Article

Paratextual Negotiations: Fan Forums as Digital Epitexts of Popular Superhero Comic Books and Science Fiction Pulp Novel Series

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Abstract: This article examines the reception of popular serial narratives. Starting from the assumption that this reception presents both a challenge (how to study the vast and heterogeneous readerly engagement with these texts?) and a chance (readers of such texts tend to comment profusely about the reception process), we identify the paratext as a privileged space of readerly communication on, and serial engagement with, popular storytelling. We develop the concept of "paratextual negotiation" as a means of understanding letter columns and fan forums as (now mostly) digital epitexts that shape the evolution of particularly popular—widely noticed, commercially successful, long-running—narratives, with a focus on the German science fiction pulp novel series *Perry Rhodan* (1961–) and additional thoughts on the US American comic book superhero Captain America (1941–). Taking the quantitative-empirical metrics of attention measurement and their public display seriously by identifying and close-reading the most popular forum threads and the most broadly recognized commentary about these narratives, we argue that the participatory element of popular culture can be reconstructed in the interplay between series text and serial paratext and can be described as a force in serial evolution that thrives on a combination of variation and redundancy and of selection and adaptation.

Keywords: popular seriality; periodicals; fandom; letters to the editor; forums; reception; paratext; superhero comics; science fiction pulp novels; negotiation; popular culture; high/low; digital methods

1. Reception as a Problem; Popular Series as a Solution

Proponents of cultural studies often argue that the meaning and value of cultural artifacts emerge from a "participatory culture" to which recipients contribute as much as producers (Jenkins 1992). The analysis of the practices of the actors involved in that culture plays a special role in this research (Hall 2019; Fiske 1990). A survey of recent praxeological studies in the fields of sociology of literature and literary studies (with a focus on the German context), however, indicates that while work has been conducted on the writing of literature (Amlinger 2021) and also on literary studies' practices of analyzing literature (Martus and Spoerhase 2022), it has rarely focused on reading literature (Olave 2022). This relative lack of critical engagement may be due to the empirical challenge inherent in the study of reading. How could we account for the readings of hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands of readers? A pragmatic solution to the problem appears in qualitative reception studies with (relatively) small groups (Sexl 2003; Goldstein and Machor 2007; Ang 2013; Knipp 2017). How representative these studies can be in the face of phenomena whose popularity expresses itself in enormously high "viewing figures" remains questionable, however. As Ang admits, "popularity is always an extremely complex phenomenon" (Ang 2013, p. 5).

While we will, in the following, train our gaze on the German science fiction pulp novel series *Perry Rhodan* (1961–) and its reception by German readers in fan forums as

examples of a participatory digital epitext, we also aim to position our research in critical dialogue with Anglophone scholarship (e.g., Beaty and Woo 2016) as well as with US American forms of popular serial narrative (*Captain America* comics). We do so for two reasons: First, we want to test, sharpen, and, if necessary, correct assumptions about US popular culture by comparing and contrasting Anglophone research with our empirical and analytical findings, as well as with insights from German pulp novel research. Second, we want to gauge the applicability of Anglophone research to the most popular German science fiction pulp novel series and also trace transformations of the popular beyond the borders of the nation state.

Addressing the reception side of literary works while taking empirically seriously the inevitable individuality, heterogeneity, and diversity of readers seems almost impossible. Not much is known about what readers do when they peruse a work. Cultural studies have pointed out this deficit. Following the motto *Reading the Popular* (Fiske 1990), however, is methodologically costly and risky in the context of literary studies:

> "Manifest documents of reception, such as reviews or previews in illustrated magazines or other popular media, constitute [what Fiske labels] secondary texts. Examples of [what Fiske calls] tertiary texts of reception can be found, among others, in readers' letters, in elusive documents of oral processing, i.e., everyday conversation and gossip about popular culture, and especially in interviews with recipients. In all these secondary and tertiary forms of processing culture-industrial texts, meanings appropriate to the recipients' social experiences are produced and 'negotiated'; the primary texts are often little more than the occasion for this." (Müller 1993, p. 58)[1]

Literary scholars, we believe, should not approach primary texts merely as an "occasion" for cultural sociological studies of their reception. But if we take reception seriously, we face a methodological challenge. The problem lies in the asymmetrical relationship between authors and readers. Out of thousands of readers of a text, only a few will comment on their reading impressions, and even if some reception testimonies are available, the fact that they were made after the publication of a literary work means that they cannot have had any influence on its production. Exceptions to this rule are perhaps the revised, supplemented, or expanded editions of one or more works, e.g., Goethe's *Werther* of 1787, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* of 1855, or Henry James's *New York Edition* (1907–1909). But even in these cases, the possibilities of taking reception into account are rather slim since we are not always dealing with substantial rewritings or fundamental reconceptualizations of the original works. It would be difficult to correlate the practices of such authors with those of their readers, as has been done in the case of "writing" (for authors: their personal environment, their editors (Amlinger 2021)) and "intellectual work" (for scholars: their collaborators, publishers, colleagues, secretaries (Martus and Spoerhase 2022)).

Thus, we build on but also venture beyond Bart Beaty and Benjamin Woo's more sociologically oriented effort to map the field of US comics production through studying ascriptions of "symbolic capital" (a concept they borrow from Bourdieu) by various actors and institutions interested in determining the "greatness" of a certain comic book or series (Beaty and Woo 2016, pp. 1–14). In fact, we identify a type of popularization that does not strain to elevate popular forms previously denigrated as "trite, trivial, and trashy" to the status of canonical literature (Stein and Böger 2023, p. 95). Rather, we expand Beaty and Woo's tentative interest in quantification as an important means of validating comics, exemplified by their reference to the number of scholarly analyses of particular comics and their notion of a comic's "success" as a critical guidepost. Beaty and Woo usefully connect cultural with economic forms of valuation, but we want to investigate more thoroughly how quantifiable popularity, defined as being noticed by many and becoming visible for everyone in ubiquitous charts and rankings, may drive the popularization of a superhero comic or science fiction pulp novel.

Fortunately, there is one field that is quite excellent for observing recipients and their practices, a field where the reception of artifacts is extraordinarily well documented: the

field of popular serial narratives. Pulp novel series and serial comic books contain, in many cases, letters to the editor and editorial statements directed at the readers. Empirical research on reception will find rich material here, and cultural studies research interested in the agency of recipients will find ample evidence of the importance of these testimonies for the continuation of the series. There are thus good reasons to put aside the canonical classics of the discipline for a moment and focus on serial literature that is actually received by many readers: "read literature", or *gelesene Literatur* in the original German wording (Martus and Spoerhase 2018), that readers have reported reading many times.[2]

As for traditional genres, novels, dramas, poetry cycles that appear in book form: As a rule, there are no letters to the editor here that would have these works as their subject. *Readers' letters pages, on the other hand, are one of the peculiarities of long-running comic books and pulp novel series*. What seems to be virtually impossible in the case of completed works of literature that are printed as books constitutes the rule in the case of popular series whose episodes extend over many issues. Letters pages become established when a series is popular enough to continue. This is the case with *Captain America* comics and *Perry Rhodan* pulp novels, our objects of investigation. In both cases, an audience can obviously be counted on to follow the series from issue to issue, rather than picking up a copy sporadically or just once at the newsstand. And this audience is counting on this very fact: *This is why letters to the editor are written and also answered*. And printed.

2. Why Paratext Matters

In the case of the *Perry Rhodan* series, which has been published in weekly installments since 1962 and continues to this day, a "Reader Contact Page" (*LKS*, i.e., *Leserkontaktseite*) was set up with issue #302 (1967) that featured letters from readers. The *Captain America* comic book series was launched several decades earlier, in 1941, by Jack Kirby and Joe Simon at Timely Publications (now Marvel Comics). Although there were no letters to the editor in superhero comics at that time, this had changed when the character was relaunched in the mid-1960s, first in the *Tales of Suspense* series and then also in the stand-alone *Captain America* series in 1968. The *LKS* and the comic book letters page are not merely virtual contact zones for initiating intimate relationships. They indeed create the space to institutionalize public exchanges about *Perry Rhodan* and *Captain America* that are unlikely and unwanted in many other places (the *Perry Rhodan* clubs and Marvel/*Captain America* fan clubs excepted).

The editors of *Captain America* and *Perry Rhodan* can assume that the authors of the letters will also be readers of the comic books and the pulp novels in which these letters are printed a few weeks or months later. The establishment of the *LKS* and the comic book letters page suggests that there are enough readers who actually write letters to the authors and the editors of the series, and that the interest of the readership in the series is stable enough to expect that the letter writers will continue to follow the series, at least until the decision to print their letter is made, and maybe even longer if there is hope that their praise will be heard or their criticism will be met.[3] "On the whole, I haven't been too pleased with your scripting on this book", reader Bruce Canwell writes in a letter printed in *Captain America* #208, cover-dated April 1977 (Figure 1). "I hope things will improve as time goes on".

Taking such statements seriously, we draw on the notion of the paratext as a productive space for negotiations among producers and readers of popular serial narrative, as outlined in the chapter "Negotiating Paratext" of *Authorizing Superhero Comics* (Stein 2021), a study from which our argument derives significant input. Our goal is to test the main theses of this chapter by turning to a representative, extremely popular German case and by considering the quantitative challenge created by the longevity and vastness of the epitextual negotiations in letter columns and digital fan forums. In doing so, we develop and try out a new method: studying the evolution of popular genre narratives through the detour of digitally analyzing forum communication, which we understand as a particular form of paratextual discourse whose pertinence to superhero comics we can only assess

cursorily in this article but which we will examine more systematically in a follow-up study based on our findings on *Perry Rhodan*.


Figure 1. "Let's Rap with Cap" letter column, *Captain America* #208 (April 1977).

The fact that the *Perry Rhodan* editors begin to answer the letters in October 1967 with issue #318 confirms this assumption, and the existence of the *LKS* in thousands of issues up to the current issue (#3200) indicates that readers are not only addressed as passive recipients but that successful attempts are made to interact with them. In the case of Marvel Comics, this interaction between the producers of the issues and the recipients historically became the core of the company and fan discourse, where the comics creators and their readers called each other "true believers" and imagined themselves to be united by a shared interest in the continuation and further development of the series and who address each other in the letter columns month after month (Stein 2021). Authors and readers engage in a conversation that is documented in the comics as well as in the pulp novels and thus becomes a material part of each series. The research question we wish to pursue on the basis of this simple observation pinpoints the consequences of this interaction for

the quasi-endless story that each series tells over the course of hundreds or thousands of issues. Describing this phenomenon of open-ended serial storytelling, the *Perry Rhodan* reader Ganerc explains in the huge online *Perry Rhodan-Forum*, dedicated exclusively to this series:

> "Perry Rhodan is an ongoing series, so it's sort of THE never-ending story, . . . no self-contained stories in each issue."[4]

The open-endedness of the series means that the many hundreds of readers whose letters were printed can see these letters and the production team's responses in the very pages of the *Perry Rhodan* series. The *LKS* offers an interactive print forum that has now lasted 55 years and that finds its continuing justification in the *popularity and seriality* of the *Perry Rhodan* novels. Popularity is understood here as a sufficiently large and continuous amount of attention by the readers—regardless of the reasons for this attention. What—literally—counts is being noticed by many (Döring et al. 2021; Werber et al. 2023). Popularity in this sense of stable attention by many people is the necessary condition for a comic book superhero or a science fiction space pilot to become protagonists of serial narratives that shape their adventures over numerous issues.

According to this logic, series are *not* popular when they are unable to create a stable readership, which also implies that they *cannot* establish letters-to-the-editor pages simply for the lack of letters. *Captain America* is a good example in this regard because the series went through ups and downs in its first decades, was discontinued and relaunched several times, and only achieved enduring popularity and continuous publication by the mid-1960s. But even a superhero narrative or science fiction novel, no matter how popular, that would appear in print as a completed work rather than as a long succession of episodes would have to do without an *LKS* or letters page, since such a space of interaction presupposes a certain temporality and also, on a material level, the printing of ongoing episodes or sequels. In his analysis of the *Captain America* letter columns of the late 1960s and 70s, J. Richard Stevens describes a politically motivated controversy that unfolded over a long period of time, and that was made possible solely by the serial publication of the comics: "The letter feud lasted almost eighty issues, long enough to involve seven comic writers and twelve different artists" (Stevens 2011, p. 606). One could also imagine letters to the editor in the case of serialized novels that appear in daily or weekly installments in newspapers, for example, but not in a work published as a book.[5] Following Carey Snyder and Leif Sorensen, we can therefore conceive of these letters to the editor as a serial form of its own (Snyder and Sorensen 2018) and study them as such.

LKS, the "Reader Contact Page" that regularly opens a space for interactions between readers and editors on the final pages of the *Perry Rhodan* issues, belongs to the paratext of the series. Letters to the editor and replies to these letters do not count as part of the text, but they do count, even physically, as part of the issue. They are peritexts, as Genette calls these instances in which a "message [. . .] has taken on material form [and] necessarily has a *location* that can be situated in relation to the location of the text itself: around the text and [. . .] within the same volume", like "the title or the preface [. . .], like chapter titles or certain notes" (Genette 1997, pp. 4–5). They count as "accessories" of the text, similar to a preface, a front cover, a back cover with a blurb, the publisher's information about the edition and price, information about the author or the text. But even if peritexts can be distinguished from the text in many respects, the reading of the text is not unaffected by the paratext. Readers first encounter a text in the material form of its paratexts, that is, in the concrete, printed form with a cover and author's photo, in this or that typography, in a particular layout on a specific type of paper, presented in garish colors or rendered in more elegant hues, with a preface or an epilogue, or even with advertisements for further works by the author or the publisher. There is no text that materializes without the paratext, no text without concrete selections from the many possibilities to give the work an "accessory". Through the "vestibule" of paratexts, we agree with Genette, every reader must pass (Genette 1997, p. 2); the form of this vestibule shapes the reception the text will receive. A hardcover book published in an established, classic series is read

differently than a flimsy periodical whose motley covers are emblazoned with a cheap price tag. Genette, however, was not interested in pulp novels or comic books, but it is worth examining what consequences his considerations may have for *serial paratexts* and their relationship to the continuously narrated *text of the series*. Would it be fruitful here to speak of the "serial accessories" of the *series* in analogy to the paratext as an "*accessory*" of a *work* and to understand this serial paratext as a stable site of negotiation of an ongoing series (Figure 2a–d)?

(**a**)

(**b**)

(**c**)
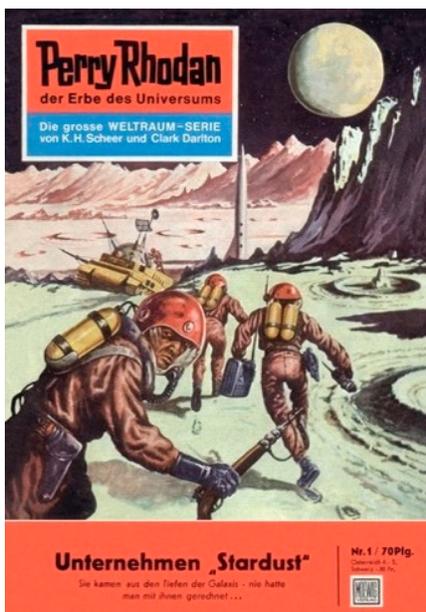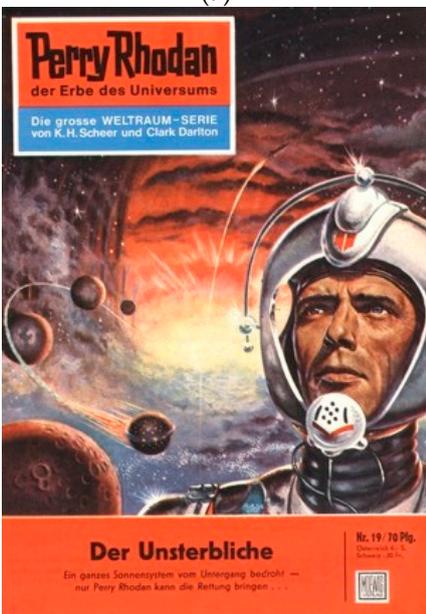
(**d**)

Figure 2. (**a**) *Perry Rhodan*, cover Issue #1, (**b**) Issue #19 title pages and page 1, (**c**) Cover Issue #19, (**d**) Reader Contact Page: Issue #3079.

In a first step, we embrace Genette's distinction between text and paratext as well as between peritext and epitext. We then assign the letters pages printed in issue after issue to the paratext of the issue—or, more precisely, since the *LKS* or comic book letters page is materially connected to the issue, to its peritext. The fact that letters to the editor and

editorial responses are part of the peritext does not imply that they have no significant relationship to the series text. On the contrary, if we assume that readers write letters to the editors and that the editors of the letters pages expect that the authors of the letters will also be the readers of their answers, then it is very likely, first, that the letters and the answers will relate to the series and its continuation and, second, that the popularity of the series represents a necessary condition of communication for both sides. In fact, in the *Perry Rhodan* series, the dialogue between readers and the *LKS* editorial staff unfolds across many issues, typically involving

(1)　the larger story arcs ("cycles") of the novel series;
(2)　its most important protagonists (above all Perry Rhodan and his closest circle: characters who shape the series over hundreds or thousands of issues);
(3)　the quality of a single issue or a particular author; and
(4)　always also a concern for the falling or rising circulation of the series, the gaining of new readers, in short: the popularity of the series.[6]

Since the letters are selected by the editorial team for publication on the *LKS*, meaning that only a slice of the overall submissions will appear, we can surmise that it is precisely these published letters and the responses to them that are of particular importance, just as the editors of the series who make this selection have a gatekeeping function and, associated with this, an institutionally based special authority. If, for example, suggestions are made or wishes or criticisms are expressed in these letters, then we must believe that these will not remain irrelevant for the continuation of the series. Why give space to criticism of an author, approval of a plot development, applause for the introduction of a new protagonist, or displeasure with an episode on the weekly "Reader Contact Page" if the expectations of the letter writers are to be ignored anyway? The comic book *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (August 1962), in which Marvel's superhero Spider-Man makes his very first appearance, underscores this logic in a remarkable peritextual plea, voiced on a specially designed "Fan Page" and promoted as an "Important Announcement from the Editor!": "We are most anxious to have your opinions, and will be waiting eagerly for your letters. Rest assured . . . that we carefully read each and every one, and are guided by your desires when we edit our magazine!" (Figure 3). This argument assigns a special status to the published letters and justifies qualitative analyses. Yet the comparison of the *LKS* and the letters pages with the unpublished letters, insofar as they have been preserved, continues to be a desideratum of pulp novel research. In the case of superhero comics, it remains unclear whether unpublished letters have been archived by the publishers at all.

Karl-Heinz Scheer was one of the initial authors of the *Perry Rhodan* series and, at the end of the 1960s, its most important exposé author. In this capacity, he planned the major plot lines and central events of the series' "cycles" and provided the structure for the authors of the individual issues. In an interview with the WDR television program *Monitor* (from 23 February 1969), he responded to a critical question about the science fiction series—denounced by the interviewer as harmful to young people, crypto-fascist, and militaristic (cf. Friedrich 1995, p. 327f.)—by thanking his fans, some of whom were organized in clubs. Their many letters to the editor, some of them critical, had contributed to the development of the pulp series and to its better adaptation to the expectations of the audience, he acknowledged: "You wouldn't believe how well and how much I've already been able to use them for my exposés".[7] Whether and "how well" this succeeds is a question that would have to be answered with a view to the further course of the series and further letters from readers about the "utilization" of their constructive suggestions or critical remarks.

FAN PAGE

IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT FROM THE EDITOR!

You will notice that the format of AMAZING has been changed. There are a number of reasons for this, and we want to take you, our valued readers, into our confidence.

We hate to throw in the towel, but we find that it is simply impossible to produce a magazine like AMAZING each and every month, containing five highly original and carefully plotted stories, without the quality eventually beginning to suffer. Rather than risk losing your confidence, we have decided to change AMAZING in such a way that it will STILL present the finest in fantasy — but in a different way!

As you can see, we are introducing one of the most unusual new fantasy characters of all time — THE SPIDERMAN, who will appear every month in AMAZING. Perhaps, if your letters request it, we will make his stories even longer, or have TWO Spiderman stories per issue.

Also, we are discontinuing our contents page, as many of you have requested. We feel your point is well taken — you would prefer us to make one of the stories a page longer instead.

Finally, we are omitting the word ADULT from our masthead. A number of our teen-age readers have written to say that it makes them feel a bit awkward to buy a magazine which seems to be written exclusively for older readers. We never expected such a reaction, but we certainly don't want to embarrass ANY of our loyal readers.

And there you have it — our new editorial policy, and the reason we have undertaken it. Naturally, we are most anxious to have your opinions, and will be waiting eagerly for your letters. Rest assured that, although it is impossible for us to answer your letters personally, we carefully read each and every one, and are guided by your desires when we edit our magazine!

Unfortunately, we have no room in this issue for many of your interesting letters, but we want to specially thank the following fans for their helpful suggestions and comments: Michael Snell, Milford, Mass.; Jeff Allen, S. Miami, Fla.; Patrick Geary, APO 12, N.Y.; C. W. Parsons, Detroit, Mich.; Michael Geller, Paterson, N. J.; Daniel Cole, Alberta, Canada; Margaret Ingalls, Arlington, Va.; Gregory Christiano, Bronx, N. Y.; Peter Panagiotis, Cranston, R. I.; Chris Uszler, Milwaukee, Wisc.; Paul Walker, McConnelsville, Ohio; Robert Zeck, Minneapolis, Minn.; Michael Siegel, Bronx, N. Y.; Dmytro Zupnyk, Chisholm, Minn.; Eugene Chan, San Francisco, Cal.; G. B. Lore, Miami, Fla.; Tom Joyce, Bklyn., N. Y.; Mark Lamberti, Wichita, Kan.; Dullum and Walter, Portland, Ore.; Britt W. Barrett, Norfolk, Va. — and the many, many other loyal fans whose names we shall try to print in future issues.

And now, here is our AMAZING SCOREBOARD, which will give you a chance to compare your favorite stories with those of our other readers:

FAVORITE STORY: (By more than 300 votes) "SOMETHING FANTASTIC" (The first time a 3-pager has ever scored so heavily)

RUNNER UP: "THE LIVING STATUES"

OTHERS, IN ORDER OF VOTES CAST: "Melvin and the Martian"; "The Plague"; "I, the Gargoyle"

More fantasy and surprises next issue — don't miss it! And, until then, send YOUR letter to:

THE EDITOR
AMAZING FANTASY
THIRD FLOOR
655 MADISON AVE.
NEW YORK 21, N. Y.

Figure 3. "Fan Page", *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (August 1962).

Even though the *Monitor* program attributes responsibility for the series to Scheer by describing him as its "chief thinker" and "idea generator", in the case of the *Perry Rhodan* series (as with superhero comics), there is always shared authorship. "The series is written by a team of authors coordinated by an exposé editorial team" (Friedrich 1995, p. 330). Involved in the production of the series, however, are not only the editors, the editorial office, the exposé team, and many issue writers, but, as Scheer points out, also the readers of the series, whose letters cannot be ignored in the long run. Without the lasting commitment of tens of thousands of readers, the series would lose the popularity without which it would not be continued. It is thus precisely the frequently criticized commerciality of the series (Hügel 2003) that favors a collective, cooperative form of series production. As Hans-Edwin Friedrich writes about *Perry Rhodan*:

> "The series concept initiated the success and led to the monopoly position in the sector of the SF pulp novel. Readers were tied to the series via clubs and reader contact pages, the most popular young authors were signed up, in the SF magazine novel sector the authors of *Perry Rhodan* received the best fees, the series has been successfully adapted to the respective social change." (Friedrich 1995, p. 338)

The zone of interaction established by the series through the *LKS*, in which the successful (in terms of popularity) "adaptation" of the series to its constantly changing contexts is thematized and observed by all sides, constitutes the pulp novels' paratext. Unlike Genette, whose paratext theory treats the book as the medial standard for publishing a "work" finished and completed by the author, *Perry Rhodan* presents a *serial* paratext that allows readers to be involved from issue to issue by working on the "recursive" continuation of the series (Kelleter 2012, p. 31; 2017, pp. 16–18). This serial paratext is a "zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*" (Genette 1997, p. 2) in the sense that negotiations take place here that are also relevant to the series text. How things continue intradiegetically with Perry Rhodan and his friends (and enemies) depends (to some degree) on the "paratextual negotiations" (Stein 2021, p. 39ff.) that occur in the letters and answers of the *LKS*, but also in the fanzines of the many *Perry Rhodan* clubs.

As already mentioned, these observations also apply to Marvel comic books, which we treat as a representative case of the genre of superhero comics with a focus on the character Captain America. Only a few years before the introduction of the *LKS* in the *Perry Rhodan* novels, an extremely lively paratextual discourse developed in the letter columns of Marvel comics that proved significant for the genesis of the publisher's series. If popular series such as *Tales of Suspense* (1959–1968) and *Captain America* (from 1968) seek to ensure their own continued existence—which they must as they represent the offerings of a commercial company whose products are to be bought, read, exchanged, and collected, and not just once, but again and again, month after month—they are well advised not only to use the reactions of their readers to continually adapt the narrative to the expectations of the audience, but also to pay attention to these reactions publicly. They do this by aggressively soliciting expressions of opinion and printing the most promising letters. The selection of letters and the editors' responses regularly serve as triggers for debates about the series text, but also about issues not directly related to the series. Their content ranges from praise and criticism of individual characters, settings, and plot cycles or judgments about the quality of the page layout and drawing style to political readings, often combined with insights into the readers' ideological positions, social circumstances, and personal experiences.

It makes sense, then, to understand these peritexts as a recurring site of serial negotiation. Even though this site is characterized by a certain authority gap between producers who are legitimized by their status as representatives of the culture industry and readers conventionally positioned as consumers, it nevertheless cannot be controlled unilaterally and authoritatively. We thus understand the mutual development of the serial peritext and the serial text as a result of this negotiation and conceive of it as an evolutionary (i.e., open, nonteleological) process. We use the term "evolution" following the work of Frank Kelleter and Daniel Stein, who replace the notion of a personally or institutionally attributable agency with an idea of the inherently dynamic form of serial evolution characterized by variation, selection, and adaptation (Kelleter and Stein 2012, p. 260; Kelleter 2017, pp. 7, 14; Stein 2021). "In the field of popular productions and receptions, there is obviously no central management" (Kelleter and Stein 2012, p. 263). Rather, it is the basic dynamic of popular serial storytelling, which Umberto Eco once described as the dialectic of redundancy and variance (Eco 1994, pp. 84–100), that enables stability and change, as it were, in the constant pursuit of popularity. And it does so via a number of mechanisms through which serial evolution unfolds: What is particularly popular and can adapt to constantly changing environmental conditions will survive and will be perpetuated; what does not become popular or cannot remain so will be discarded. It thus makes sense to speak of evolution in the context of popular seriality as a combination of variation and repetition, selection and adaptation (cf. Luhmann 2012, pp. 251–306; Kelleter 2012, 2017), and to understand the paratexts of the series as an important evolutionary element that has so far been underexposed in research. The serial paratext not only enables continuous commentary on the relationship between redundancy and variance in the series. It also facilitates negotiation of the selection conditions and adaptation requirements of individual series.

The example of the letter column in *Captain America* comic books raises the question of whether our considerations about the establishment of a paratextual negotiation space in popular series can be generalized. Before we can reap the analytical benefits of our proposal, we must confront two problems that arise from our turn to an exploration of the relationship between the serial paratext and the ongoing text of the series.

3. Empirical and Methodological Problems

Serial paratexts promise information about the evolution of a popular series, as our first look at the function of the peritexts of *Captain America* comics and *Perry Rhodan* novels suggests. But how should we continue the investigation? If paratexts matter, how can we include them into the analysis of popular seriality?

The first problem facing paratext analysis of the two series is a *quantitative-empirical* one: Popular comic book and pulp novel series are "long-running narratives" (Stein 2021, pp. 46, 49, 56). In the case of *Perry Rhodan*, "long-running" means 3200+ issues (each containing about 64 pages of text) to date. About 2900 issues each contain about two pages of letters and answers from the editors. Thus, about 5800 pages of the *LKS* would have to be examined to see what consequences the transactions (Genette 1997, p. 2) that take place there may have for the continuation of a narrative that extends over 200,000 pages. Which letters to the editor should we consider? Which issues or cycles should we read? Which readers' concerns should we single out?

The same problem of case selection and corpus formation exists in the case of the Marvel franchise *Captain America*. Even if we leave aside DC Comics, ignore dozens of Marvel series, and restrict ourselves entirely to comics with Captain America as the main character, we are still dealing with hundreds of issues and as many letter columns since the 1960s. Which ones are worth reading in order to pursue the thesis of an evolutionary connection between serial text and serial paratext? As in the case of the *Perry Rhodan* novels, the multidecade popularity of *Captain America* comics has produced a form of ongoing seriality whose growing complexity poses a challenge for its study (Kelleter and Stein 2012, p. 283).

Superhero series themselves have responded to this information overload with retcons and reboots, among other things, that seek to reduce the complexity of the diegesis by eliminating protagonists, plot lines, and settings:

> "Plot lines, character constellations, and back stories of the interacting comics series [became] so complex that DC felt compelled to eliminate them in one fell swoop. Marv Wolfman and George Perez's twelve-issue miniseries *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985–1986) reduced the various multiverses back to a single universe; a host of characters were simply killed off." (Kelleter and Stein 2012, p. 279)

Moreover, the fact that a reboot does not even stop at rebooting popular protagonists was demonstrated in 2018 in the film *Avengers: Infinity War*: Bucky Barnes, T'Challa, Groot, Wanda Maximoff, Sam Wilson, Mantis, Drax, Quill, Dr. Strange, Peter Parker, and Nick Fury literally vanish into thin air. Steve Rogers (aka Captain America) survives, but there is no way of knowing that he will not be curbed from the MCU in the next segment of the franchise. Such evolutionary cleanups are essential to the continued existence of individual series and large comic book universes. Without occasional radical selection, their ever-growing backlog alone, driven by the interplay of redundancy and variance and the need to keep adapting to new circumstances, would eventually render such series and universes completely unmanageable, from both a production and a reception standpoint (Stein 2021, pp. 26, 251).

Research does not have this brute possibility of "complexity reduction" (Kelleter and Stein 2012, p. 283). How should one choose—especially in the case of series that are open-ended and have not yet concluded—from the multitude of "plotlines, character constellations, and backstories" that have emerged over the long course of the series, but also from the abundance of available letter columns and editors' notes, in order to test our thesis about the function of paratexts for series evolution? Are a few well-chosen examples

enough? And if so, would it not be necessary to search for possible counterexamples—and this in a hardly manageable abundance of texts and paratexts? And how could *exemplary* cases, which are supposed to have a *representative* character, be distinguished from other, *nonrepresentative* cases at all, if most of the issues—be it comics or pulp novels—are left out of consideration? Friedrich's observation holds true: "The series is a research problem simply because of its size" (Friedrich 1995, p. 327).[8]

The empirical, and first of all quantitative, challenge for research on popular "long-running" comic books and pulp novel series such as *Captain America* and *Perry Rhodan* thus presents us with a *methodological* problem: According to which criteria should the corpus formation take place? Here, we will present a two-step proposal that first *exacerbates* the quantitative problem, only to eventually *circumvent* it and *work around* it by using digital methods.

For some time now, digital methods seem to be the obvious choice whenever we study large corpora, which is why one could immediately suggest that our proposal is unoriginal. Yet our corpora have not been systematically digitized so far; and anyway, one should not expect too much from the digitization of the comic book narratives as far as the verification of our hypothesis on paratext is concerned. In many cases, hundreds of pages of letter columns and thousands of reader contact pages have not yet been digitized: the effort to set up the corpora for investigation with digital methods in the first place would be enormous and expensive.[9]

The *detour* we therefore want to take expands our field of investigation and seems to aggravate the problem of corpus formation even more. We add the *Internet forums* in which Marvel and *Perry Rhodan* readers exchange ideas about the series with each other and sometimes seek to communicate with the producers responsible for their series. We understand these spaces of interaction, which, just like the serial peritext, enable recipients and producers to work together on the continuation of the series, as *serial epitext*. This epitext does not need to be digitized. It is already a digital phenomenon, and the data can be prepared—even in large quantities relatively quickly and with little error—for analysis with established digital tools. As we proceed to analyze our material, we will make the data of the relevant forums, already prepared by our team, which we use for our *mixed methods* analyses, available to the scientific community.

We therefore ignore the many printed letters to the editor and editorial responses for the time being in order to be able to test our hypothesis about series evolution on the connection between *digital epitext* and *series text*. However, this still does not solve the basic problem of corpus formation: Which of the thousands of posts and threads in the forums should be examined more closely? It may seem that we are only increasing the problem of selection. Thus, in order to test a viable solution to the problem, we take a second methodological step that uses the peculiarities of popular seriality to adjust the digital tools. In order to do so, we draw on the notion of second-order popularization presented in our collaborative essay "Getting Noticed by Many: On the Transformations of the Popular" in this special issue (see also Döring et al. 2021).

4. Second-Order Popularization and Digital Epitext

Perhaps the most important common feature of the serially published comic books and pulp novels we study is their popularity. Unlike a substantial segment of cultural and literary studies, as well as of sociological and ethnographic research, we do not approach the popular in opposition to "high culture" as a simple, easy-to-understand, trivial, low, mean, commercial, or superficial culture, nor do we aim to "rescue" popular culture from such views by suggesting that it is necessarily complex, subversive, or democratic. We do not distinguish "low culture" from "high culture" in order to then situate our objects of inquiry accordingly. Rather, we understand popularity as a quantitative, scalable dimension: Objects or people, topics or concepts, can be more or less popular, depending on whether they are noticed by many or by few. "Popular is what is noticed by many" (Hecken 2006, p. 85).

What follows from this basic assumption is that comic books and pulp novel series, which are generally assigned to the realm of popular culture and viewed as products of the culture industry, as part of "mass" or "low" culture by virtue of their genre, may be noticed by many or by few and that they can therefore be more or less popular. Moreover, works, artists, authors, and institutions that are generally assigned to high culture, the canon, the classical period, "or legitimate" culture can also be noticed by many or by few, which means that they can also be more or less popular. Instead of opposing high and low, we thus distinguish two different dimensions of the popular: a *quantitative-nominal* dimension that ranges from the nonpopular (no attention) to the extremely popular (very much attention) and a *qualitative-normative* dimension that assigns cultural value and, with a nod to Bourdieu or Reckwitz, ranges from the "low culture" of the lower strata to the "high culture" of the upper strata (Bourdieu 1987; Reckwitz 2017) (Figure 4).
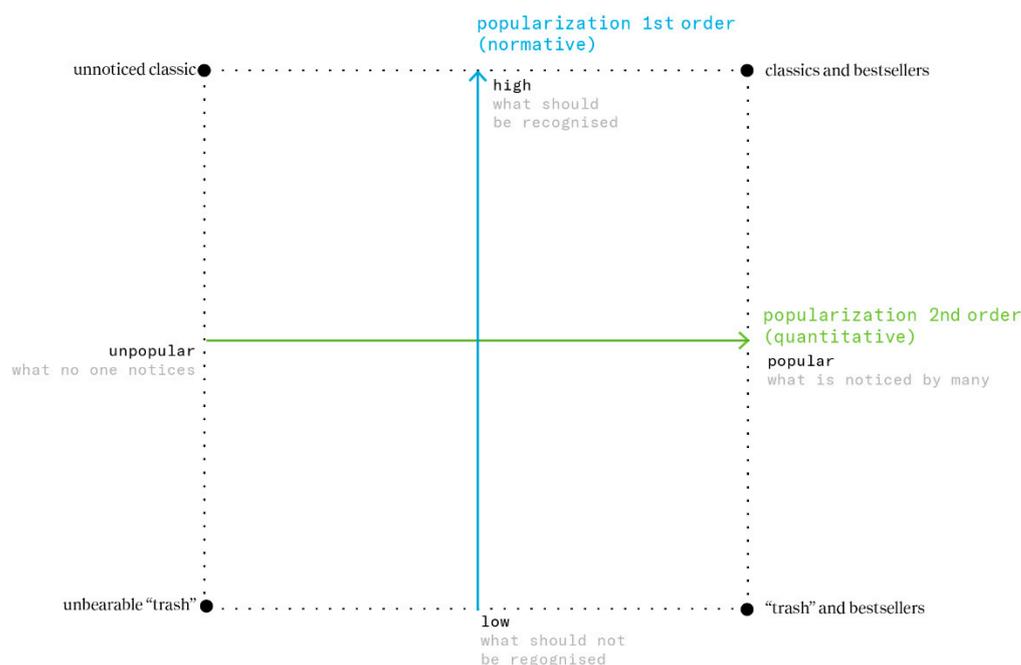
Figure 4. Matrix first- and second-order popularization.

Our proposal for this alternative differentiation becomes analytically interesting when objects come into play that receive much attention even though they *should not* (according to established taste-making institutions) because they are considered low level and lacking complexity, or when objects receive no attention *but should be noticed* because they are considered works of high culture and are said to belong to the classics, situated as canonical works everyone should supposedly know.

Popularization of the first order is normative: What is to become popular is *that which is to be observed by many*. The objects of this desired observation are specified in the name of "legitimate" culture and promoted with great financial and organizational effort: Schools, universities, museums, theaters, opera houses, and philharmonic halls are institutions that seek to ensure that that which is understood to deserve notice is actually noticed. It is part of their range of services to produce and protect the popularity of certain artifacts that belong to the traditional canon of (still disproportionately male) authors, to the classics, to the educational goods of a culture. According to these institutions, it is desirable to know the works of Goethe and Schiller, Melville and Hawthorne, Kant and Hegel, Emerson and Thoreau, Bach and Beethoven, Glass and Cage, Dürer and Klee, Hopper and O'Keefe. Those who do not know these canonical heavyweights are sanctioned, whether by poor grades or by disrespect. Those who aim at social differentiation through "fine distinctions" (Bourdieu 1987) must be able to rely on the fact that that which is to be respected is also sufficiently

known. Cultural capital is thus dependent on what we call *first-order popularization* (Döring et al. 2021; Werber et al. 2023). And without cultural institutions—often tax-favored, state-subsidized—first-order popularization, which is indispensable for the social distribution of attention and cultural value, would have little chance of success.

Even Umberto Eco embraces the foregone conclusion that a work of high culture cannot be popular and serial: "high art", i.e., "original and not serial" (Eco 1994, p. 93). The social asymmetry between "high culture" and "low culture" has taken the place of the class stratification of society since the eighteenth century in Europe and still dominates cultural self-descriptions (in the US as well) in the 1960s (Fiedler 1969). It comes under pressure to legitimize itself when it becomes increasingly easy to observe *how popular certain artifacts actually are*. Since the advent of charts and hit parades (e.g., the "Billboard Music Popularity Chart" from 1940), ratings (e.g., the Nielsen ratings from 1950), and polling data as ranking technologies, a wide audience can know *what is noticed by many and what is not*. Inevitably, this audience will also realize that what is *intended* to be noticed by many by no means always coincides with what *is* noticed by many. Harry Potter is more popular than Wilhelm Meister. Captain America is more popular than Charlie Marlow. Asterix is more popular than Charles Swann.

At least since the middle of the twentieth century, Western consumer societies have routinely measured and publicized whether something receives much or little attention. Bestseller lists, top 10 lists, audience ratings, the name recognition of goods, services, institutions, and people of all kinds are surveyed, compared, and ranked (Miller 2000; Heintz 2016, 2018). Translated into charts or diagrams, these rankings allow us to grasp at a glance whether a particular song has been listened to more often than others, whether a book has found more readers than others, whether a program has reached more viewers than another, whether a museum has had more visitors in a year than others, whether an author's drama has been played more often than another play, or whether a scientific paper has been cited more often than another publication on the topic. These popularity scores are translated into zero-sum rankings (such as a top 10 list or a global ranking of blockbusters) that are then published again with as high a resonance as possible. We call this process *second-order popularization* (Döring et al. 2021; Werber et al. 2023). We should note that we are not talking about absolute numbers here: Topping the bestseller list of fiction or, as a blockbuster, the ranking of new movies implies a far larger readership or greater audience numbers than ranking nonfiction or radio plays: What matters is being ahead (or behind) in a particular sector. How popular something is, is *comparative*: i.e., how many people pay attention to something in a certain category (from nonfiction to concerts, from comics to movies) is determined and, in turn, publicized so as to garner additional attention.[10] Popularity is surveyed, compared, and popularized. The knowledge that a song, a novel, a film, a play, a museum is at the top of a ranking has consequences for the evaluation of this song, novel, film, drama, or museum:

- If the extremely popular artefact—the highly ranked bestseller, the blockbuster, the chart topper—is conventionally counted among the products of "low culture", the associated devaluation can now be opposed by asking why an artifact that is already noticed by many and places much higher in the rankings than other artifacts, even those of high culture, should not receive any attention. Why should one of the most popular comic books or the most popular science fiction novel series in the world be ignored?
- If a novel, a piece of music, an exhibition is generally counted among the products of "high culture" but receives little attention according to the ranking, or at least much less attention than other novels, songs, or events in the ranking, then one might ask why something should receive attention (high culture, the canon, classical music, educational material) even though it is not popular at all.

These two basic observations complicate, and ultimately move beyond, Dwight Macdonald's classic "theory of mass culture" (Macdonald 1953) as well as later scholarship

that conceives of popular culture as a commercialized culture aimed at maximizing mass consumption.[11]

In the *Perry Rhodan* forum, where since the late 1990s about 2000 members have written a total of 680,000 posts on about 10,000 topics, these questions are formulated as follows:

"As an example I can give you 'Der Vorleser'. Hordes of young people are forced to read this 'book' in schools, yet it is worth no more than toilet reading in a public station restroom! Never in my life have I wasted so much time as when I had to read this book!"[12]

This post received approval in the same thread of the forum:

"I agree with you there, the two SF books are more interesting than novels suggested by German teachers that students have to slog through against their better judgment."

In a thread that was consulted 153,770 times by "forists" (the emic term for the users of the forum) and that received a total of 1516 comments under the topic "Opinions on the *Mythos* cycle", one of the *Perry Rhodan* fans states that he cannot imagine why many readers should follow the current cycle (cycles consist of a hundred issue novels; in superhero comics, one speaks of story arcs or events) of the series without also finding the issues "good". Whether he checks "Amazon or Thalia", the series is "always an online bestseller". So the current cycle cannot be all that bad, this forist suggests. It would be "absurd" to deny quality to a series that is read by so many in the science fiction segment that it leads in the rankings.[13]

The "German teachers" can be taken as examples of popularization of the first order: They mandated that Schlink's *The Reader* be read. At the same time, these teachers proclaimed what should not be paid attention to: *Perry Rhodan*. The series' editor (since 1992), Klaus N. Frick (KNF), states in the forum: "In the past, pulp novels were considered 'trash' across the board, disparaged by well-meaning educators, or confiscated in school".[14] Many long-time readers have experienced this themselves, but they did not give up reading their favorite popular science fiction series.

The qualitative, ultimately normative legitimation of first-order popularization encounters justification difficulties when the rankings of second-order popularization make transparent that pulp novels are read by a great many, while the "classics" of literature are often read only when mandated: "Schiller's 'Kabale und Liebe', which would have long since been in a box in the basement if I hadn't been forced to read it".[15] Pulp novels, as well as comic books, are obviously read even without institutional pressure: "Of course, one had a hard time with the teachers; if they found out about it".[16] The forist Vincent states: "I know that in my life I was often mildly smiled at by some people in my circle of acquaintances for reading a *science fiction* series". *Perry Rhodan* may be popular, but it is not supposed to attract attention. As long as the distinction between "high culture" and "low culture" is stable and the series is attributed to "popular culture" and *thus at the same time* to "low culture", its readers can be disregarded. In his discussion of such assessments of the series and its readers, Vincent continues as follows:

"One argument that critics like to use is 'Let's stick to the facts: Let's just take the form of publication: a booklet a week', to which I like to counter 'Okay, let's stick to the facts: A booklet of which one has been published every week for 52 years (50, 45, 30 years (interchangeable, since it depends on the time))'.

There must be something to such a perennial favorite. A 52-year consistency can no longer be a coincidence. There are trends, global companies, even a whole state that hasn't existed that long."[17]

There "must be something to" a pulp novel series that has been finding its audience for more than half a century (or, for that matter, for comic books with a more 80-year history, such as *Superman*, *Batman*, *Wonder Woman*, or *Captain America*); its "consistency can no longer be a coincidence". This argument not only counters the disparagement of the

material "appearance" of the series as flimsy periodicals, or "booklets", but at the same time plays off the quantitative dimension of popular seriality against the taste judgments of "legitimate" culture. Under the conditions of second-order popularization, the assumption that the series deserves no attention loses its self-evidence.

A first consequence of the distinction between first-order and second-order popularization is the need to discursively classify a recurring theme of forum communication: Circulation figures, bestseller successes, attendance figures at fancons, membership figures of fan clubs, etc. are connected with the experiences that fans have had with cultural degradations of a series, its authors, and its readers. The fact that the series, due to its popularity, is no longer categorized as "low culture" *per se* but is easily compared by its readers with works of "high culture" marks a major *transformation of the popular*. The fact that superhero or sci-fi series receive the attention of many becomes an argument for their notability (but not necessarily for their nobilitation).

However, by no means do all readers see it this way, and one of the advantages of analyzing digital epitexts is that exceptions can be found quickly and weighted quantitatively. The forist Roi Danton comments: "Well, Perry Rhodan was and is trivial literature. He should own up to that, and we all should [own up to that]". Haywood Floyd, on the other hand, argues in book-medial terms: If the texts of the series were not published as a periodical, but in book form, i.e., if text were accompanied by a stable paratext like other works of "recognized literature", then this attribution to trivial literature would be omitted:

> "PR [*Perry Rhodan*] between book covers (no: not silver ones . . .) or at least paperback covers would probably be recognized as literature. And some recognized mainstream literature wouldn't be worth a damn in booklet form, it's so shallow and trivial."[18]

Printed as a book and set in "silver" book covers, the series has made the *Spiegel* (a leading German weekly news magazine) bestseller list several times. This list does not distinguish between "serious" and "trivial" literature and therefore privileges quantity (measured by sales) over quality (measured by economies of taste) (Figure 5).

Figure 5. *Spiegel* bestseller list *Hardcover Belletristik* from 19 May 2018. The *Perry Rhodan* volume ranks at place 16 behind Elena Ferrante and before Daniel Kehlmann, a representative of "high culture", who has been honored with renowned poetry and literature awards.

In terms of the cultural legitimacy of popular serial narratives, however, it is interesting to see contributions from forists who do not participate at all in these comparisons and positionings on the high–low scale and who therefore speak of "booklets" or "periodicals" without associating devaluations or obligations of justification with them.

"Each issue, new questions, and the reader is thinking 'Wow, rad', speculating in all sorts of directions, which provides immersion and excitement."[19]

However, we would have to observe these negotiations of the cultural value of the series in forums and wikis and in readers' letters and fanzines since we cannot simply deduce them from the series' generic status as a *pulp novel*. And we would have to examine whether and how, in the practices of readers, the popular becomes a reference value that serves to reverse the burden of proof in the discourse of valuation (Döring et al. 2021, pp. 4–9; Werber et al. 2023). To make empirical progress here, a few more quotes from the seemingly inexhaustible treasure trove of fan forums cannot help. Rather, we have to ascertain which quote, or which position toward the series, represents a single finding that hardly plays a role in the discussion, and which positions have received much attention in the forums. Forums tend to provide information on this question: Platforms index, via digital counters, what receives much attention and what receives little. At the same time, they indicate through their user ranks who is responsible for many posts and who only for a few.

The logic of second-order popularization thus plays not only a semantic role in forum communication, insofar as attention by many becomes an argument in the debate about the quality of the series. Rather, forum communication is also organized by the platform according to the logic of second-order popularization: The logic of popularization is already inherent in the *Perry Rhodan* forum software, which displays the number of replies to a post and the frequency of hits (Figure 6). The functionality of the software also includes the possibility to sort the posts according to the number of replies and hits. Such attention measurement is automated, and the display of the forum's pages includes the *rankings* (by the number of replies and hits). Thus, the display follows popularity criteria.

This is no different in the forums in which Captain America receives a particularly high volume of attention. For example, Marvel Publishing has a subreddit that has 2.1 million followers—who are called, rather nostalgically, "true believers"—and which the platform ranks as the top 1% of all subreddits. The posts can be sorted by different categories ("hot", "new", "top"), with additional internal differentiations. Under "top", you can choose between "today" and all "times", for instance, with the most popular thread of all times accumulating 45,400 posts, the most popular on a single day (a random example: 11 July 2022) at least 5000.[20] What is more, if you click on names of the forists, you get to their profile page, where so-called karma points are displayed that have been awarded based on forum activities such as posts, comments, and upvotes.[21]

We can use the attention measurement (counting) and the ranking (listing) of popularity that platforms perform and display for our analysis as we pursue the argument that *whatever receives the most attention in the forum should also be relevant for research*: A thread with hundreds of comments and tens of thousands of hits would thus be preferable to the analysis of a discussion in which only a few forum members are involved and which garners little attention from other fans of the series. Let us recall: We want to observe the coevolution of serial text and serial paratext. Our *hypothesis is that it is more likely that popular positions in the forum make a difference to the way the series is continued than those positions that are not popular, i.e., receive little attention in the forum*. Methodologically, this means that in the digital epitext of the series, we first have to identify those threads that have conspicuously high numbers of comments and views, in order to then turn to the question of the long-term connection with the text of the series via a close reading of these selected threads.

Figure 6. *Perry Rhodan* subforum issue series EA, sorted by the number of hits. The *threads* are also displayed—and can be sorted—by the number of posts to a topic (*replies*), by the topicality of the posts, and by *authors*. The participation in a thread can also be read graphically by the number of pages in the forum the posts cover, e.g., 4 pages to the first thread, but 45 pages to the second thread.

One of the most popular threads in the *Perry Rhodan* forum over the past 5 years is titled "Opinions on the 'Mythos' cycle—issues 3000–3099".[22] Issue #3000 was published on 15 February 2019, and the last issue of the cycle was published on 8 January 2021. There are 1505 posts in the discussion; the thread has been viewed 184,893 times. In both categories (reply count, view count), the thread ranks third. This is comparatively high, considering that the forum's ca. 2000 active members have made a total of 680,000 posts on approximately 10,000 topics over the past decade. We prefer the thread selected for our close reading to the two more highly ranked threads because we are already familiar with the *Mythos* cycle (including the serial text and the serial peritext) from previous research and also because the forum discussion of these issues has another striking feature. The spoiler thread about issue #3072 of the cycle, "The Ilt Must Die!", is again the most popular thread in the discussion of the individual issues of the cycle and at the same time (rated by replies) of all spoiler threads: it gathers 977 posts and registers 68,410 hits.

This spoiler thread is in 11th place in the overall ranking (Figure 7). In issue #3072, one of the most popular and beloved protagonists of the *Perry Rhodan* series, the "mouse beaver" or Ilt named Gucky, dies (only supposedly, as later installments will eventually show). Sixteen weeks later, in issue #3088 ("Gucky Returns"), the Ilt is written back into the series: He has never been dead. Both events, Gucky's death and his return to the series, have been intensely discussed among readers. This particularly high level of attention to Gucky's fate may also play a role in the attention that the cycle as a whole has received in the forum (Figure 8a,b).

Topic ID	Forum → Title	Reply Count	View Count	Date	Title	URL	Avg Views	Autho
9278	Allgemeine Diskussionen	2 216	385 252	2017-03-14T21:32:57+00:00	Meinungen zum Zyklus "Genesis" Band 2900-2999	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=9278	173,85	1051
8800	Allgemeine Diskussionen	1 575	218 372	2016-09-07T17:01:01+00:00	Zyklusfazit "Die Jenzeitigen Lande"	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=8800	138,65	9349
11119	Allgemeine Diskussionen	1 505	184 893	2019-02-15T06:40:29+00:00	Meinungen zum Zyklus "Mythos" Band 3000 - 3099	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=11119	122,85	1068
8240	Allgemeine Diskussionen	747	132 188	2016-02-11T10:38:07+00:00	Kurzzyklus ab Band 2875 - Die Sternengruft	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=8240	176,96	9349
4772	Allgemeine Diskussionen	916	113 762	2013-10-16T07:47:53+00:00	Atlan kehrt zurück in die EA	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=4772	124,19	8060
10218	Projekt Band 3000	633	104 289	2018-03-11T16:22:34+00:00	Spekulationen 3000 ++	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=10218	164,75	9491
8381	Spoiler	541	95 154	2016-03-31T18:07:02+00:00	Spoiler 2850: Die Jenzeitigen Lande v. Vandemaan/Montillon	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=8381	175,89	9349
9082	Spoiler EA	281	95 137	2016-12-22T11:29:30+00:00	Spoilerschreiber gesucht	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=9082	338,57	8001
9044	Romantitel	450	93 986	2016-12-06T08:04:58+00:00	Titel und paar Infos zu Zyklus ab 2900	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=9044	208,86	80
7280	Spoiler	403	91 649	2015-04-16T09:01:40+00:00	Spoiler 2800: Zeitriss von Michelle Stern	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=7280	227,42	700
12208	Spoiler	976	85 396	2020-07-01T11:41:12+00:00	Spoiler 3072: Der Ilt muss sterben!, von Leo Lukas	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=12208	87,5	1052
4778	Spoiler	587	84 603	2013-10-17T10:19:08+00:00	Spoiler 2722: Altin Magara von Michael Marcus Thurner	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=4778	144,13	9776
3980	Spoiler	597	84 456	2013-05-15T15:19:33+00:00	Spoiler 2700: Der Techno-Mond von Andreas Eschbach	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=3980	141,47	58
10784	Allgemeine Diskussionen	806	83 324	2018-09-06T11:57:29+00:00	Zeitriss - Scherung - Dyschrone Drift	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=10784	103,38	9349
8458	Spoiler	389	79 678	2016-04-28T07:55:26+00:00	Spoiler 2854: Der letzte Mensch, v. Oliver Fröhlich	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=8458	204,83	435
11645	Kurs 3100	700	78 524	2019-09-23T16:37:12+00:00	Kurs 3100 ...	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=11645	112,18	87
10024	Spoiler	404	76 647	2017-12-28T01:35:06+00:00	Spoiler 2941: TEIRESIAS spricht, von Kai Hirdt	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=10024	189,72	1055
8821	Spoiler	454	74 377	2016-09-15T18:14:23+00:00	Spoiler 2874: Thez, von Vandemaan und Montillon	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=8821	163,83	114
5093	Spoiler	484	73 505	2013-12-05T13:10:04+00:00	Spoiler 2729: In eine neue Ära von Marc A.Herren	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=5093	151,87	8186

Figure 7. Listing of the most popular forum threads by replies and views. The thread about the *Mythos* cycle is in 3rd place; the thread about issue #3072 in 11th place.
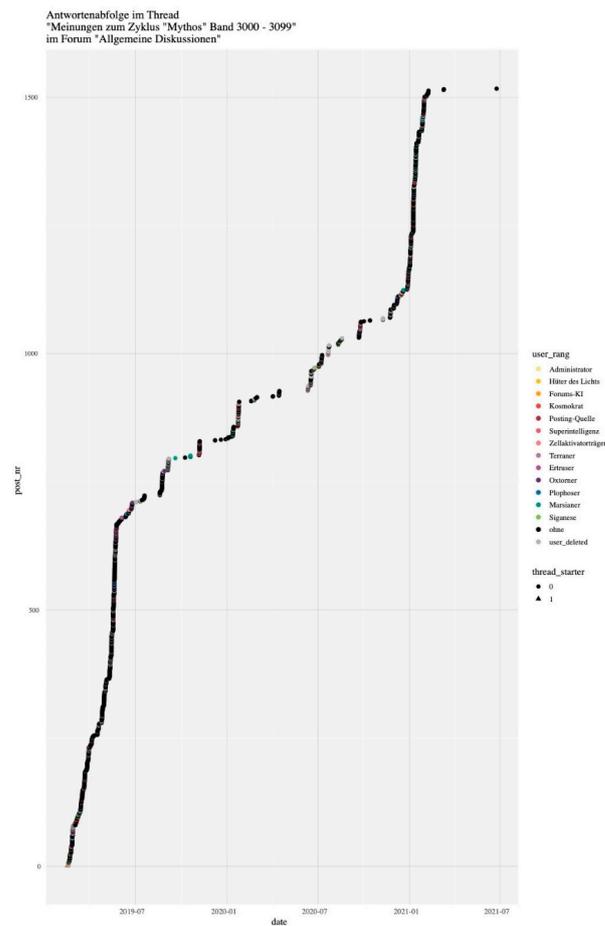
(**a**)
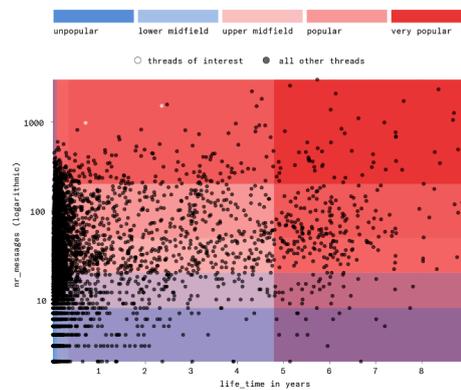
(**b**)

Figure 8. (**a**) Reply dynamics in thread 11119: *Mythos* cycle. In the graphic representation of the response dynamics in the thread, i.e., the distribution of comments over the time the thread is discussed, we can see that the discussion stops several times, does not restart until November 2020, and then develops continuously. The title "The Ilt Must Die!" (issue #3072) has been known since the end of June; issue #3072 (Gucky's Death) is due out on 3 July 2020, and issue #3088 (Gucky's Return) is due out on 23 October 2020. (**b**) Speed of the comments and popularity of the thematically relevant threads (without the large off-topic area). The two white dots in the red area on the top left represent the threads about issue #3072 and the *Mythos* cycle. There is only one thread that generates as many comments so quickly. Only discussions that run over many years and thus show a larger participation and more hits in absolute numbers are more popular.

This digital analysis suggests a connection between the incisive event in the text of the series (Gucky's death) and the serial epitext (the discussion of the current cycle in thread 11119). This settles the question of which issues to read and which readers' comments to examine more closely.

5. The Serial Epitext: Close Readings

In February 2020, the forum exchange of opinions about the newly launched *Mythos* cycle begins, starting with issue #3000. Through a kind of time jump of 493 years, Perry Rhodan and his crew return to the Milky Way in the spaceship Ras Tschubai, where due to a galaxy-wide computer virus ("Posizid"), nobody has reliable memories of Earth, Perry Rhodan, or the history of the Terrans. Without functioning storage media, the history that Perry Rhodan has written in the galaxy during thousands of years (and issues) is passed on like a rumor. Rhodan, his starship, his immortal friends Atlan and Gucky, and even his home planet are remembered at best as parts of a "myth". The first one hundred posts in the thread discuss intradiegetic details of the series, with experts being among themselves. Take the forist astroGK as an example:

> "Data flood, posicide, and the arrival of the Cairans must have happened at the same time. Only contradictory info was available, Terra was no longer there, apparently never had been there, nobody was allowed to investigate(?), and the people who remembered a different history were denounced as madmen and enemies(?), and so it was inevitable that after one generation myth-making was already a given.

I am extremely curious what we will find in the Sol system. How is the system stabilized if Terra is gone? How do you give the impression that this planet never existed?"

Readers speculate in a rather sophisticated manner about possible lines of development here. They use their knowledge of the preceding cycles, the lives of dozens of main and secondary characters, the political situation in the galaxy, and the most diverse technical possibilities of the spacefaring peoples.

Another topic in the forum discussion is the thesis that the anniversary issue (#3000), according to Ce Rhioton, uses the heightened public attention to "introduce new readers [...] (without having to assume great knowledge of the Perryverse) to the series". The beginning of the cycle is diegetically well suited for this maneuver, because the plot—the forum speaks of a "reset", but we may just as well use the more established term "reboot"—starts without too many prerequisites: The core crew around Perry Rhodan aboard the Ras Tschubai is manageably small, and the galaxy is also relatively unfamiliar to them after the lapse of 493 years. The "Posizid" and the patchy and uncertain memory of what the series has narrated over 3000 issues not only offer talking points about "current" political problems, such as "conspiracy theories" and "fake data", but above all provide an intradiegetic occasion to recall and consolidate all that is necessary for the understanding of the series. An alternative past that is explicitly refuted in this reappropriation of galactic history (#3005: "The Cradle of Mankind") is the memory of Perry Rhodan as a totalitarian autocrat. The reboot excludes this not entirely improbable past of the series' titular hero (Werber 2018, pp. 87–90).[23]

The "new readers" are thus introduced to the "series canon". The start of the cycle, which is perceived as "quiet" or "slow", has "of course the purpose of letting the reader slowly get to know the 'new' Milky Way together with our heroes", says Rainer Nagel. Many commentators express similar sentiments: The cycle wants to "take new readers along by visiting important players in the Milky Way". The aim is to "make it easier for new readers [...] to get started". That the series needs new readers is undisputed, but the narrative strategies used for recruitment purposes are not appreciated by all "old readers". Repetition and explanation can be boring for recipients who know the series well and thus become risky for series evolution. Ce Rhioton suspects:

> "I think the crux is (and [*Perry Rhodan* author] Christian Montillon has mentioned this here in the forum) that the balancing act of catering to different reader groups

(regular readers, return readers, new readers) has been attempted since volume 3000. And this balancing act, in my opinion, inhibits the creativity of the stories."

Forist AushilfsMutant shares this view and asks for understanding and patience:

"I also think that this is exactly the reason. At the moment, old things are partly reintroduced or/and new things are added. This simply requires some time."

As soon as new readers can get their bearings, the cycle will pick up speed and gain momentum, Kosmonaut hopes. Julian comments:

"In my opinion, the plot was very well prepared, especially for me as an old reader, now also physically, it has been a pleasure for me to witness how they tried to attract new readers and thus keep them engaged in order to maybe become old readers themselves at some point."

Not surprisingly, there is also criticism of this "balancing act" the forists perceive. One answer to the question of what the series criticism expressed in the forum could be good for at all is this: "because everyone involved is interested in the greatest science fiction series also being the best possible". Others share this view: "Agree", writes Old Man. And Aarn Munro confirms: "I agree! That's why we nag . . . But it's always justified". The expectation is that critical support for the series will help to ensure that it continues and, as much as possible, meets the expectations and hopes of its readers. This is what the forum is all about. The forists' discussion of issues and cycles in the context of the entire "history of the Perryverse" provides information about the "reader expectations" and the "reception" of the series. Nanograinger writes:

"How could it be otherwise? After all, we're reading an endless series, many of us for years, if not decades, or hundreds of volumes."

Especially since the "old readers" in the forum, who have been following the "endless series" for decades and are also particularly active in the thread, articulate the expectation that the new cycle should also have surprises in store. Aarn Munro criticizes: "Nothing (serious) has really happened yet. Maybe more in the next volumes that push the galactic plot a bit. Right now, all I see is: repetition, repetition. Like on German television". Nanograinger concurs: "Perry Rhodan, Atlan, Gucky and Bully also play leading roles again, they really can't think of anything new". Ce Rhioton confesses, "I'm longing for that *Wow*! effect", to which he adds: "The structure of a cycle follows predictable paths. Why not leave tried and true paths?" In this discussion about repetition and deviation (or variation), Eric Manoli maintains that the longevity of the series indicates that, in light of 3000 issues in the series, the concrete relationship between innovation and redundancy must have been successful: "I think 'never change a running system' might have proven itself to be a golden rule after 60 years".

This exchange calls to mind Frank Kelleter's thoughts on the "evolution" of popular series. In the course of their continuation, series experiment with the difference between "redundancy and variability" (Kelleter 2012, p. 28). Whether the result of the combination of variation and redundancy is evolutionarily convincing can be observed in their popularity, which either drops to the point that the series is discontinued (negative selection) or is so strong that the series is continued (positive selection) and might even spread into other series and other media (proliferation; spread) (Kelleter 2017, pp. 18–22). In the case of *Perry Rhodan*, this includes miniseries, spin-offs, remakes (*Perry Rhodan-Neo*), novels such as Andreas Eschbach's bestseller about Perry Rhodan's youth (Eschbach 2020), or, in the decades of its greatest popularity (1970s to 1980s), the *Atlan* series and the planetary novels (Werber 2018, p. 79f.). We could also cite many similar examples from the transmedia Marvel universe.

As a theoretically saturated concept rather than a metaphor for observing change or adaptation, evolution implies at least the three-figure differentiation suggested above—namely, "of variation, selection, and restabilization" (Luhmann 2012, p. 252). Society, and its internal differentiations, "is thus a result of evolution", Niklas Luhmann states (Luhmann 2012, p. 301). According to Luhmann (cf. Werber 2000), society evolves according to the

"neo-Darwinian schema" (Luhmann 2012, p. 252), i.e., through "variation to the elements" of the system ("that is, communications"), through the "selection of structures" of the system ("that is, the formation and use of expectations") (p. 286, cf. p. 273), and through the "restabilization [...] of the evolving system after selection, whether positive or negative" (p. 274)—and therefore, through the use of evolutionary achievements such as agriculture or stratification, writing or organizations for new variants, and further structural formation.

Series evolution is also based on evolutionary achievements, for example, on the storytelling in cycles, on the "onion model' of the Perryverse, on the establishment of galactic peoples and technologies, on a readership that is familiar with them. The much-vaunted complexity of a long-running series consists precisely in the fact that it has itself, with its narrative, created the conditions for otherwise highly improbable selection offers (in the case of the series, written communication appearing in a periodical form) to have a chance of being positively selected. The fact that tens of thousands of readers do not have the slightest problem with a time jump of 493 years, with immortal protagonists and mutants gifted with superpowers, with superintelligences, self-aware computers, and faster-than-light engines is due to the fact that certain structures of expectation have been successfully established in the readers. After all, it is rather improbable that a communication offer that confronts the recipient with a galaxy in which Earth and Moon have been abducted from the solar system (*raptus terrae*) and replaced by other planets will connect text and readers week after week. Moreover, the fact that in the course of the *Mythos* cycle, with a machine that must be activated in another universe, Earth is enabled to return to its ancestral place proves to be a completely unproblematic development of the diegetic possibilities that the series has created for itself. In the thread, such twists are not even mentioned. The most important evolutionary achievement of the *Perry Rhodan* series is thus a readership that is able to read each new issue against the backdrop of the self-created complexity of the Perryverse and enjoy "improbable" selection offers that would have little chance of connectivity outside the series.

The initial story of an American crew flying to the moon did not make great demands on the recipients in 1961. This is very much different with the current state of the plot, with each new *Perry Rhodan* issue requiring vast knowledge about the history of the series. A new reader without this knowledge will most likely not derive the same sense of tension, satisfaction, and fulfillment as long-time followers and may thus not be motivated to buy and read the next issue. For forists, however, this is indeed very likely. According to our evolutionary approach, the reasons for this likeliness lie in the "increasing functional specification" (of the readership as well as of their series) that makes it possible to deal with the "increasing complexity" of the series and increasingly normalizes "improbabilities" (Luhmann 2008, p. 108; cf. Luhmann 2012, p. 253).

The forum also demonstrates a sense that the series narrative and its readership are evolutionarily related or "coupled" (Luhmann 2012, p. 269). There is a shared understanding of the improbability that new issues represent a selection offer that is accepted because the conditions of writing and reading, the possibilities of continuing the series, and the expectations of the readership change from issue to issue. Observing forum communication has consequences for the formation of expectations, that is, expectations that readers and authors have of readers and authors. Whether this is true or not, the forists assume that the continuation of the series will take their expectations into account; the editors and synopsis team, for their part, plan the continuation under the assumption that they will take the readers' expectations into account. Whether the continuation of communication (new issues are written and read) succeeds, despite the great improbability arising from the self-generated complexity of the series and the consequent high demands on its continuation (is everything correct?) and the specification of the recipients (do you understand everything?), can only be observed *post hoc*. This temporal dimension also becomes an issue in the thread.

A popular series can be "irritated" by the forum discussion and convert these internal "irritations" into its own communicative operations of "information-processing"

([Luhmann 2013](), p. 116). But it cannot accomplish this simultaneously. It needs time for its own operations. The forist Halut describes this cause-and-effect model thusly:

> "While an individual author can react within a few weeks, an exposé takes much longer. Basic plot concepts will probably have quite a few months delay. I myself have perceived things that were implemented after 'only' six years.
>
> Criticism and reaction fall very far apart, but they must have a perceptible temporal and factual connection in order to be noticed. This connection is often too tenuous."

This observation gets to the bottom of the problem: There is a "connection" between the series criticism practiced in the forum and the continuation of the series, but it is very difficult to observe and specify, especially since the readers' memory must last long enough to observe conversions after years. Nevertheless, in some cases, the temporal difference is only "a few weeks", and the thread deals with such a case.

There is no question that Gucky's "death" irritated the readers. Yet for the production team, it is naturally not this character's "death", narrated in issue #3072, that causes irritation, but the readers' reactions to this issue. This irritation, which the producers of the series perceive as unexpected "surprises, disappointments, disturbances", must be channeled into a specific form of information to which the system (the organization of the production of the series) can then react:

> "A system that does not repress its own irritation, but observes and processes it, gives them the form of information. Information also does not occur in the environment, but only in the system itself. Thus, it cannot be transported as identical units from the environment into the system. This is because information presupposes a design of possibilities from which it selects one (and no other). Such constructions, however, are always the system's own achievements [. . .]. In the form of information, the system can then use eigenstates to choose other eigenstates." ([Luhmann 1990](), p. 99)

The system learns ([Luhmann 1990](), p. 99). It reshuffles the relationship between variance and redundancy. Combinations that cannot maintain their popularity in a changing "reading(r) environment", to borrow a term from the forist Nanograinger, are discontinued. *Perry Rhodan* itself has to adjust to these "changes" again and again to survive as a series. For Nanograinger, it is "clear: even if it is an endless series, we never read the same thing (despite all the repetitions)". And even those who read change and never read the same way.

Even if the more than "50,000" readers may have different "requirements" for "pulp novels", ovaron29 argues that the most important factor for the continuation of the series is that it "continues to be bought". The series can then continue, quite independently of the individual motives for the purchase. Ce Rhioton is aware that the "act of purchase" itself is not a quality criterion ([Hecken 2006](), p. 87):

> "A sold issue doesn't really say anything about the satisfaction of the buyer. Measured against the total number of copies sold, the feedback is comparatively small. No one can really know whether the majority of buyers/readers are satisfied or not."

A distinction must therefore be made between the popularity of the series and the quality of the episodes. "If a consumer has to decide in the evening whether to read a PR novel or watch 'Game of Thrones' or another exciting television series", Arkosan writes", his decision will depend on the quality of the product". So the decision to read the pulp novel, made week after week, would be an indicator of quality. Looking at series evolution, we can assume that the *Perry Rhodan* series, which has retained its audience ("old readers") and keeps renewing ("new readers") it in the span of thousands of issues, is already "outstandingly good" and "enthusiastically read", as Julian puts it in a post. It is the attachment to the series that matters, not the individual issue. After all, notes Eric

Manoli, "[n]o regular reader will drop out because of one or two bad issues. It can take quite a few issues".

But how are "regular readers" won, and how does the series keep them? The question occupies the forists because they know that the series will only continue if new readers are gained, who will gradually replace the aging regular audience. Ninety percent of the 50 most active forists (over 2000 posts) are over 40 years of age; 85% are over 50. Just as the longevity of the series forces it to integrate new editors and writers into the production team, so too does the readership change. In both cases, the series' greatest success—appearing continuously every week since 8 September 1961—creates a need to continually recalibrate supply and demand. The evolutionary achievement that makes this possible is a readership, trained by the series itself, that is able to understand and appreciate the "complex" novel series in its seventh decade and is robust enough to continue reading even after a few boring, irrelevant, confusing, or annoying issues.

The forum provides "irritations" that the series can use for its evolution. This has the great advantage that it can make changes in order to maintain its "reading/reader environment". It is not faced with the quasi-existential alternative of either being discontinued or being continued but instead is able to react to an abundance of irritations by means of variations—which in turn leads to discussions in the forum that can irritate the series once again. The digital epitext enables this permanent self-adjustment of the series to the information it gains from the irritations. The organization (editors, synopsis writers, authors) can base its decisions (about how to continue the series) on more than subscriber and sales figures, namely, on the ongoing ratings of the issues and cycles and on the ongoing issue reviews in the forum (and on the *LKS*). Eric Manoli recalls in the thread KNF's "statement that the forum here is a kind of seismograph for him". This is an apt metaphor as the swings of the seismograph do not causally lead to certain consequences for the way the series continues but rather motivate continuing self-adjustment to ongoing irritations.

As is typical of other mass media formats (such as newspapers and magazines), it is true for pulp novel series that "no interaction among those co-present can take place between sender and receivers" (Luhmann 2000, p. 2). First, the authors must write; then the readers can read. What is written and how it is written, and whether and how it is read, "cannot be coordinated centrally" (Luhmann 2000, p. 3). This impossibility creates uncertainty on both sides: Readers cannot know what authors will write before they purchase an issue, and authors cannot know what readers will want to read in the future. However, the fact that *Perry Rhodan* is not a single, self-contained, autonomous "work" of literature but a series of science fiction pulp novels (Werber 2021) makes possible a reciprocal observation that enables the formation of stable expectations imputed to the other side. Each issue of the series is a test for both sides as to whether their assumptions are still correct. This can be observed not only in the issues themselves, which continue to be written and sold, as well as bought and read, but also in the serial paratext.

In the *Mythos* thread, Gucky_Fan, like many others, assumes that the "responsible people [...] certainly read the critical contributions". The editor responsible for *Perry Rhodan*, Frick, confirms: "We discuss this internally, no question". Could the crisis that shook the series after issue #3072 have been avoided? AimeeAbuh is just one of many readers who were so shocked by the plot development that they suspended their reading (and purchase of the issues): "I still haven't touched any of the new HR's [issues] since Gucky's death, by the way". If, for many forists, and even for very experienced readers, "Gucky's death [...] is a slap in the face", could this not have been known by the synopsis team planning the series' progression? Ce Rhioton claims: "They should have seen 'Gucky disaster' coming just the same".

On 7 July 2020, a few days after issue #3072 (Gucky's Death) was published, Mentro Kosum notes: "For the first time since this thread was created, the 'Don't Like' votes have taken the lead in the poll (48 votes to 45)". On that day, the "seismograph", as the ongoing poll is called, indexed a majority of dissatisfied readers. Then, there were no posts at all in the thread from 9 July to 21 July 2020. As for the exchange of views on the *Mythos* cycle,

conducted over 72 weeks, the forists are silent. The complaint made there at the beginning of the cycle about the predictability of the series has been heard. However, the surprise that was achieved with issue #3072 seems to represent a variant that is negatively selected by the "reading environment".

We can observe similar reactions in other serial media, for instance, in the numerous backlashes against several Marvel comic books, one of the most prominent being the depiction of Captain America as a fascist HYDRA leader in Nick Spencer's *Secret Empire* story arc (2017).[24] In the case of *Perry Rhodan*, the sometimes outraged reactions concern not only a single issue and its author, but the series and the production team (editors, exposé writers, authors) as a whole. In letters to the editor that appear on the *LKS* (in issue #3079, cf. Figure 2d), there is speculation about the end of the series, which was heralded by Gucky's death: Without Gucky, too many readers are considering to opt out of the series to guarantee its continuation.

Only on 21 July 2021 does a new post appear in the thread, in which Kardec refers very briefly to a post by Zeut-42 that had appeared elsewhere in the forum. Those who follow the link Kardec included in his post learn that, according to the editors, Gucky did not actually die, but only a "clone" version of him did. It had been the goal of the production team to shock the protagonists of the series (Gucky's friends: Atlan, Bully, etc.) with this death, but not the "readers", who, the editor explains, were meant to actually "get it", to recognize "that it is somehow a 'fake', because they have more information than the heroes".[25] To ensure such recognition, however, a more appropriate narratological focalization should have been chosen (zero focalization). The death scene is internally focalized—so there was no access to the events other than through the protagonist (Lionel Obioma), from whose co-view the events are conveyed. And he is sure that the Ilt has died. Another possibility would have been to provide hints in the narrated world itself that there was a Gucky clone and that it was at least questionable in the key scene whether the popular mouse beaver or a replica was threatened. Zeut-42 accuses the exposé authors of "operational blindness". They were apparently no longer able to anticipate the reception of the series by their readers.

The editor agrees with the forist "in some respects":

"More correct would have been (and afterwards one is always wiser) to show how the Cairans prepare the Gucky plan. Then everyone would have seen crystal clear what was happening. The characters in the novels would still have been horrified and shocked, but for the readers it would have been an exciting story that would not have annoyed them but would have evoked sympathy.

Be that as it may: we haven't thought this through properly, that's obvious. I'm sure you can't blame individuals for that anyway. If I had presented the whole thing to my team colleagues, Sabine Kropp or Bettina Lang or Klaus Bollhöfener, with their experience, would certainly have pointed out the problems to me. If the two exposé authors and I had discussed the situation more thoroughly . . . would-if-had."[26]

The thread on the *Mythos* cycle references this discussion (in the subforum "Questions to the Editors") several times. The new state of knowledge now, weeks before the mouse beaver appears again in the series itself, is that Gucky did not die in issue #3072. Some people claim to have always known this, being congenial readers, but the general opinion that the "Gucky plan" failed remains unchallenged among the forists. Is it because of the "operational blindness" of authors and editors insinuated by Zeut-42? Ce Rhioton remarks: "At times I have the impression that those in charge also live a little in their bubble". Mentro Kosum thinks that the "authors" are "alien to the view of the simple reader". On 22 July 2021, he comments on the editor's concession that the murder of an Ilt should have been narratively prepared in a different manner:

"After the fact, you're always smarter. But with a product that reaches tens of thousands of readers, it would have been better to be smart up front. You can't change it now, but I'm afraid it will have a long-lasting effect."

Some forists speculate that the publisher would benefit from making better use of the readers' expertise in planning the course of the series, avoiding setbacks like the "Gucky debacle". "There is so much expertise in the fan scene: the creators of Perrypedia, PRFZ [Perry Rhodan Fan Zentrale/Headquarters] and also here in the forum. Not using that is completely incomprehensible to me", Arkosan writes. "The competence within the fan scene is a godsend after all". The quality assurance of the series can "only work through a feedback mechanism with the fan community", that is, through an organization of "interaction with the fan community".

For the forist Rebecca, the forum is a "place of exchange" about "what's going well and what's not going so well in the series". She speaks of a "serial community" of "authors, readers, forists, or publishing people". All these terms—"interaction", "exchange", "community", "community"—connote familiarity and closeness. This might also be the reason why forists repeatedly offer authors to "act as test readers". A "panel of experts assembled from among the forists [could] read the novels before publication and make their comments". In 183 posts, the forum discusses the possible advantages and disadvantages of test readers. Many posts in the thread profess a willingness to contribute their own expertise, acquired over decades, for the best of the series. The *Perry Rhodan* forum, one might think, is virtually a model case of popular culture's "participatory culture", as Jenkins recently defined it with regard to digital networking opportunities:

"My initial use of 'participatory culture' to refer to fandom (Jenkins 1992) relied on a not fully conscious blurring between forms of cultural production and forms of social exchange; fans understood fandom to be an informal 'community' defined around notions of equality, reciprocity, sociality, and diversity." (Jenkins 2016, p. 2)

The members of the forum claim "equality, reciprocity, sociality" not only for their interaction with each other, but also for their back-and-forth with the authors and editors of the series. What is more, it seems, the "fans ha[ve] a clear and (largely) shared understanding of what they [a]re participating in" (Jenkins 2016, p. 2). Thirteen authors of the series are among the members of the forum, plus four members of the *Perry Rhodan* editorial staff and one of the cartoonists. A total of about 15,000 contributions to the forum come from this group. The "interaction" within the "series community" that has been called for is certainly taking place here. Is this "participatory culture" in practice?

The thread under investigation includes a post by the editor that gives a different impression. Klaus N. Frick posted the following on 19 May 2019, at 5:20 p.m.:

"You have already noticed that the team of authors almost completely and also the editorial staff nearly completely do not want to have anything to do with the forum anymore, haven't you? It frustrates me. And I can understand it."

A few hours later (at 9:16 p.m.), Wim Vandemann joins the discussion. Vandemann is the author of about three dozen *Perry Rhodan* issues, but above all (since issue #2700) one of the two exposé authors responsible for the series development. He writes:

"Hello and good evening everyone,

we have just finished the preliminary work on Expo 3032 and are sitting on Expo 3033. [...] I read the forum almost every day. And it is well known that at the last team meeting we talked about the forum posts, exclusively in terms of how helpful they were and are.

I don't always share the criticisms, but I haven't read anything here that I think is unfounded or worthless in terms of Expo work.

I'll admit: posts from people who haven't read the novels, or have only read them in part, or have only read them in spoiler form, are of no interest to me. They're

> mere statements, not criticisms. But the forum is large and has room for everyone, so please. [. . .] The other posts (almost) always make me think."

Vandemann seems to want to confirm the view formulated by Ce Rhioton 2 days earlier:

> "You think those responsible are resistant to criticism? Christian Montillon, Wim Vandemaan and KNF are supposed to be completely indifferent to readers' opinions?
>
> Pardon me, I don't believe that. According to the editor, at least once a year they determine what went well, but also what didn't go so well."

The forist LaLe replies 3 min later:

> "No, I don't think so. Obviously, though, they disagree with the critics. And if the series is successful, from that point of view, they're absolutely right to act differently than some readers hope/expect."

The open and undecided discussion in the forum about whether or not the opinions and expectations of the forists are given enough attention by the "PR team" does not mean that the forum discussion does not play a role in the evolution of the series. Even the disappointing reactions of the team for some forists still confirm that their comments are not meaningless for the continuation of the series. Through these reactions, editor and authors take part in the interaction in the forum and confirm its relevance. Nonattention looks different.

Frick admittedly takes the position that a central coordination of senders and receivers, which would serve to optimize the series and serve the goal of reader satisfaction, is not possible.[27] Readers' wishes, opinions, and comments are so diverse that they simply cannot all be taken into account:

> "And one thing is clear after all these years: I get a lot of very different opinions from the readers' point of view. And the authors can't fulfill everyone's wishes. That's not possible, I'm afraid."

The authors can only ever selectively refer to the forum discussion, i.e., be "irritated"— and thereby make their own selection as to what they will consider and what consequences they may draw for the series. This is exactly what evolution as self-adaptation means. Frick responds skeptically to demands from the forum to seek "interaction with the fan community" in order to plan the course of the series together:

> "With what part of the fan community? The ones who comment on the forum? The ones on the SF Network who have been declaring the series dead for a dozen years? The people in the Facebook groups? The #Twitter gang [. . .]?
>
> It makes sense to me that someone who doesn't like the series would call for a change of course. But it's really not clear to me now—if I were to take this seriously—which course would find a majority."

Frick rejects the idea of having an expert panel of readers act as advisors to the exposé authors:

> "About twenty years ago, when the Forum was young, it was very seriously suggested in this Forum that a Readers' Council be convened. It sounded very much like that. I can't imagine that a more extensive bureaucracy will make even one novel more entertaining or exciting."

Systems theory confirms that there is indeed no other way because "central coordination" between readers and authors is fundamentally impossible, not even through bureaucratization or mechanization (for example, in the form of opinion polls). Series evolution does not mean optimizing the satisfaction of readers and authors over the course of the series through more exchange or more feedback. Series evolution means that the mutual observation of readers and authors in the serial paratext is not indifferent to the continuation of the series. How the series continues is not the result of a "better" match

between authors' skills and readers' expectations, but the result of a specific combination of redundancy and variation that is either stabilized in the series' ecological niche (= popular enough) or not (= nonpopular). Whether something gets attention or not can be tested out in the forum—and precisely with respect to how much attention something attracts in the forum. The popularity of a thread, a post, a thesis helps to turn an irritation into information to which one can react. This can be done very quickly. Zeut-42 states in the thread even before the end of the cycle:

> "Gucky came back and the writers put an incredible amount of effort into the characters after the 'Gucky incident.' You just have to acknowledge that the authors have written very well—and even before all discussions about cycles, the characters have to be right."

Whether, then, the next cycle has hit the right ratio can only be observed *post hoc*—and again related to the paratexts of the series. Whether, after all the criticism of the *Mythos* cycle, the *Chaotarch* cycle will do better or worse cannot be observed in the *Mythos* thread, but only later. And then, months or years down the road, it will be possible to observe in the forum whether forists attribute the development of the series to comments they had made months or years earlier. Anyway, at the end of this *Chaotarch* cycle, over a hundred issues after the Gucky disaster, we can observe that the narrative deals differently with the death of main protagonists. When Gucky and Atlan, Perry Rhodan and Alaska Saedelaere are "blown to pieces" by explosions ("They are all dead". #3197, p. 56), readers immediately learn that this will not be the last word.

Which threads and which posts have been considered comes into view only with temporal distance, and from the perspective of the continued series, which, at the time of this writing, has just concluded the next cycle with volume #3199. Just as the evolutionary history of a species is not determined by a coordination council between a gene commission responsible for variation and an environmental committee responsible for selection, the series evolution cannot be described as a coordination process between readers and authors and reconstructed in the paratext. Nevertheless, and this is precisely our evolutionary argument, a fit into the environment can be observed in the case of successfully stabilized variants—otherwise, negative selection would have occurred and the species would no longer exist. For the observation of the evolution of the series, it would therefore be necessary to understand this fit not as the result of a conscious, motivated negotiation process but as the effects of the mutual observation and self-adaptation initiated by these observations. Readers and authors observe according to their own possibilities and standards and draw their own consequences—and adapt in their reading and writing to what they have observed in the text and in the paratexts of the series.

The last issue of the *Mythos* cycle appeared on 8 January 2021, with Ce Rhioton summing up a week earlier:

> "I'm just going to assume that the Mythos cycle was (also) a concession to the new readers who started with anniversary volume 3000. There always has to be a balance between regular readers, newcomers and new readers.
>
> And with the new cycle, the serial steamship will pick up speed again. After all, it will be under the sign of chaos—and this prospect already conveys a sense of optimism."

In a new thread in which "opinions on the *Chaotarch* cycle" are exchanged, the forist asks with some satisfaction on 2 February 2021: "86%—has any cycle ever had such a high approval rating?"[28]

At least this much can be said about this *Chaotarch* cycle: It will not go on without "Perry Rhodan, Atlan, Gucky and Bully" in the "leading roles". There will be no further experiment of the so-called expocrats (*Perry Rhodan* writers and editors) with the favorite and main characters of the series. In the exchanges about the new cycle (issues #3100–#3199), this conviction appears repeatedly in the discussion of possible plot developments. Ce Rhioton states with a sense of certainty: "You mean the authors would throw us off the scent

a second time with one of the main characters after the Gucky disaster? Impossible".[29] After the "Gucky disaster", those responsible for the series "wouldn't dare fool the readership like that for a second time".[30] So far, this prediction has been accurate.

6. Outlook

Pulp novel series and superhero comics are evidently part of the popular culture of Western societies. The fact that they are popular and widely read is a necessary prerequisite for their serial continuation. Both popularity and seriality enable the formation of a paratextual space where recipients and producers exchange ideas about the past, present, and possible future of the series, which can only ever begin on the condition that the current issue is popular enough to justify continuing the series. The letters to the editor sections and digital fan forums offer a glimpse into these multidecade negotiations. The "participatory culture" of popular culture can be reconstructed here in the interplay between series text and serial paratext and can be related to series evolution as a combination of variation and redundancy, selection and adaptation.

We too have exemplified the potential of this research approach, but we have also taken a new approach to corpus formation: We made the crucial importance of the popularity of the series the criterion for selecting reception testimonies. The analyzed thread has received the greatest attention in the forum, and the speed with which forum members have responded to the discussion is also significantly higher than in other discussions. The interventions of authors and editors in the discussion attests to the importance of these reception testimonies for the continuation of the series. Because the quantitative dimension of popular series threatens a methodological overload, we believe this detour is a promising approach that deserves further testing. The idea is to examine more closely what has already received the most attention in the "paratextual negotiations". This approach sees its biggest chances where the seriality of popular phenomena has created stable forms of exchange, such as letters pages and fan forums. The highly regarded peritexts and digital epitexts of popular pulp novel series and superhero comic books shed light on how "read literature" is received and what function reading practices have for the continuation of the series.

Notes

1   All translations from German language sources are ours unless otherwise noted.

2   Even now-canonical works may have originally been serial at one time, but their seriality is often invisible once they are published in book form and read as works of the canon (e.g., Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, E.D.E.N Southworth's *The Hidden Hand*, or George Lippard's *Quaker City*).

3   While *Perry Rhodan* continues to include letters to the editor in the printed installments, publishers of superhero comics such as DC, Marvel, and Image Comics largely ceased to run them in the early 2000s, when most communication about the series began to occur online, first in message boards and now on forums and especially social media platforms.

4   Forum entry from 9 October 2015: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=438186#p438186 (accessed on 29 March 2023). We only cite freely accessible contributions that can be viewed online without being a forum member. Obvious typos and

spelling errors will be corrected. Quotations are italicized in the same way as in the original. Cf. the privacy policy of the forum: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/ucp.php?mode=privacy (accessed on 29 March 2023).

5   An early example of this phenomenon is the French feuilleton novel *Les Mystères de Paris* by Eugène Sue, which appeared in serial form in the *Journal de Debats* from 1842 to 1843, received considerable national and international attention, and generated a substantial number of letters to the editor (Hügel 2012, pp. 63–65). In the German-speaking world, one could think of serialized novels that were first published in the *Gartenlaube*, for example, and only later as works in book form (Stockinger 2018). In the case of Theodor Fontane, 10 out of 17 novels and stories first appeared in newspapers and magazines (Beintmann 2019, p. 48). The requirements of popularity and seriality do not seem to have been sufficiently explored for the serial novel with regard to the place of publication, reader responses, and changing paratexts (newspaper/book).

6   These observations also apply to the letters pages in superhero comics. See Stein (2021, chp. 1) for a detailed discussion; see Walsh et al. (2018) for an attempt to use digital methods for the study of superhero letter columns.

7   Minutes 5–6. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XnXc33z5D5I (accessed on 29 March 2023).

8   (Stein 2018) proposes some solutions to this problem, but they are less concerned with completeness and empirical validity than with analyzing superhero comics as an evolutionary network and thus are not necessarily geared toward solving the problem addressed here.

9   Digital archives, such as the subscription-based Marvel Unlimited, are not complete and also do not contain the most important original peritexts (especially the letters pages, editorials, and bullpen bulletins). CD-ROM collections of Spider-Man, Captain-America, and a few other series heroes appeared in the mid-2000s with PDF files of the scanned original comics, including all peritexts, but these files are not yet sufficiently prepared to be adopted as a searchable corpus that would satisfy the demands of digital analysis.

10   In the field of US comics, the website Comichron.com provides the most accurate numbers: https://www.comichron.com/index.php (accessed on 29 March 2023). The site's byline—"Comics history ... by the numbers"—illustrates the numbers-based attention economy we discuss here.

11   Macdonald included comic books and science fiction in his list of media brought forth by mass culture. He distinguished between a "'High Culture' [...] that is chronicled in the textbooks, and a 'Mass Culture' manufactured wholesale for the market". Macdonald was obviously aware of the fact that this distinction might run counter to the actual popularity of certain artifacts, but this did not dissuade him from sticking with it: "['Mass Culture'] is sometimes called 'Popular Culture', but I think 'Mass Culture' a more accurate term, since its distinctive mark is that it is solely and directly an article of mass consumption, like chewing gum. A work of High Culture is occasionally popular, after all, though this is increasingly rare" (Macdonald 1953, p. 1).

12   Entry from 24 October 2012: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=60041#p60041 (accessed on 29 March 2023). *Der Vorleser* (English title: *The Reader*) is a novel by the German author Bernhard Schlink, published in 1995.

13   Entry from 10 June 2020: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=710620#p710620 (accessed on 29 March 2023).

14   Entry from 3 August 2017: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=548072#p548072 (accessed on 29 March 2023). In the US, a particularly derogatory discourse was formed in the 1940s, which manifested itself in descriptions of comics as "the lowest, most despicable, and most harmful from of trash" (John Mason Brown in the *Saturday Review of Literature* in 1948), continued in the 1950s through the claims of youth endangerment (e.g., in Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* of 1954), and then continued for decades. In the late 1960s, the mastermind of Marvel Comics, Stan Lee, therefore, expressed a desire to nobilitate comics (in White 2007, he speaks of the "elevation" of comics). See Stein (2021, pp. 116, 229, 241).

15   Entry from 24 December 2012: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=14&start=350 (accessed on 29 March 2023).

16   Entry from 18 December 2013: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=207948#p207948 (accessed on 29 March 2023).

17   Entry from 17 April 2013: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=116123#p116123 (accessed on 29 March 2023).

18   Entry from 16 April 2014: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=246920 (accessed on 29 March 2023).

19   Entry from 8 January 2021: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=740687#p740687 (accessed 29 March 2023).

20   https://www.reddit.com/r/Marvel/top/?t=all; (accessed on 11 July 2022)

21   https://reddit.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/204511829-What-is-karma- (accessed on 29 March 2023).

22   All quoted posts from this thread can be found here: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=702514 (accessed on 29 March 2023). We used data from the forum as of July 2022. The analysis with digital tools is based on a closed discussion in which no one has participated for months.

23   This narrative cycle recalls the search for memories of Wakanda in the intergalactic turmoil of a great empire imagined by Ta-Nehisi Coates in his *Black Panther* run (Marvel, 2016–2022). Whether the *Perry Rhodan* production team was inspired by these comics or whether the similarities are due to the shared tropes of the superhero and science fiction genres cannot be ascertained with any degree of certainty. On the connection between series history, or archives, and the Afrodiasporic implications of the figure's history and the history of imperialism, see Stein (2022).

24   See also Stein (2023). The titles of the online coverage already show the importance of epitextual reactions to the series: "Secret Empire: Did Fan Reaction Affect the Ending?" (https://screenrant.com/marvel-secret-empire-fan-reaction-alternative-ending/; accessed on 29 March 2023); "Marvel Desperately Reassures Fans Captain America Is Still a Hero after Secret Empire

Backlash" (https://gizmodo.com/marvel-desperately-reassures-fans-captain-america-is-st-1794849294; accessed on 29 March 2023); "Marvel Pleads for Readers to Wait until the End of Secret Empire to Pass Judgement" (https://www.comicsbeat.com/marvel-pleads-for-readers-to-wait-until-the-end-of-secret-empire-to-pass-judgement/; accessed on 29 March 2023).

25 Entry from 21 July 2021: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=717610 (accessed on 29 March 2023).

26 Entry from 22 July 2021: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=12275 (accessed on 29 March 2023).

27 In the 2010s, the two major superhero publishers Marvel and DC switched from moderated message boards to a social media strategy where content is presented on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter and moderated according to the practices of these services. In addition, fan-run forums dominate the epitextual discourse, although it is usually unclear whether what is posted is even noticed by the creators of the series.

28 Entry from 2 February 2021: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=744848 (accessed on 29 March 2023).

29 Entry from 9 January 2022: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=787464 (accessed on 29 March 2023).

30 Entry from 27 March 2021: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=752910 (accessed on 29 March 2023).

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