

Paratexts and the Making of the “Digital Auteur”

Special features as marketing materials have long been a part of the Hollywood system for crafting perceptions of stars and celebrities. The development of LaserDiscs and the establishment of the Criterion Collection as an archive helped to solidify paratextual materials as critical in contextualizing cinema as a cultural force (Kendrick). Such paratextual material often serves a generative function, inventing individual or even corporate auteurs through deliberate rhetoric or narratives that construct a perspective on the film or filmmaker for the receptive audience (Brookey and Westerfelhaus). This evokes classical auteur theory, which developed as a method for identifying the unique visual, stylistic, and personal structures of traditionally underappreciated directors (Sarris), but evolved to encompass conceptions of auteurs as entities in larger webs of cultural production forces (Corrigan; Christensen). In connection with later auteur theory's emphasis on the means of production, consideration should be given to how special features and other digital paratexts reposition traditional understandings of what constitutes an auteur. These paratexts importantly highlight a reputation or theorization of digital technologies that center on the specific characteristics of the digital means of production in contemporary cinema.

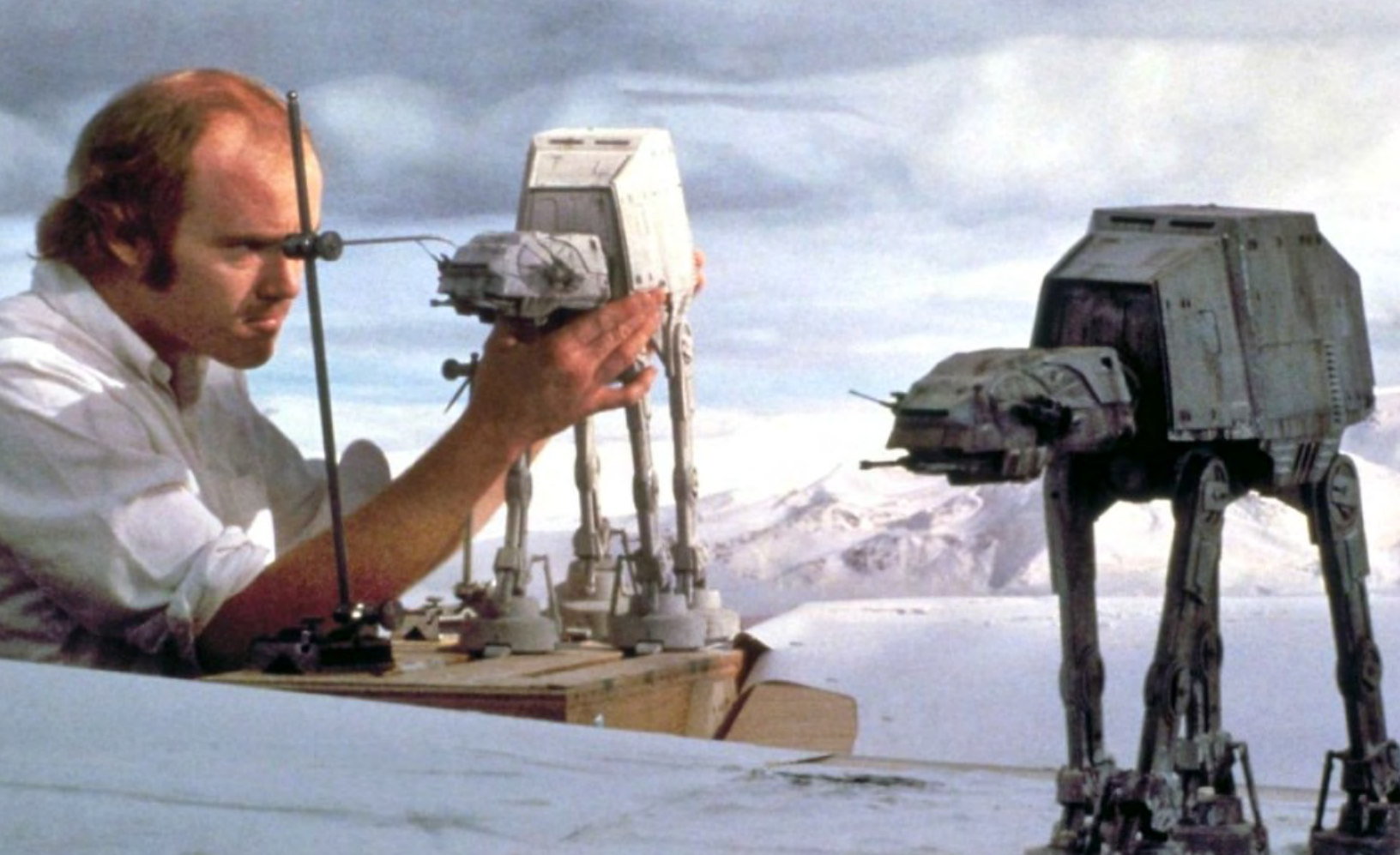
To examine how cinematic special features are contributing to an evaluation of a specific form of corporate auteur, the “digital auteur”, this article engages with the paratextual materials accompanying the home releases of George Lucas's *Star Wars* prequels, *The Phantom Menace* (1999), *Attack of the Clones* (2002), and *Revenge of the Sith* (2005). Lucas's early adoption and innovative approach to digital filmmaking technologies position him as a spokesperson for the new digital paradigm in film. Lucas's emphasis on digital technologies in the paratexts contained on the

DVDs of his trilogy demonstrate what digital tools offer to filmmakers and implicate digital technologies in establishing a variation of cinematic authorship. This understanding of authorship transcends genres and even individual filmmakers perpetrating the creation of dreams, the exploration of possibilities, and ultimately the integration of digital technologies into a fully realized system of production. The following section will briefly cover the history and expansion of auteur theory, before engaging paratextual theories to show how special features contribute to constructing the identities of films and filmmakers. Finally, I synthesize these tracks to establish specific dimensions of the “digital auteur.”

Auteur Theory

Early conceptions of auteur theory developed in the 1950s amidst the pages of French film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Initially the theory argued that films were ultimately composed by a singular author. Thus, auteur theory was dedicated to the identification of the unique characteristics of the “author” of film texts. The theory developed in some ways as a direct response to classical Hollywood, and so focused almost exclusively on American directors such as Orson Welles and John Ford. While such directors were initially seen as merely churning out products for mass consumption, auteur theory identified particular directors as artists transcending their studio-driven circumstances and executing their own cohesive authorial vision (Hayward).

The rise of structuralism and postmodernism pushed back on the notion of a singular author, particularly in the production of inherently collaborative media like film. Tying the auteur to the corporate structures of Hollywood, Corrigan noted that the auteur has “rematerialized in the eighties and nineties as a commercial performance of the *business*



of being an auteur” (419, emphasis his). Corrigan argues that this turned the auteur into a commercial figure playing into the classical *image* of the auteur (427). Thinking in this way invited consideration of corporate entities, including Hollywood studios themselves, as auteurs. Christensen’s notion of “studio authorship” pushed back against the consideration of “Hollywood as a generic industry,” personifying the major studios by arguing that, “When Jolson sang, Warner Bros. performed. When the Lion roars, MGM speaks” (432). Brookey and Westerfelhaus extend this consideration to the home video releases of Hollywood studios and to their special features, which often involve a film’s director in their production, or at the very least include their presence onscreen. DVD special features suggest a possible reconceptualization of the auteur, departing from an authorial identity rooted in individuals or even corporations and towards a category of auteur that refer to the corporate and technological elements that significantly influence film production.

While the title of Brookey and Westerfelhaus’ article is “The Digital Auteur,” their work more directly considers what is termed the “corporate auteur” (118). Corporate authorship, they argue, enables the fast creation of an auteur persona to build artistic

reputations. Paratextual materials like those found on DVDs play an essential role in framing the creation and creators of a film. The rhetoric of these special features emphasize the auteur-like characteristics of an artist or even a whole studio, thereby supplying an auteur narrative and persona. But what Brookey and Westerfelhaus do not entertain is that these materials may perform a service beyond the construction of a specific auteur identity. Rather, this article proposes that these paratexts push forward a novel conceptualization of the auteur. Digital technologies, contributing to the concept of a “digital auteur,” are just one prominent example. Instead of centering on the individual or even corporate identity involved in film production, the rhetoric emphasizes the means of production themselves. Before explicating this novel category, let us understand how paratexts construct authorial identities.

Paratexts and Special Features

Texts are never divorced entirely from their surroundings. This applies both literally and in how texts influence and are influenced by culture. Paratexts, as texts supplemental or literally “alongside” a main text, construct an identity for

particular media. Jonathan Gray's influential study of paratexts in contemporary entertainment marketing emphasizes that diverse "proliferations" of a media product "change the nature of the text's address, each proliferation either amplifying an aspect of the text through its mass circulation or adding something new and different to the text" (Gray 2). In so doing, the entire network of paratexts reiterates that these paratexts and the initial, inducing text are all themselves interrelated products. For instance, each of the *Star Wars* prequels featured extensive trailer and commercial advertising that positioned the films in relation to the other entries in the series. Toys, LEGO, and video games, as well as print media like books and magazines were also utilized to communicate particular ideas about the films to distinct audiences, thereby priming their ultimate reception and interest in the films and characters. This shows that even in their potential emphasis on the story or character content of the main text, paratexts tend to highlight their status as produced, marketed commodities, a status which is then also attributed to the original text.

Important to note is the intense diversity in what constitutes a paratext, especially in relation to film. Paratexts for an animated release, for instance, may include traditional print and web advertising; multi-platform social media blasts; appearances from the voice actors on talk shows; trailers in theaters; making-of features on *YouTube*; toys at fast food restaurants and traditional retailers—and this only scratches the surface of what might be considered a paratext. With this in mind, a film's special features are key paratexts in examining that film. Not only are they often produced in cooperation with the filmmaker themselves, but they are informationally "rich" in a way that other paratexts may not be by virtue of their informative bent and explanatory tone. This is not to say that special features do not or cannot entertain, but the emphasis on the "making-of" the film highlights background information more often than it does story content or characters. With this in mind, special features are uniquely suited to "play a constitutive role in creating value for a film or television show" (115). Such value may be characterized in terms of identity construction, selecting and presenting particular views and interpretations of the director, the cast and crew, and the film itself.

Critical for our consideration is how the special features construct an identity that expands the scope of authorship and invites contemplation of alternative attributions of auteur identity. Gérard Genette's initial conception of paratexts emphasized the authority of

the author, arguing that such deference recognized "the simple postulate that the author 'knows best' what we should think about his work" (408). This presupposition has been roundly critiqued, with variations of this criticism making their way into film theory's engagement with paratexts. One response has been to recognize the "media-specific variant of paratexts" (Stanitzek 36) to demonstrate that certain media have specific formations of paratexts, a distinctness which must be accounted for in assessing the relation between a medium and its paratexts. Following this logic, issues of authorial intention are "easily resolved in the sense that the usually large division of labor during the production of a film makes it rather difficult to attribute the work to one single author" (Klecker 405). Applying this critique to auteurism is anticipated in how the conceptualization of auteur theory is shifting from singular authors to collaborative processes, but some question of authorship or agency persists.

A helpful perspective on paratexts and authorship emerges when considering paratexts as emblematic of promotional culture. Film promotion in the age of the internet has created an environment where the hype around the film text can be more influential than the

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text itself. Now emancipated from DVDs and home media, special features shared on *YouTube* bring a heightened visibility to the performative maneuvers of brand positioning: crafting assemblages of images, texts, and media that shape audience interpretations of a text. Importantly, Aronczyk notes that the meanings such assemblages elicit "*redound to the paratext, not the text*" (113, emphasis in original). Put differently, special features say more about the "brand" that constructs the film than they necessarily do about the film itself. This means that "the meaning and value created does not enhance the legitimacy of the text but rather accrues to the benefit of the brand" (113).

But even if the assembled meanings say more about the paratext of the special features than the text of the film, the paratexts are, nonetheless, texts. These in turn say something significant about the production of the film in question. And given the tendency of many special features to showcase innovative means of film production—particularly digital technology (Allison)—it follows that centering the means of production repositions the auteur identity within this criteria, rather than with any singular individual.

Delineating the Digital Auteur

Special features from each of Lucas' *Star Wars* prequels contain key examples of how the "digital auteur" is constructed through emphasizing a film's means of production. Though Lucas had controversially incorporated digital elements and shots into the 1997 re-releases of his original trilogy, his prequels are important for their gradual adoption of the digital as an all-encompassing element of their production. While only select features are dedicated exclusively to digital technologies, the integration of the digital into the larger project of these films is pervasive as a rhetorical strategy throughout *all* of the features on these discs. The three specific dimensions I note here consider the digital auteur as a "dream maker," an "exploratory tool," and a "system of production," charting the evolution of digital influence throughout these films' production.

The Beginning, a feature-length documentary on *The Phantom Menace's* DVD, quickly establishes the idea of digital technology as "dream maker." The documentary's first significant scene is a special effects meeting wherein Lucas is telling his effects supervisors how much of the in-progress film is going to rely upon digital imagery. The placement of this scene foregrounds the importance of digital effects to the story being told. "I know it's going to work," Lucas says, "because it's impossible." Lucas charges the visual effects team with making his world, his dream come true, trusting technology to do exactly that. When Visual Effects Supervisor John Knoll interjects, "We don't really have a good way of doing that right now," Lucas counters with, "Well, that is the challenge." Later, Knoll says to the audience, "Technically [in this film] there are quite a number of things that have never been attempted before. Things that were just not possible and still aren't possible. We're still working on them." The documentary returns to the digital effects several times, guiding audiences to see how Lucas's "dream" is made possible through pushing the digital

envelope. By framing technology as a "dream-maker" the special effects material campaigns to reposition the reputation of the film's CGI—previously critiqued as sterile (Franich and Staskiewicz)—as a remarkable achievement, attesting to the power of digital tools to bring the seemingly impossible to fruition.

Accomplishing impossible dreams is a rhetoric similarly utilized in another *Phantom Menace* featurette, "Visual Effects". In this text, producer Rick McCallum contrasts *Phantom Menace* with other effects-heavy films to illustrate the film's unprecedented digital accomplishments. A film like the 1997 blockbuster *Titanic*, McCallum explains, may have 450-500 effects shots whereas *Phantom Menace* had "somewhere between 1,700 and 2,000 shots". That they managed to accomplish these shots while creating the new technologies necessary to make these shots possible attests to the "dream maker" construction of the featurette and emphasizes the digital as essential in



creating heretofore unseen cinematic delights. The digital may be hard work, but there is also freedom in its power—freedom to dream.

Having grown confident with digital effects in *Phantom Menace*, Lucas took a brave new step with *Attack of the Clones* (2002), eschewing film entirely and shooting in a digital format. In the featurette, "Here We Go Again: *The Digital Cinema Revolution Begins*," Lucas acknowledges, "There is a lot of controversy about the fact that we're shooting this digitally," his words following comments from two leading cinematographers about the sub-par quality of digital images. This sets the rest of the featurette up as an

apologetic for the digital approach, with McCallum noting that “we are ostensibly in the digital arena from the first day that we actually start working...every single frame, every single shot in the movie has a digital effect.” Lucas and McCallum are unconcerned with disillusioning the audience to this fact, reflecting the special features’ campaign to shift the rhetoric surrounding digital effects. The featurette also constructs the digital as an “exploratory tool,” a theme which pervades the DVD’s other main documentaries, *State of the Art: The Previsualization of Episode II* and *From Puppets to Pixels: Digital Characters in Episode II*.

In these two making-of documentaries, the digital is emphasized for its exploratory flexibility,

that never appeared in the original script.

The development of the digital from “dream maker” to “exploratory tool” is followed by the construction of the digital as an overarching “system of production” in the special feature texts for *Revenge of the Sith* (2005). The making-of documentary *Within a Minute* details the multiplicity of processes contributing to the creation of sixty seconds of the finished film. McCallum narrates, “Within this brief moment of the film you really have a window into the entire process of what it took to make Episode III.” This process includes over 900 artists and craftsmen, and nearly every imaginable department on a film set, from visual effects to catering and beyond. But



leading to greater creativity and better production decisions. In *From Puppets to Pixels*, Lucas implicates digital production’s role in shifting authorship from the singular to the collaborative. He explains, “We’re always constantly taking advantage of the new technology as it grows, pushing it forward to solve certain creative problems that I have”. In the following scene, Rob Coleman, the film’s Animation Director, describes how he and other animators used the time between *Phantom Menace* and *Attack of the Clones* to explore the possibility of an animated Yoda. The featurette shows the team creating screen-tests to prove to Lucas that this is feasible. Coleman’s tests convince Lucas and spur him to expand the role that digital characters play in his developing screenplay. Thus, the digital becomes a site of flexibility and creative exploration. This is exemplified in *State of the Art*, which details how speedier digital animation tools enabled digital “previsualization.” Instead of traditional storyboards, Lucas and his crew were able to use digital animation to draft, plan, and improvise, leading to the creation of sometimes whole sequences

through it all, digital means of production remain a constant presence, often directing and organizing the other elements in the process. Even traditional special effects such as miniatures and practical environmental effects are shot deliberately so as to smoothly integrate into digitally conceived elements. That the film was edited simultaneously in Sydney, Australia, and California made the digital use of filmed elements between the studio sites an integral component to the completion of the film. This in turn contributes to the digital’s diffusing of the traditional emphasis of singularity in auteur theory. As such, though the artistry of individuals is highlighted in this making-of documentary, the focus is on how digital technology has enabled this complicated dance of elements to occur, creating, controlling, refining, and fully integrating the process as it happens. The making-of paratext highlights the digital as a whole “system of production” with such a directive agency and pervasiveness in the production as to be considered worthy of the auteur label in a newly conceived variation on the theory.

Conclusion

This cursory examination of the special features for George Lucas's *Star Wars* prequels demonstrates a variant of auteur theory that I have called the "digital auteur." Doing so makes the case that auteur theory, which has already evolved significantly from its concentration on individuals, may need to evolve further to accommodate twenty-first century shifts in the means and processes of cinematic production. Through paratexts, especially special features, we gain valuable insight into the production of films today and as a method of building and proliferating reputations for filmmakers, studios, and even visual effects companies, through which this strand of authorship is emerging. The dimensions of the "digital auteur" tentatively outlined here, and as found especially in paratexts, begin to trace the development of the digital's role and influence in this particular franchise, a limited sample size that invites further focus and study. Finally, shifting the focus of auteur theory from individuals or corporate actors and onto the means of production opens up the possibility for new conceptualizations of auteur categories.

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