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# INHALT

- 4 EDITORIAL**  
Falko Schmieder
- 6 DIE »NATION« VERFREMDEN. FÜR EINE TRANSNATIONALE BEGRIFFSGESCHICHTE**  
Corentin Marion
- 20 SOZIALE STRUKTUREN IN ZEIT UND RAUM. BEGRIFFSANALYSEN IN DER KOMPARATIVEN SOZIALSTRUKTURFORSCHUNG**  
Lena M. Friedrich
- 34 KOLONIALGESCHICHTE IM RAHMEN DER BEGRIFFSGESCHICHTE: DAS BEISPIEL LATEINAMERIKAS**  
Laura Rivas Gagliardi
- 43 UMKÄMPFTE SEMANTIKEN ›EUROPAS‹ IN DER WELTANSCHAUUNGSLITERATUR DER WEIMARER REPUBLIK**  
Tillmann Heise
- 58 DIE UNMÖGLICHE MÖGLICHKEIT DER GESCHICHTE EINES BEGRIFFS: BEOBACHTUNGEN DER SÄKULARISIERUNG UND DER SPRACHLICHE WANDEL DER RELIGIÖSEN SEMANTIK**  
Lorenz Trein
- 68 STRUCTURES OF REPETITION: KOSELLECK, SERIALITY, AND THE PRACTICES OF CONCEPTUAL HISTORY**  
Sean Franzel
- 78 SPLITTER UND SCHICHTEN DES VERTRAUENS. FUNDSTÜCKE UND KONTEXTE EINES GRUNDBEGRIFFS DES 14. UND 21. JAHRHUNDERTS**  
Maximilian Kinder
- 89 DIE (IN-)VULNERABLEN. ÜBERLEGUNGEN ZUR NEUEN KREATÜRLICHKEIT**  
Patricia Gwozdz

# STRUCTURES OF REPETITION KOSELLECK, SERIALITY, AND THE PRACTICES OF CONCEPTUAL HISTORY

Sean Franzel

Though the term seriality is not a central element of Koselleck's critical vocabulary, his writings are very much attuned to how patterns of repetition and variation—defining features of serial forms—shape experiences of historical events,<sup>1</sup> organize language use, and inform how historical sources are produced and evaluated. Koselleck explores how human actors experience structures of repetition and eventfulness in historical time by identifying similarities and variation in multiple related phenomena or events, with certain events forming series that unfold sequentially or synchronically. Koselleck also provides tools for viewing different linguistic usages as series by exploring how language depends both upon repeated use and subtle (and not so subtle) variation. Relatedly, he is quite aware of serial publication as a constitutive feature of a variety of historical sources that are at the heart of the scholarly practices informing conceptual history, including the efforts of modern lexicons and other research aids—from the Grimm brothers' dictionary to the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (GG) lexicon and beyond—to build upon and successively augment each other. Whether understood in experiential, semantic, or material terms, serial structures and forms play a central part in Koselleck's thought, and his work has the potential to enrich recent debates about seriality.

Concepts of seriality have become an integral part of multiple scholarly debates in the past fifty years or so. Discussions of seriality represent a point of convergence between different disciplines, including history and historiography, literary studies, art history, media history, and more. These debates involve parsing whether seriality is primarily a quality of phenomena themselves or whether it is more aptly understood as a mode of representation based in specific forms

and media formats. Such debates have the potential to inform historiographical and metahistoriographical discussions, and can also indicate where conceptual history and other related research programs can both build upon and go beyond Koselleck's work. To explore these questions, I begin this essay by exploring the concept of seriality and its historical applications before turning to Koselleck's engagement with concepts proximate to seriality and serial form such as »structures of repetition« (*Wiederholungsstrukturen*). As Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann puts it in his recent study on Koselleck, his »theory of history can be understood as the search for historical structures of repetition in a time of extremes,« i. e. in Koselleck's own time of modernity.<sup>2</sup> After exploring several key terms of Koselleck's critical vocabulary, including his insight that series of actions, events, and linguistic usages have different temporalities and can be seen to stand in relation to one another as »layers of time« (*Zeitschichten*), I turn to how the practices of conceptual history involve the examination of serial forms as well as the production of history writing in serial form. Approaching Koselleck's broad body of work through the lens of seriality thereby has the potential to highlight its interdisciplinary ramifications.

## I. SERIALITY AS ›SUBSTANCE‹ AND ›METHOD‹

On a general level, a series is a set or sequence of multiple entities organized according to the relationships of these different parts; the Latin word *serere* means to join together or bind. *Reihe* (row), a German term for series, has clear spatial connotations, along with implicitly suggesting temporal relations

1 Cf. Umberto Eco: »Interpreting Serials«, in: idem (ed.): *The Limits of Interpretation*, Bloomington 1990, pp. 83–100.

2 Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann: *Der Riss in der Zeit. Reinhart Kosellecks ungeschriebene Historik*, Frankfurt a. M. 2023, p. 363.

of sequence. The term has multiple applications in mathematics, science, electrical and electronic technology, and serves as a key term of cultural and literary history as well as art and music history. It is common to understand series as structures of similar things that repeat in some regular way: the early twentieth-century biologist Paul Kammerer defined the series as »a lawful repetition of the same or similar things and events—a repetition (accumulation) in time or space, whose individual cases cannot be connected through the same continuing cause as far as careful investigation can tell.«<sup>3</sup> As Kammerer describes it, the formation of a series is a process that unfolds over time and is characterized by a repetitive accumulation (*Häufung*) of elements. In discussions of the structural organization of series, it has also been common to distinguish between series with a closed set of elements and those with an open-ended set with an increasing number of elements. The historian Benedict Anderson, for example, describes how the nineteenth-century census is based on a conception of a »bound« series—*x* number of inhabitants, no more, no less—and identifies newspapers and popular performances as sites of »unbound« seriality, due to their ability to continue on indefinitely.<sup>4</sup>

Across a variety of interdisciplinary research programs, the terms series and seriality are used both to account for features of related things in the world and to describe media or constructed forms or formats that are created for specific communicative or representational ends. The literary scholar Eva Geulen describes this dual sense of seriality as a distinction between series as »substance« and series as »method,« i. e., of series either as »composed of already given phenomena that are, as it were, inherently predisposed to being grouped together, [or] as tool, technique, and a mode of construction—in short, the distinction between series conceived as grounded in substance or considered a method.«<sup>5</sup> In

many cases, identifying serial patterns and placing things into groupings of like or repeating phenomena can be a methodological choice, just like opting to use a specific serial format as a preferred mode of representation—for reporting the news, for publishing a short story, for depicting the different play of daylight and weather on haystacks, for presenting a television crime drama, etc.<sup>6</sup> When the literary scholar Malika Maskarinec describes the series as »an epistemic practice that seeks to generate knowledge about the world and about itself,« she foregrounds the methodological affordances of seriality.<sup>7</sup>

Scholars across a variety of disciplines have argued that serial forms undergo significant expansion in the nineteenth century, an era, as Anderson notes, when the »logic of seriality« gives rise to »a new grammar of representation.«<sup>8</sup> This scholarship includes media-historical accounts of reproduction processes and the mechanical production of multiple identical items, studies of the use of epistemological series in the natural sciences, and studies of aesthetic series in art and cultural history (e. g. Monet's haystacks).<sup>9</sup> Scholars have explored how serial forms in journalism, scientific publication, public performance, and more are defining features of the nineteenth century, how they play central roles in creating a sense of newness, craft expectations for the future, and allow for reencounters with the recent or distant past.<sup>10</sup> Such scholarship prompts speculation that the so-called *Sattelzeit* (of course, along with more recent

3 »[E]ine gesetzmäßige Wiederholung gleicher oder ähnlicher Dinge und Ereignisse—eine Wiederholung (Häufung) in der Zeit oder im Raume, deren Einzelfälle, soweit es nur sorgsame Untersuchung zu offenbaren vermag, nicht durch dieselbe, gemeinsam fortwirkende Ursache verknüpft sein können.« Paul Kammerer: *Das Gesetz der Serie: eine Lehre von den Wiederholungen im Lebens- und im Weltgeschehen*, Stuttgart 1919, p. 36; translations here and in the following, unless otherwise stated, S. F.

4 Benedict Anderson: »Nationalism, Identity, and the Logic of Seriality«, in: idem (ed.): *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World*, London 1998, pp. 29–44, here p. 34.

5 Eva Geulen: »Serialization in Goethe's Morphology«, in: *Compar(a)ison 2* (2008), pp. 53–70, here p. 53.

6 As Frank Kelleter remarks in the context of cultural artifacts such as literary texts, »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: idem (ed.): *Media of Serial Narrative*, Columbus 2017, pp. 7–36, here p. 15.

7 Malika Maskarinec: »Introduction«, in: idem (ed.): *Truth in Serial Form: Serial Formats and the Form of the Series, 1850-1930*, Berlin 2023, pp. 1–22, here p. 6.

8 Anderson: »Nationalism, Identity, and the Logic of Seriality« (fn. 4), p. 29.

9 See Hartmut Winkler: »Technische Reproduktion und Serialität«, in: Günter Giesenfeld (ed.): *Endlose Geschichten. Serialität in den Medien*, Hildesheim 1994, pp. 38–45; Nick Hopwood/Simon Schaffer/Jim Secord: »Seriality and Scientific Objects in the Nineteenth Century«, in: *History of Science* 48 (2010), pp. 251–280; and Anabelle Girgen (ed.): *Monets Vermächtnis. Serie, Ordnung und Obsession*, Ostfildern 2001.

10 See Clare Pettitt: *Serial Forms: The Unfinished Project of Modernity, 1815–1848*, Oxford 2020; and Sean Franzel: *Writing Time: Studies in Serial Literature, 1780–1850*, Ithaca 2023.

eras) is an epoch characterized by the proliferation of and increased attunement to serial forms and their experiential, historiographical, and media applications.

In its nineteenth-century manifestations, print publication comes into view as both serial in substance and as a preferred method of organizing information and communication.<sup>11</sup> As Benedict Anderson famously observed, the daily, »almost precisely simultaneous consumption... of the newspaper« came to be an »extraordinary mass ceremony« of readers in the nineteenth century, and we can imagine and in many cases track in close detail the different periodicities and temporal patterns that substantially structure the circulation of serial print in increasingly mechanized and industrialized patterns.<sup>12</sup> Studies of nineteenth-century print have also explored how serialization affected the closed, »bound« structure of the novel and other self-contained narrative structures (with most novels first published in installments in journals and newspapers), and studies have also foregrounded the effects of serialization on other more »unbound« forms of cultural journalism such as ongoing correspondence reporting. Koselleck himself is quite aware of the place of serial forms in modernity, noting that serialized journalistic and contemporary-historical publications emerged for the first time as historical sources in the early nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Scholars have likewise examined the media-based and technological preconditions of nineteenth-century literature and journalism, including the steam-powered rotary printing press (invented in 1843), advances in mechanized image reproduction, and the mass distribution of late-century family journals such as the *Gartenlaube*.<sup>14</sup> This is also a time when writers and editors are tasked with a certain kind of accumulative collection and production of copy for journals and newspapers, which itself bears certain affinities to the *accumulatio* (*Häufung*) of Baroque rhetoric, a

technical term referring to the amassing of multiple related descriptors of a certain topic in a speech or text.

Seriality has also 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. Theories of twentieth- and twenty-first-century popular entertainment have described serial television and video in terms of ongoing, episodic storytelling based in the repetition and alteration of genre conventions. Umberto Eco's influential work finds serial patterns of repetition and variation in cross-historical genre systems, ranging from medieval romance to television, while Frank Kelleter's work on popular seriality examines factors conditioning the production of mass-market film and television series, including financial requirements, the recursive involvement of fan feedback, and more.<sup>15</sup> In the digital age, serial forms are key tools for capturing and holding consumer attention.

## II. STRUCTURES OF REPETITION

Koselleck was concerned throughout his career with identifying structures of repetition as they are manifested in the »substance« of given (frequently natural) phenomena in the world as well as in constructed media forms and formats, and it is worthwhile to consider the ways that the concept of seriality helps to elucidate these structures. Before turning to serial formats of history writing that are involved in the practical side (and »method«) of doing conceptual history, I would like to first consider temporal structures of repetition and the central role they play in his theory of history (*Historik*). Koselleck's interest in patterns of repetition spanned from his early writings to his late work—his last published essay is titled *What repeats (Was sich wiederholt)*.<sup>16</sup> Across various essays, he describes how patterns of repetition make up our reality; as he puts it in a late essay »[i]f [...] everything were new or innovative, humankind would fall into a black hole from one day to the next, helpless and bare of all orientation.«<sup>17</sup> Historical experience, including the pro-

11 See Mark W. Turner: »The Unruliness of Serials in the Nineteenth Century (and in the Digital Age)«, in: Thijs van den Berg/Rob Allen (eds.): *Serialization in Popular Culture*, London 2014, pp. 11–32.

12 Benedict Anderson: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, New York 1991, p. 35.

13 Cf. Reinhart Koselleck: »Constancy and Change of All Contemporary Histories: Conceptual-Historical Notes«, in: idem: *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, transl. and ed. by Sean Franzel/Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, Stanford 2018, pp. 100–116, here p. 110.

14 See Helmut Müller-Sievers: *The Cylinder: Kinematics of the Nineteenth Century*, Berkeley, Calif. 2012; Claudia Stockinger: *An den Ursprüngen populärer Serialität: Das Familienblatt "Die Gartenlaube"*, Göttingen 2018.

15 See Eco: »Interpreting Serials« (fn. 1); and Kelleter (ed.): *Media of Serial Narrative* (fn. 6).

16 Reinhart Koselleck: »Was sich wiederholt«, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 21.07.2005, p. 6.

17 Reinhart Koselleck: »Structures of Repetition in Language

cessing of new events that break with the old, takes place against a backdrop of structures of repeated actions, events, and occurrences: the delivery of mail, the change of seasons, election cycles, the school year, etc.

In an early essay from 1973 titled »History, Histories, and Formal Time Structures,« Koselleck identifies three forms of temporal experiences: 1) of the irreversible sequence of events following upon each other; 2) of the »repeatability of events, whether in the form of an imputed identity of events, the return of constellations, or a figurative or typological ordering of events;« and 3) of the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous (*Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*).<sup>18</sup> In the present context, I am especially concerned with the second item and with how Koselleck suggests that there are different possible ways that we experience and organize time structures generated by the repetition of similar events. In some cases, we can observe and record such events, while in others we are obliged to imagine or figurally impute such similarity through representation at varying levels of »figural« or »typological« abstraction. This spectrum between observation and figural imagination maps onto Geulen's distinction between seriality as structure and/or method: some forms of repetition are potentially more constructed, less given by the events under consideration. In a related essay from the same point in Koselleck's career, he makes the heuristic distinction between different modes of historical representation, with historians obliged to »narrate« historical events, and to more neutrally »describe« the deeper, more background natural and historical structures that allow these events to emerge (as examples of such structures he mentions constructions of space and geography, unconscious patterns of behavior connected to certain institutions, customs, systems of law, and more).<sup>19</sup> Though Koselleck goes on to deconstruct this dichotomy—deep structures require narration, and one-off events also need descriptive treatment—what interests me here is his sense that structures of repetition can be described in more and less figural, more and less constructed or narrativized ways.

Though Koselleck was deeply concerned with how language shaped historical experience, he resisted reducing all experience and knowability of historical truths to how these truths are constructed in and through language, a key premise of the linguistic turn. Koselleck's engagement with the American historian Hayden White is instructive in this context. White famously argued that history writing adheres to certain genre conventions based in the literary tradition such as the tragedy, comedy, romance, novel, etc. While appreciative of White's theory of history and history writing, Koselleck was also critical, wanting to preserve at least some difference between history as what happens (*Geschichte*) and history writing (*Historie*) as the narrative thereof, between »being and saying, happening and recounting.«<sup>20</sup> Koselleck's attention to repetition structures is a potentially revealing case for tracking how historical events withhold themselves from narrativizing interventions based in literary genre systems. Certain regulated structures and patterns exist that cannot be subsumed into »bound« structures with beginnings, middles, and ends akin to literary genres, and these structures require other devices of observation, recording, description, and narrative. Of course, one might well experiment with expanding White's historiographical typology to include potentially unbound serial forms (history as tragedy or comedy, but also as *Netflix* dramedy or *YouTube* video channel), yet Koselleck's concern with repetition structures commits him to a descriptive vocabulary for serial patterning and recurrence that eschews the »bound« genres of White's historiographical narratology.<sup>21</sup>

In delineating the different kinds of time and repetition structures that make up human experience, Koselleck frequently distinguishes between three different layers of time, namely the mostly permanent time of nature; long-term social, cultural and political structures (what Braudel terms the *longue durée*); and the more fleeting events of the present.<sup>22</sup> Part of the historian's job is to be aware of and identify patterns of repetition in each of these temporal frameworks. These structures

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and History«, in: idem: *Sediments of Time* (fn. 13), pp. 158–176, here p. 160.

18 Reinhart Koselleck: »History, Histories, and Formal Time Structures«, in: idem: *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, transl. and ed. by Keith Tribe, New York 2004, pp. 93–104, here p. 95.

19 See Reinhart Koselleck: »Representation, Event, and Structure«, in: idem: *Futures Past* (fn. 18), pp. 105–114.

20 See Reinhart Koselleck: »Introduction to Hayden White's *Tropics of Discourse*«, in: *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, Stanford 2002, pp. 38–45.

21 For an exploration of how certain literary tropes and genre conventions inform certain constructions of deep time, see Noah Heringman: *Deep Time: A Literary History*, Princeton 2023.

22 What Koselleck describes as »langfristige Dauer, mittelfristiger Wandel, momentaner Wechsel.« Cited in Hoffmann: *Der Riss in der Zeit* (fn. 2), p. 347; see also *ibid.*, p. 340 f.

of repetition are so important for Koselleck because they are the backdrop upon which unique events take place: as he writes in unpublished notes, »the recurring« (*das Wiederkehrende*) is the »condition of possible uniqueness and possible action« (*Bedingung möglicher Einmaligkeit and Bedingung möglichen Handelns*).<sup>23</sup> Recurrence allows for uniqueness and newness to be perceived as such, it organizes our experience of the natural world and human institutions, and it trains our horizons of experience and expectation. In this context, Koselleck frequently returns to several quasi-dialectical opposing terms in order to reference in a shorthand manner the interconnection of eventfulness and repetition structures; these include »constancy and change« (*Stetigkeit und Wandel*) and »repetition and innovation« (*Wiederholung und Innovation*).<sup>24</sup>

In the process, Koselleck seeks to give these repetition structures partial shape and definition by delimiting certain anthropologically pregiven structures (*Vorgaben*) that organize and condition all human experience and, hence, all possible histories, returning repeatedly to the distinctions between sooner or later, inside and outside, and above and below.<sup>25</sup> »Sooner and later« pertains to facts of birth and death and of generational difference: both are anthropological constants, and the theme of finitude as a conditioning factor of historicity is familiar from Heidegger's *Being and Time*. »Inside and outside« refers to the drawing of territorial, spatial distinctions, of borders and boundaries, and adapts certain aspects of Carl Schmitt's concept of the political, with Koselleck sometimes formulating this in terms of »friend and foe« (*Freund und Feind*). And lastly, »above and below« pertains to social hierarchy (*Herr und Knecht*), and is intended as a provocation of utopian visions of total emancipation and equality—a critique of Hegel and Marx should resonate here. For Koselleck, each of these fundamental distinctions has an independent existence and is not exhausted in language, but is nonetheless dependent upon linguistic expression to take on a historical valence in any given historical situation.

There is much that speaks for bringing the concept of seriality to bear on the repetition structures envisioned by Koselleck. They take place according to different identifiable rules and governing principles—elsewhere he speaks of the »regularities of sequences of events« (*Regelmäßigkeiten von Ereignissequenzen*)<sup>26</sup> or of reference series (*Vergleichsreihen*)<sup>27</sup> of events—and they often unfold as processes of accumulation. Some of these structures are discontinued—closed, »bound« series, in other words—and belong to the past, such as the operations of an institution that no longer exists, the patterns forming the ecosystem of a lake that has dried up, the life cycle of a now extinct species, the seasons of a sports team that has moved to a different town, etc. These are what Koselleck refers to as »past pasts« (*vergangene Vergangenheiten*). Other repetition structures are more open-ended (»unbound«) and will continue into future (allowing us to predict »present futures«), while still others have more uncertain futures due to changes in the climate or changes in the social and political landscape (thus representing potential »future pasts« such as the predicted extinction of currently living species).

Another interesting aspect of Koselleck's discussion of repetition structures that pertains to the question of seriality is his repeated emphasis on the denaturalization of certain temporal structures, including historical ones. As he puts it in *Futures Past*, »Historical temporalities follow a sequence different from the temporal rhythms given in nature.«<sup>28</sup> He thus seeks to explore the unique times of human institutions, actions, media, and asks whether and to what extent the temporal structures and repetition structures of modernity can be seen as new on the basis of certain networks of human agents and technological affordances. As he notes, technology transforms relations of time and space and introduces different patterns of eventfulness and repetition that historians are obliged to take into consideration. Koselleck's interest in denaturalized, technology-driven temporal structures dovetails with media-historical accounts of time that seek to describe media times breaking with natural time and occurring beyond what humans can experience.<sup>29</sup>

23 Cited in Hoffmann: *Der Riss in der Zeit* (fn. 2), p. 362.

24 One might also include here Hoffmann's emphasis on the metaphor of temporal crack, tear, or rupture (*Riss*) as a counterpoint to repetition structures (*Riss und Wiederholung*); cf. Hoffmann: *Der Riss in der Zeit* (fn. 2).

25 Hoffmann has glossed these distinctions as »repetition structures that occur[ ] historically in ever new and different forms.« Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann: »Koselleck, Arendt, and the Anthropology of Historical Experience«, *History and Theory* 49 (2010), pp. 212–236, here p. 219.

26 Koselleck: »Constancy and Change« (fn. 13), p. 115.

27 Koselleck: »Was sich wiederholt« (fn. 16).

28 Koselleck: »History, Histories, and Formal Time Structures« (fn. 18), p. 96.

29 See, for example, the claim of the media theorist Wolfgang Ernst that electric and electronic media represent the end of »the anthropological narrative of time.« Wolfgang Ernst: *Chronopoetics: The Temporal Being and Operativity of Technological Media*, transl. and ed. by Anthony Enns, London 2016, p. 39.



Though he defines the structural pre-givens conditioning history as expressly anthropological in nature, the temporal structures affected by and indeed generated by technical media represent possible repetition structures that post-humanist media theorists are interested in, even if they seek to go beyond anthropologically driven theories of time. Even if Koselleck always reads such technology-driven time structures through the lens of human experience, these structures might well lend further proof for why the kinds of time structures he is concerned with resist the kinds of tropological historiographical models envisioned by Hayden White.

### III. KOSELLECK'S CRITICAL VOCABULARY AND ITS INTERDISCIPLINARY RESONANCE

We have already begun to see how Koselleck uses language to describe a variety of time structures, and, as an historian and a theorist of history, he has come to be known for his understated, yet often suggestive terminological coinages. As Helge Jordheim has noted, Koselleck's sometimes metaphorical terminology plays a generative part in his theory of history and in historiographical discussions. For example, the so-called *Sattelzeit* has been much debated in the historiographical literature, and his term layers or sediments of time (*Zeitschichten*) has likewise spurred interesting debate.<sup>30</sup> As someone working in the field of conceptual history, he is quite aware of the effects of certain key concepts in shaping historical thought. Reflecting on the work of the historian at the intersection of historical narrative and description, Koselleck writes that concepts, too, are fundamental conditions for history writing: »Concepts that comprehend past states, relations, and processes become for the historian who employs them formal categories which are the conditions of possible histories.«<sup>31</sup> The repeated usage of certain fundamental concepts over time—e. g. ›nation state,‹ ›democracy,‹ ›capitalism‹—manifests identifiable repetition structures that shape and condition historical experience in similar ways to recurring natural or cultural events.

In the context of my focus here on conceptions of seriality, it stands out that many of the central formal metahistorical concepts coined by Koselleck seek to visualize complex temporal processes via spatial imagery and carry implications of serial structures. These include »sediments of experience« (*Erfahrungsschichten*) and »sluices of memory« (*Erinnerungsschleusen*), both of which seek to visualize how flows of experience, events, and memories are shaped, regulated, or redirected and how these flows accumulate, solidify, or »sediment« into place. The term *Zeitschichten* likewise describes the coexistence of multiple time structures created by different kinds of patterns of repetition. Coined as a gloss or visualization of the idea of the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous (*Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*), the term *Zeitschichten* enables the figural imagination of the coexistence of variously timed repetition structures—indeed, one might well say various processes of serial unfolding. The suggestiveness of this visual metaphor has occasioned scholars to consider how history writing might put this metaphor to use,<sup>32</sup> how Koselleck's decidedly geological metaphor could be applicable to deep, pre-historical time,<sup>33</sup> and how this metaphor relates to the complex historical temporalities of viewing and display at work in museum exhibitions.<sup>34</sup> Just as we saw above that (serial) repetition structures are conditions of possible histories but are not the histories themselves, we might then also conclude that individual serial repetition structures are conditioning factors and composite elements of »layers of time,« but are not the composite layering itself. Koselleck thereby develops a theoretical language for centering repetition, different speeds of temporal sedimentation, and layering as structuring conditions of historical experience and history writing, and in the process, he decenters singular events, great personalities, or epistemic breaks.

Exploring Koselleck's critical vocabulary through the lens of seriality also reveals some of the interdisciplinary resonances and potential applications of that vocabulary. In particular, Koselleck's insight that series of actions, events, and linguistic usages have different temporalities and generate different ›layers‹

30 See Helge Jordheim: »Sattel, Schicht, Schwelle, Schleuse: Kosellecks paradoxe Sprachbildlichkeit der pluralen Zeiten«, in: Bettina Brandt/Britta Hochkirchen (eds.): *Reinhart Koselleck und das Bild*, Bielefeld 2021, pp. 217–244.

31 Koselleck: »Representation, Event, and Structure« (fn. 19), p. 112.

32 See John Zammito: »Drilling Down: Can Historians Operationalize Koselleck's Stratigraphical Times?«, in: *Configurations* 23 (2015), pp. 199–213.

33 See Helge Jordheim: »Natural Histories for the Anthropocene: Koselleck's Theories and the Possibility of a History of Lifetimes«, in: *History and Theory* 61 (2022), pp. 391–425.

34 See Kerstin Barndt: »Layers of Time: Industrial Ruins and Exhibitionary Temporalities«, in: *PMLA* 125 (2010), pp. 134–141.

has a strong affinity with the art historian Georg Kubler's concept of ›shapes‹ of time. Scholars have noted affinities between Koselleck's and Kubler's accounts of repetition structures and their varied temporalities; while scholarship on serial forms has considered Kubler's work extensively, a thorough exploration of Koselleck in this regard remains outstanding (something that this essay seeks to remedy).<sup>35</sup> As a historian of pre-modern art, Kubler was interested in forms of pottery, building styles, and more that tended to be stylistically consistent across multiple centuries.<sup>36</sup> Kubler proposed 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 patterns, which can cut across multiple generations or be condensed into bursts of transformative stylistic shifts. Viewed in this light, differently structured sequences can potentially operate simultaneously, again a notion that resonates with Koselleck's notion of layers of time. Koselleck's affinity with Kubler is based in part on the shared recognition that historical time takes on shape and structure through serial forms and patterns and condenses into recognizable ›temporal figures,‹ as Lucian Hölscher has recently put it.<sup>37</sup>

Resonances between Koselleck and Kubler on the question of (serial) repetition structures point to ways in which Koselleck's work might be applied to other fields, including art history and archaeology, media history, as well as book and print history (in my own work, the opportunity to imagine the nineteenth-century print landscape as a multi-layered temporal structure has proved extremely helpful).<sup>38</sup> 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‹ (*aufeinander folgende Kunstwerke*) rather than as stand-alone ›classic‹ works that are granted a certain privileged ahistorical timelessness.<sup>39</sup> The methodological choice to view artifacts, images, or textual units as elements of a series is just that: a choice,<sup>40</sup> and one that Koselleck is keenly aware of. As he puts it elsewhere, ›the researcher can concentrate on one concept, on one text, on a series of texts, or on the entire language. All of these decisions are equally legitimate, but they all preclude each other up to a certain point. Much depends upon the individual preferences and practical considerations of the person doing the research.‹<sup>41</sup> Koselleck makes a related observation in an essay that he initially wrote for the interdisciplinary ›Poetik und Hermeneutik‹ research group, where he draws the analogy between the potential uniqueness of historical events and that of works of art. The more an event or a work is perceived as unique, the more it ›contains at the same time more and less than what was included in its predecessors.‹<sup>42</sup> At the risk of overgeneralization, we might conclude that the assumption that a given thing, event, work, etc. stands in a sequence of like items is a fundamental logical figure that is one of the basic tools of all scholarship and science, and this is a tool that Koselleck repeatedly and insistently suggests we take seriously.

#### IV. SERIAL FORMS AND THE PRACTICES OF CONCEPTUAL HISTORY

Up to now, I have largely considered seriality and serial forms as ›substance‹ as elements of the world that can be described and represented through analysis and terminological devices. As I have already mentioned, this side of serial form as substance

35 On recent scholarship that has adapted Kubler's contributions to theorizing seriality, see Simon Rothöhler: *Theorien der Serie zur Einführung*, Hamburg 2020, pp. 92–101.

36 See George Kubler: *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, New Haven 1962.

37 Lucian Hölscher: *Zeitgärten. Zeitfiguren in der Geschichte der Neuzeit*, Göttingen 2020.

38 See Franzel: *Writing Time* (fn. 10).

39 ›Welche Analyse eines Kunstwerks kann—mit Kubler zu reden—davon abstrahieren, daß auch die vollkommenen Kunstwerke Probleme aufgeben, die erst durch die nachfolgenden Kunstwerke gelöst werden.‹ (Reinhart Koselleck: ›Wozu noch Historie?‹ in: idem: *Vom Sinn und Unsinn der Geschichte*, ed. by Carsten Dutt, Berlin 2014, pp. 32–51, here p. 36) For a thorough exploration of connections between Koselleck and Kubler, see Adriana Markantonatos: *Geschichtsdenken zwischen Bild und Text. Reinhart Kosellecks "Suche nach dem (...) Unsichtbaren"*, Dissertation, Marburg 2018.

40 See the quote above from Kelleter in fn 6.

41 Reinhart Koselleck: ›Hinweise auf die temporalen Strukturen begriffsgeschichtlichen Wandels‹, in: idem: *Begriffsgeschichten*, Berlin 2010, pp. 86–98, here p. 87.

42 Koselleck: ›Representation, Event, and Structure‹ (fn. 19), Note, p. 290.

applies in particular to linguistic usage, which Koselleck, in his conceptual-historical work, considers to be one of the most important historical repetition structures; through their repetitive use, concepts function as »formal categories that determine the conditions of possible history.«<sup>43</sup> If we understand seriality not merely as a substantial feature of certain phenomena but also as a material media format and representational practice—as ›method,‹ in Geulen’s terms—serial forms likewise come into view as specific conditioning factors that enable the practice of conceptual history. Looking at the source materials used by conceptual historians as well as at the historical writings they produce provides the foundation for what we might call a ›praxeology‹ of conceptual history, to draw on the terms of literary scholars Steffen Martus and Carlos Spoerhase.<sup>44</sup> Examining some of the practices of conceptual history reveals it to be a research method based in serial structures. Though work with and reliance on serial publication is not unique to conceptual history—indeed (and at the risk of yet more overgeneralization), praxeological studies would likely reveal traces of seriality as both substance and method at work in all sciences and scholarship because the form of the method corresponds to the substance it deals with (thereby fulfilling the scientific criterion of explanatory or descriptive adequacy)—the practices of conceptual history do arguably represent a compelling test case for how scholars are enmeshed in serial forms in the day-to-day, year-to-year carrying out of their research programs.

It is clear that conceptual-historical research involves itself with tracing the repetition structures of specific historical semantics; to this end, though, it 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 (lexicons, manuals, textbooks).«<sup>45</sup> Traces of this work with serial formats are visible in the preparatory work for entries for the *GG* lexicon that can be found in Koselleck’s estate (*Nachlass*) in Marbach, where he and his assistants copied certain pages from historical print matter of different sorts and highlighted specific linguistic usages. The reliance

on specifically serial sources is also apparent in the recent and ongoing Berlin-based project of writing the conceptual history of the twentieth century; as the editors of this dictionary project note, contributors rely significantly on daily and weekly newspapers of the twentieth century and the online databases that have preserved them.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, 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.« that are potentially available as sources for conceptual histories of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.<sup>47</sup> 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. His ongoing attention to serial patterns of repetition and variation is visible in the various hand-written 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, which is itself a practice of compiling, collecting, accumulating, etc. As Hoffmann puts it, ›His method (*Herangehensweise*) always aimed at the comparison of countless supporting documents and findings, in order to recognize repeating structures and singular innovations amidst the serial accumulation (*in der seriellen Häufung*).«<sup>48</sup> Koselleck’s estate (*Nachlass*) thus has the potential for being 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 lexicons and numerous sources from everyday language« that were unavailable to nineteenth-century scholars such as the Grimms as they were compiling their

43 Koselleck: »*Begriffsgeschichte* and Social History«, in: idem: *Futures Past* (fn. 18), pp. 75–92, here p. 91.

44 Steffen Martus/Carlos Spoerhase: *Geistesarbeit. Eine Praxeologie der Geisteswissenschaften*, Berlin 2022.

45 Ernst Müller/Falko Schmieder: *Begriffsgeschichte zur Einführung*, Hamburg 2020, p. 146.

46 Cf. Ernst Müller/Barbara Picht/Falko Schmieder: »Das 20. Jahrhundert in Grundbegriffen. Einleitung«, Paragraph 22, <https://doi.org/10.31267/Grundbegriffe>.

47 Müller/Schmieder: *Begriffsgeschichte zur Einführung* (fn. 45), p. 173.

48 Hoffmann: *Der Riss in der Zeit* (fn. 2), p. 363.

dictionary.<sup>49</sup> 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 lexicon 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].«<sup>50</sup> It is a methodological necessity of new lexicon projects to reflect on the merits and succession of different lexicon projects, including most recently the 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 lexicon 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.<sup>51</sup>

As we move into the mid-twenty-first century, Koselleck's work with and in series likewise reveals itself to be tied to a specific historical epoch since he and his colleagues often worked largely pre-digitally. One important indication that Koselleck's conceptual-historical work is a product of the pre-digital philological age is the fact that in 2024 the *GG* lexicon has yet to be digitized.<sup>52</sup> Newer research methods that will necessarily be part of a continued conceptual history of more recent times requires new approaches to the manifestations of various types of series across different electronic media. We can see this necessity in the new conceptual history of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century project, which explicitly makes use of digital research practices such as »distant readings« and other digital search techniques.<sup>53</sup> It also stands out that this project is being published online, in an open access format that can be added to when new entries are complete. This, too, is evidence of an open, unbound serial structure.

## V. HISTORY WRITING AS SERIAL FORM

Via the scholarly practices that went into the production of the *GG* lexicon, we have seen how the writing of history can be understood as an ongoing series of different attempts to describe, represent, narrate historical events and structures, with »series« meaning both loosely a set of multiple written products by different scholars as well as a formal distinction pertaining to the mediality of history writing that occurs in different serial formats: journals, multiple volumes of different lexicons, etc. In this context, I would like to close on the question of history writing and/as serial form.

Throughout his work, Koselleck distinguishes rather schematically between three different modes of history writing: an initial recording or »writing down« of historical events (*Aufschreiben*); the copying of previous histories, either as a kind of imitative retelling of previously told histories or as the application of preexisting interpretive templates from such already written histories (genres, narrative arcs, moral lessons, etc.) to new occurrences (*Abschreiben* and *Fortschreiben*); and »rewriting« histories on the basis of the recognition that previous historical templates cannot do justice to the events and structures under examination (*Umschreiben*).<sup>54</sup> Now, there are ways that the first two modes of history writing can be seen to have certain serial features. The chronicling of events as they unfold—what Koselleck describes as annalistics—can take on a serial, sequential structure as new events are written about as they unfold diachronically. Such history writing can likewise make use of serial formats that build upon each other, whether in the pre-print era of hand-written manuscripts or in the digital age of archiving online editions of newspapers and journals. The second form of history writing, »copying,« likewise bears important connections to seriality, also in the sense of Eco who describes repetition and variation as key features of serial genre systems. On Koselleck's telling, much of pre- and early-modern history writing depended on historiographical templates stemming from antiquity, where certain interpretive frameworks articulated by the leading history writers of antiquity were mimetically adapted to interpret and write about more recent events; the continued usability of these templates served as ongoing confirmation of their authority and accuracy. Taken from a position of historical remove that at least initially would pay less attention to the

49 Reinhart Koselleck: »Vorwort«, in: idem/Otto Brunner/Werner Conze (eds.): *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. 8.1: *Register*, Stuttgart 1997, p. vi.

50 Ibid., p. v.

51 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht: *Dimensionen und Grenzen der Begriffsgeschichte*, München 2006, p. 7.

52 As Wolfgang Ernst puts it, »Erst wenn Begriffsgeschichte auch den »Stil des Sourcecodes« mit einbezieht (Wolfgang Hagen), ist Erich Rothackers Projekt von 1955 [in reference to the founding of the *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*] wieder auf der Höhe unserer Zeit.« Wolfgang Ernst: Review of Stefan Hoffmann: *Geschichte des Medienbegriffs*, in: *MEDI-ENwissenschaft* 19 (2002), pp. 461–464, here p. 464.

53 See Müller/Picht/Schmieder: »Das 20. Jahrhundert in Grundbegriffen. Einleitung« (fn. 46), Paragraphs 22–26.

54 See Koselleck: »Constancy and Change« (fn. 13).

formats in which such modes of ›copying‹ took place, the mimetic repetition and variation of certain interpretive templates—the succession of different constitutional forms theorized by Polybius, moralistic interpretations of just or unjust rulers, etc.—might well be viewed as a series of repetitive modes of history writing that spans multiple centuries.

That said, I have already mentioned that Koselleck makes a point of noting the rise of expressly serial formats in the context of trying to come to terms with and write about the late-eighteenth-century age of revolution: ›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.‹<sup>55</sup> As Koselleck notes, these formats in part participated in the ›project of traditional annalistics‹ of ›writing down‹ events as they are happening. At the same time, though, history writers also experimented with applying tropological models taken from earlier historians to the events of the revolution, viewing the tumultuous succession of different ruling structures in post-revolutionary France as an accelerated confirmation of Polybian doctrine, or generalizing ›the short-lived stages of the Revolution [to identify] a typological structure of constitutional succession that became applicable for all other forms of historical interpretation, regardless of the partisan perspective from which current events were viewed.‹<sup>56</sup> Such attempts find expression in historical maxims that are still with us today, such as Marx's dictum that (revolutionary) history occurs first as tragedy then as farce. Koselleck thus registers how certain repeatable interpretative templates, whether preexisting or newly created, circulate quasi-serially through patterns of repetition and variation.

Though I do not have time to go into much more detail about the recuperation of the concept of contemporary history writing that Koselleck pursues in this context,<sup>57</sup> it does stand out that Koselleck marks the early- and mid-nineteenth century as a time when more academic modes of history writing emerged (Leopold von Ranke et al.). On the one hand, this

form of history writing cast ›copying‹—the digest, commentary, and recirculation of accepted sources—into disrepute as a viable and productive historiographical mode. On the other hand, it increasingly rejected attempts to write the history of contemporary and recent historical events, as Koselleck notes

›the concept of *Zeitgeschichte* came to be displaced into the realm of journalism, of day-to-day scribbling (*Tagesschriftstellerei*). But this, too, had its distinguished representatives. We might recall the left Hegelians Bruno Bauer or Karl Marx, but also Heinrich Heine or Lorenz von Stein, Jules Michelet and Adolphe Thiers, whose writings on contemporary history remain required reading for any scholar seeking to reconsider the nineteenth century (an increasingly common undertaking in recent years)‹.<sup>58</sup>

In effect, academic historians shied away from writing about the present and from doing so in more journalistic forms tied to the serial press; this represents a nonconfrontational (and usually conservative) approach to history writing that prefers to write about ›past pasts,‹ about historical constellations that can be regarded as completed rather than ›unbound‹ ongoing events with uncertain futures, and in formats that could adequately represent such ›bound‹ sequences of events (single-author books, etc.).<sup>59</sup> These academic approaches likewise tried to secure an idea of ›scientific‹ systematic coherence that ›bound‹ formats such as the book or book series could better depict.<sup>60</sup> I want to suggest in closing, then, that Koselleck's valorization of contemporary history writing and its use of journalistic format presents an opening for thinking about the complementarity between history writing and its media formats, an opening for further exploring the place of seriality in history writing across a variety of historiographical contexts that is not limited to the pursuit of conceptual history per se. Whether or not such exploration would do well to lean on Koselleck's suggestive attempt to recuperate the notion of *Zeitgeschichte* is a thought experiment for a different essay.

55 Koselleck: ›Constancy and Change‹ (fn. 13), p. 110.

56 Ibid.

57 On this topic see Ingrid Oesterle: ›Der ›Führungswechsel der Zeithorizonte‹ in der deutschen Literatur: Korrespondenzen aus Paris, der Hauptstadt der Menschheitsgeschichte, und die Ausbildung der geschichtlichen Zeit ›Gegenwart‹‹, in: Dirk Grathoff (ed.): *Studien zur Ästhetik und Literatur der Kunstperiode*, Frankfurt a. M. 1985, pp. 11–76.

58 Koselleck: ›Constancy and Change‹ (fn. 13), p. 110 f.

59 That said, for an exploration of Ranke's use of serial forms, see Mario Wimmer: ›World History in Six Installments: Epistemic Seriality and the Epistemology of Series‹, in: Maskarinec (ed.): *Truth in Serial Form* (fn. 7), pp. 55–82.

60 See Laurence Dickey: ›Philosophizing about History in the Nineteenth Century: *Zusammenhang* and the ›Progressive Method‹ in German Historical Scholarship‹, in: Allen W. Wood/Songsuk Susan Hahn (eds.): *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century (1790–1870)*, Cambridge 2012, pp. 793–816.