Seriality

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Seriosity

Though the term seriosity is not a central element of Koselleck's critical vocabulary, his work is very much attuned to how patterns of repetition and variation—defining features of serial forms⁴—shape experiences of historical events, organize language use, and inform how historical sources are produced and evaluated. We observe serial forms by comparing and identifying similarities and variation in multiple related items. Events perceived as similar can form a series because they happen either in a diachronic sequence or synchronically. Different linguistic usages can also be viewed as series, shedding light on how language depends both upon repeated use and subtle (and not so subtle) variation. Koselleck's reflections on historical time exhibit a keen sense of how series of recurring events structure human experience, and his work with series of images is a key feature of his studies in historical iconography. He is also quite aware of serial publication as a constitutive feature of a variety of historical sources, and of the efforts of modern lexica and other research aids—from the Grimm dictionary to the Geschichte Grundbegriffe lexicon and beyond—to build upon and successively augment each other. Whether understood in experiential, semantic, or material terms, serial forms play an important part in Koselleck's thought, and his work has much to contribute to recent debates about seriosity.²

Concepts of seriosity have become an integral part of a number of scholarly discussions in the past fifty years or so, be it in media-historical accounts of reproducible technical processes, studies of the use of epistemological series in the natural sciences, or in the evaluation of aesthetic series in art and cultural history.² Seriosity has become an important conceptual lever in discussions of popular culture and media with the rise of so-called “prestige TV” and online streaming platforms, and many observers trace a renewed interest in long-form, serialized storytelling back to nineteenth-century narrative fiction first published in periodicals.⁴ In this context, literary- and media-historical scholars have uncovered new ways that serial forms in journalism, scientific publication, public performance, and more are defining features of the nineteenth century, playing central roles in creating a sense of newness, crafting expectations for the future, and allowing for reencounters with the recent or distant past.⁵ Koselleck is quite aware of the place of serial forms in modernity, noting that serialized journalistic and contemporary-historical publications become increasingly important historical sources in the early nineteenth century.⁸ We might thus be prompted to consider how the so-called Sattelzeit (as well as more recent eras) is an epoch characterized by the
proliferation of and increased attunement to serial forms and their experiential, historiographical, and medial implications.

“Shapes of time” and series of images

Underpinning Koselleck’s historical thought is the insight that series of actions, events, and linguistic usages have different temporalities and generate different “layers” or “shapes” of time, to use Georg Kubler’s term.7 Scholars have noted affinities between Koselleck’s and Kubler’s accounts of structures of repetition and their varied temporalities; while scholarship on serial forms has considered Kubler’s work extensively, a thorough exploration of Koselleck’s in this regard remains outstanding.8 As a historian of pre-modern art, Kubler is interested in forms of pottery, building styles, and more that tend to be stylistically consistent across multiple centuries.9 Kubler proposes that we understand different series of similar material things—occurrences of particular styles of pottery, literary genres, architectural elements, or publishing rubrics produced across multiple decades or centuries—as generating different “shapes” or forms of time. It is the work of the cultural historian to identify patterns of similarity that show repetition and variation and to develop hypotheses about why certain shapes of time last for longer or shorter time spans. Such series develop according to their own time schedules, which can cut across multiple generations or be condensed into bursts of innovation. Viewed in this light, differently structured sequences can potentially operate simultaneously, again a notion that resonates with Koselleck’s notion of layers or sediments of time. Serial forms and patterns represent central avenues through which historical time takes on shape and structure and condenses into recognizable “temporal figures,” as Lucian Hölscher has recently put it.10

Resonances between Koselleck’s and Kubler’s thought on the question of (serial) repetition structures points to ways in which Koselleck’s work might be applied to other fields, including art history and archaeology, media history, and book and print history. Indeed, Koselleck cites Kubler’s attention to the inherent historicity of art objects as an example of art history’s complementarity with the discipline of history proper. In the process, Koselleck notes Kubler’s method of approaching art objects as a series of “works that follow upon each other (nachfolgende Kunstwerke)” rather than as stand-alone “classic” works that are granted a certain privileged ahistorical timelessness.11 The methodological choice to view artifacts, images or textual units as elements of a series is just that: a choice,12 and one that Koselleck is keenly aware of.13
Attention to series of historical texts informs Koselleck’s work in conceptual history as well as his work in political iconography and with photography.14 As we know, he was planning a larger project on political iconography toward the end of his life, and his multiple articles of war monuments work with an open-ended corpus of multiple memorial projects, exploring what the shifting styles and contents of these monuments tell us about the historical experience and commemoration of the suffering of war as it shifts over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Koselleck was himself an amateur photographer and integrated photographs of certain monuments and other objects into his essays, accumulating an extensive collection—around 30,000 objects—of what Hubert Locher and Adriana Markantonatos call “rich and idiosyncratically organized visual material.”15 Koselleck’s work with images is decidedly work with and in series, as he often took multiple photographs of the same monument or building from different perspectives and work with his photos by combining and recombining them into different sorts of series.16 Koselleck’s collection is both idiosyncratically personal and representative of a particular historical epoch, both a quasi-private record of his different travels and research stays (in the US, France, around Germany, etc.) and an inventory of the shifting visual terrain of post-war Germany up to and after the Wende. His activity as “photographical lay person and collector” (Locher) is a fascinating and still underexplored aspect of his work and it has the potential to show how his specific scholarly and medial practices resonate with other research and artistic agendas of figures such as Aby Warburg or Gerhard Richter.17

**Seriality and the practice of conceptual history**

We might also understand seriality as a condition of possibility of conceptual history, both on linguistic and material or medial-historical terms. It is a central task of the conceptual historian to trace the repetition structures that lead to the condensation of established meanings and their shifts over time. Conceptual historical work additionally must evaluate a variety of different source materials, including expressly serialized publications such as periodicals, pamphlets, and fliers alongside “texts that contain sedimented knowledge of longer periods of time (lexica, manuals, textbooks).”18 The semantic and material conditions of conceptual-historical work become even more complicated with the consideration of digital sources that have different temporalities and patterns of repetition, such as the “new online forms such as forums, chats, mailing lists, newsgroups, blogs, Twitter posts, social media posts, etc.” available as important sources for conceptual histories of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.19
Reflecting on shifts in source material and how we as scholars access it is an essential part of the ongoing practice of conceptual history.

Koselleck’s historical thinking and his working methods are revealing in this context. Similar to recent scholarship that examines his photograph collection at the DDK in Marburg, the study of Koselleck’s estate (Nachlass) and scholarly library at the DLA in Marbach can shed important light on how he worked as a conceptual historian and provide the foundation for what we might call a “praxeology” of conceptual history, to borrow from Steffen Martus and Carlos Spoerhase. Koselleck’s ongoing attention to serial patterns of repetition and variation is visible in the various handwritten notes and marginalia in the books in his personal library where he tracked the repeated appearance of certain terms in books and essays, or in the preparatory work for entries for the GG lexicon done by him and his assistants and collaborators. Koselleck’s Nachlass is an important source for studies on the practice of conceptual history and its engagement with serial sources and semantic repetition.

A sense for the importance of serial sources is also an essential part of the GG project. Koselleck makes a point of noting that it was possible for the GG lexicon to include the “serial sources of the lexica and numerous sources from everyday language” that were unavailable to nineteenth-century scholars such as the Grimms as they were compiling their dictionary. Newer encyclopedias are perhaps better situated to process the serial, day-in, day-out sources of the past. At the same time they also lend themselves to being viewed as individual elements in a series of different lexica projects; hence Koselleck’s perhaps not entirely modest remark that the GG lexicon is “a real enrichment and supplement (eine wirkliche Bereicherung und Ergänzung) [of the Grimm dictionary].” It is a methodological necessity of new lexica projects to reflect on the merits and succession of different lexica projects, including most recently the Berlin-based project of tracking the “basic concepts” of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries which seeks to “work with” and “go beyond” Koselleck. Reflection on the sequence (and materiality) of lexica projects likewise informs their critical reception: in 2006 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht deemed the GG lexicon one of many bulky, monumental “pyramids of the spirit” that fill up bookshelves yet are seldom used.

As we move into the twenty-first century, Koselleck’s work with and in series comes into view as tied to a specific historical epoch since he and his colleagues often worked more or less pre-digitally. One important indication that Koselleck’s conceptual historical work is a product of the predigital philological age is the fact
that in 2023 the GG lexicon has yet to be digitized.\textsuperscript{25} Newer research methods that will necessarily be part of a continued conceptual history of more recent times would seem to require new approaches to the manifestations of various types of series across different electronic media. In turn, new digital practices offer compelling new inroads into Koselleck's activities as a historical thinker, as evidenced in the digitization of Koselleck's photo collection. Koselleck's practice of constantly recombining his series of photos was more flexible and experimental than the lexicon, which tracked more linear patterns of linguistic development. Exploring the digital photo collection allows us to develop criteria for configuring new series.

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“Beginning with the French Revolution, we can witness a boom in journal and book series that were to inform the reader about current events; these often contained over thirty volumes and appeared yearly.” Reinhart Koselleck, “Constancy and Change of All Contemporary Histories,” in Sediments of Time, 100–116, here 110.


8 On recent scholarship that has adapted Kubler’s contributions to theorizing seriality, see Rothöhler, Theorien der Serie zur Einführung, 92–101.


12 As Kelleter remarks, “one and the same text can be regarded as simultaneously serial and non–serial, depending on the perspective from which it is seen—or, more properly, depending on the historical situation in which its textual activities are mobilized in one way or another.” Frank Kelleter, “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality,” in Media of Serial Narrative, 15.


15 Hubert Locher and Adriana Markantonatos, “Vorwort,” in Reinhart Koselleck und die Politische ikonologie, 6.


Ernst Müller and Falko Schmieder, Begriffsgeschichte zur Einführung. Hamburg: Junius, 2020, 146.

Müller and Schmieder, Begriffsgeschichte zur Einführung, 173.


Ibid., v.

