

CINERHILE

**AUDIENCES**  
*and* **PARATEXTS**

Suzanne Scott • Emily Sidel • Troy Michael  
Bordun • Joceline Andersen • Zachary  
Sheldon • John Quinn • Keith M. Johnston •  
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CINEPHILE acknowledges its identity as product of settler violence and colonization, and is committed to learning and engaging with Indigenous voices and histories on the UBC campus.

# CINEPHILE

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# Contributors

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**John Quinn** is a lecturer in Screen & Performance at the University of the West of Scotland. Focusing on popular film and television, John's recent publications have explored professional wrestling as an intersection between transmedia storytelling and high concept cinema, and offered multimodal discourse analysis as a means of deconstructing sports entertainment. John's forthcoming publications explore representations of supergendering in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019); the *Deadpool* cinematic franchise as an illustration of the complex crisis of masculinity; representations of populist masculinities in *JOKER* (2019) and how the aesthetics of *The Mandalorian* (2019-Pres) facilitate a return to, and continuity of, masculine heteronormativity in the face of rapid change within the wider *Star Wars* franchise.

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**Lisa Escudero** is a Vancouver-based Communications Specialist and Graphic Designer. Her academic background in critical approach and diverse clientele allows her to move strategically and creatively in traditional and modern communication spaces, breathing vibrancy into each of her projects.

# Letter from the Editor

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Dear readers,

This issue of *Cinephile* implores us to consider the little things—the comparably smaller, sometimes ephemeral media texts that orbit the edges of film and television culture. From movie reviews to end credits, ‘making of’ featurettes to fan-created *YouTube* videos, this issue considers those ancillary components that frame and shape our everyday encounters with screen media.

Published during a global shutdown of movie theatres due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus of *Cinephile* 14.1 has adopted an eerie timeliness. As our external lives have contracted, our appreciation for that which is often denigrated as subsidiary—or supplementary—has sharpened. Small moments and gestures procure a sudden gravity as souvenirs of securer, social times. Confined to our homes, we yearn for the comfort of contact, of settling down in the dark with strangers in anticipation of the latest film. While the collective theatrical experience is momentarily paused, audiences are resilient, finding avenues to connect through many of the paratextual practices and materials considered in these pages. In *Cinephile* 14.1, you will read essays that consider the multiple mediators that shape not just our relationships to cinematic stories, but to each other.

Opening this issue, Suzanne Scott's preface considers the powerful intimacy between audiences and paratexts—or, as she writes, para/texts. Contemplating this slash as a politically charged space, Scott affirms the need for critical inquiry into para/texts as the nexus of negotiations between audiences and industry. Our first article comes from Emily Saidel, who traces feminist possibilities in the narrative fringes with her analysis of title cards and end credits in *Jane the Virgin* (2014-2019) and *Fleabag* (2016-2019). Saidel also pushes us to consider how industrial shifts such as streaming and binge-watching continue to devalue these liminal spaces. Next, Troy Michael Bordun casts a penetrating eye on the state of online film criticism in his reception study of *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015). Tracking reviews that ultimately label *Fifty Shades of Grey* a ‘woman's film’, Bordun considers the consequences of contemporary criticism's reliance on genre classification as a favoured analytical tool. Writing on Watchmojo's now ubiquitous ‘Top 10’ *YouTube* videos, Joceline Andersen demystifies the mega content creator's success by pointing to its

strategy of appropriating bootleg aesthetics while adhering to the stipulations of rightsholders. Following this, Zachary Sheldon brings a nostalgic turn back to DVD paratexts. Drawing on the ‘making of’ featurettes accompanying *Star Wars* films, Sheldon expands auteurist theory to detail a new rhetoric of authorship, examining how the digital's reorganization of labour and production is propagated through paratextual materials. Another expansive media franchise, the *Alien* universe, is the subject of John Quinn's essay. Writing specifically on fan-created ‘explained’ or ‘lore’ videos shared on *YouTube*, Quinn considers how online platforms hybridize with paratexts to extend narrative engagement and consumer experiences. Lastly, our issue closes with a roundtable between Keith M. Johnston, Jesse Balzer and Erin Pearson. Interrogating the hierarchal implications of a paratext-lens in promotional media analysis, their discussion invites us to leave these pages with a renewed interest in what lies around the corner of this paratextual turn.

Just as we cannot view a film or television series as an isolated unit, *Cinephile* 14.1 is not complete without commending the many individuals who were instrumental to the fruition of this issue. I wish to extend my deepest gratitude to the talented scholars whose thoughtful words and inquisitive ideas fill these pages. Your rigorous research and astounding dedication during this uncertain time is appreciated beyond measure. To the editorial board, thank you for your boundless enthusiasm and devotion to detail, to put it plainly: this issue would not exist without you. To my dear friend and graphic designer for this issue, Lisa Escudero, thank you for lending us your unparalleled eye. And finally, to the faculty and staff at UBC's Department of Theatre and Film who guide us through it all: Christine Evans, Lisa Coulthard, Brian McIlroy, Cameron Cronin, Karen Tong and those who have read *Cinephile* over the years. Thank you for being part of this wondrous adventure.

Sincerely,

Jemma Dashkewytch

Editor-in-Chief, 2019-2020



## Preface

At some point over the past several years, I began using “(para)textual” rather than “textual and paratextual analysis” as a sort of shorthand to describe my own analytical approach to how fan and industry relations play out across and between a wide array of media texts, social media platforms, news stories, promotional materials, and fan texts and discourse. This was less an attempt to avoid clunky prose than to visualize and convey what I perceive to be a growing intimacy between text and paratext in our contemporary media landscape. In retrospect, though, perhaps para/text is more appropriate. Not only does the slash visually evoke the tradition of tagging the central relationship explored within a given fanfiction story (e.g. Kirk/Spock), it also suggests the centrality of audiences and their individualized interpretive practices to any broader understanding about how paratexts function. Much as the slash in fanfiction is utilized to convey the act of bringing two characters into contact, audiences are the ones that ultimately put paratexts and texts into meaningful cognitive conversation. If the parenthetical seems to imply a hierarchical relationship between text and paratext, then the slash conveys a distinct dynamic, an evolving relationship, or a unit that demands further exploration.

A decade after the publication of Jonathan Gray’s *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, which was central in updating and porting paratextual theory from its roots in literary analysis into a contemporary media landscape, the term “paratext” still carries some of contextual trappings of its initial use in Gérard Genette’s 1987 book *Seuils* (translated into English as *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* in 1997). This is an issue that Gray himself recently took up in a conversation with Robert Brookey when prefacing their 2017 special issue on paratexts for *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. As Gray notes, “The ‘para’ is deceptive because it might suggest it’s outside the text when, in fact, I think paratexts are intrinsic parts of the text as social and cultural unit” (102). This special issue of *Cinephile* powerfully affirms this view, reflecting on the myriad and multifaceted ways that paratexts mediate relationships between authors, texts, and audiences,

# On the Intimacy of Para/texts

particularly within a digital ecosystem primed to para/textual cross-pollination. In doing so, the articles that follow productively engage and expand on foundational concerns within paratextual studies, including work addressing how authorial and promotional paratexts function as a form of reputation management or performance of taste, articles that contemplate the distinct functionality of entryway paratexts (ranging from movie trailers to opening credits sequences), and others that take up longstanding concerns around fan-produced paratexts as both a form of digital labor and a site of textual negotiation.

It is precisely because of the synergistic slippage between para/texts and their growing centrality to the social and cultural experience of media objects that it is vital we more actively theorize the contextual and experiential dimensions of paratexts for audiences. This special issue’s emphasis on the relationships between audiences and paratexts is an essential step in this process, but there is still an abundance of work to be done, particularly considering the lack of comparative analyses of paratexts within the same general category. For example, how does the aura surrounding an

authorial paratext shift if we examine a long-running creator podcast, a DVD director’s commentary, a magazine interview, or a Twitter feed? How do the aural, textual, or multimodal dimensions of these transmissions impact our experience of this authorial address, or the sense of intimacy or interpretive influence that they are designed to produce? How are they temporally situated? Do they suggest a presumed or optimal window of consumption connected to the text, or how might their repeated consumption week in and out increase their impact? While a wide array of work continues to be done on how authorial paratexts strive to shore up a creator’s reputation or interpretive power, we know considerably less about why audiences seek them out or how and when they choose to (dis)engage them. There has also been limited study of how paratexts (and authorial paratexts in particular) are wielded by audiences within broader intra-fannish debates and disputes.

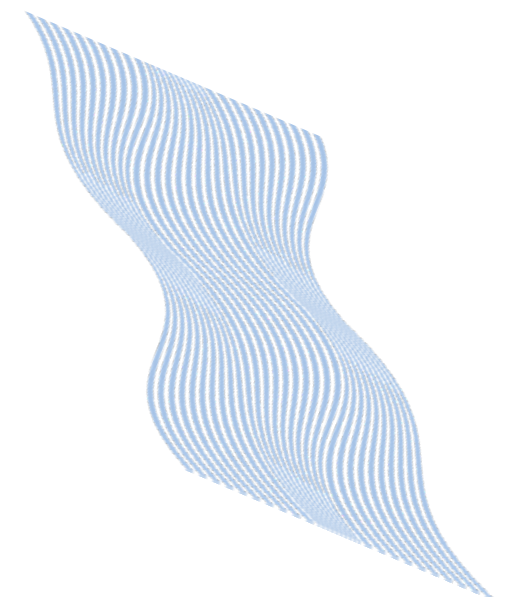
Alternately, we might consider if there is a palpable difference between experiencing an anticipated movie trailer at a panel at Comic-Con before it is widely released, or seeing the same trailer in a movie theater before a film or on your phone walking down the street. While the narrative or promotional work this paratext is seeking to perform might be similar in many cases, the experiential dimension of the paratextual encounter is radically different. It is likewise problematic to flatten “fan-produced paratexts” as a conceptual category. Any given piece of fan art (even if we imagine two examples that are identical in content and design) might serve a radically different paratextual function depending on if it is circulating within an insular fan community as part of an annual fandom challenge, or if it is being spread via a media corporation’s social media channels as a part of a fan contest and related marketing campaign that is bound by particular creative strictures.

In other words, now that we have thankfully moved past the need to justify analyzing paratexts as producers of meanings, textual mediators, and as objects of study in their own right, we would be remiss to not embark on more audience-centered research that explores the deeply contextual and experiential dimensions of paratexts. If para/text implies a symbiotic relationship between text and paratext, it also might suggest a conceptual intimacy for consumers, who routinely use their knowledge of one to inform their consumption of and navigate their affective relationship with the other. Audience-centered paratextual studies would afford an unprecedented opportunity to better map and theorize personalized media flows, but with this call for more ethnographic work, it is important to acknowledge that

it is precisely because paratextual networks are highly individualized, and media consumers’ experience of paratexts is often ephemeral, that these studies pose unique challenges. Still, they will be essential to better understanding not just how intrinsic paratexts are to the social and cultural dimensions of media texts, but also the ways in which that / between para and text might become a politically charged space. Much as media fans have historically used that slash, in part, to indicate queer couplings that simultaneously exist outside of the representational desires or norms of mainstream media production and nonetheless are perceived to be subtextually present, para/texts represent a site of perpetual negotiation between industry, text, and audience in which audiences ultimately determine which elements to take in, and the relative weight they are given. If the slash is an indicator of intimacy, it is also a sign of the power of that intimacy, and conflicting desires on the part of media industries, creators, and audiences to control it.

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Emily Saidel

## *Fleabag*, *Jane the Virgin*, and Feminist Media on Television's Textual Edges

Film and television accolades traditionally elicit praise for those found deserving, empathy for those who missed out, and scorn for the selection process no matter the results. The year 2020 was no exception. The announcement of the Golden Globe film nominees prompted headlines including “If there’s a theme to the 2020 Golden Globe nominations, it’s ‘all men, all the time’ (McNamara) and “The Golden Globes didn’t nominate any women for best director. Or screenplay. Or motion picture” (Rao). However, the smaller screen Globe nominations told a different story. Of the ten Best Television Series nominees, six featured women-centric stories—*Big Little Lies* (2017- ), *The Crown* (2016-), *Killing Eve* (2018- ), *The Morning Show* (2019-), *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017-), and *Fleabag* (2016-2019). The eponymous titling of these series highlights the centrality of female characters to their respective stories; *Eve*, *Mrs. Maisel*, and *Fleabag* invoke their leads, while *The Crown* metonymically refers to Queen Elizabeth II. Building from that titular recognition, this paper argues that the potential for feminist media-

making extends beyond the visual paradigm of spectacle and spectatorship into the (para) textual. Analyzing the award-winning *Fleabag*'s humorous and descriptive end credits alongside *Jane the Virgin*'s (2014-2019)<sup>1</sup> manipulation of its title card reveals feminist possibilities within seemingly inconsequential industrially-codified spaces. In addition to a politics of representation, these two shows invite a feminist onomastic; how women name themselves and how they name others. Simultaneously, the ephemerality of these spaces demonstrates the continuing challenge of formulating feminist critique within a hegemonic industry.

*Fleabag*, a co-production by Two Brothers Pictures for BBC with Amazon Studios,<sup>2</sup> adapted from a stage play of the same name, is a twelve-

1. A 2015 Golden Globe nominee for Best Television Series – Musical or Comedy.

2. *Fleabag* was produced for the BBC in two sets of episodes. To standardize terminology, these will be referred to with the US style as ‘season one’ and ‘season two,’ rather than the UK style of ‘series one’ and ‘series two.’ In this article ‘series’ refers to the entire run of a program.

episode, raunchy, bittersweet half-hour comedy created by and starring Phoebe Waller-Bridge. The series tracks the unnamed protagonist's attempts to cope with painful elements of her past including the deaths of her mother and best friend. Prior to the Globe nomination and win, *Fleabag* had already received Program of the Year at the Television Critics Association and Outstanding Comedy Series at the Primetime Emmy Awards for its 2019 second season as well as awards for multiple members of the cast and crew. *Fleabag*'s women-centric storytelling does not rest solely on casting female leads. Hilarie Ashton, writing for *Ms. magazine*, explains “*Fleabag* lets the near-constant absurdity of women's experiences within a male-controlled world open out into a refreshing slant of realistic, female-centered and implicitly feminist viewpoint” (2019). Throughout the series, Waller-Bridge's character reveals an awareness of the camera; asides, conspiratorial smiles, and significant glances acknowledge the viewing audience and provide the character an opportunity to make her thought processes explicit. One example of this occurs during the second season when she brashly reports to a counsellor why she thinks her father gifted her a therapy session. “Because my mother died, and he can't talk about it. And my sister and I didn't speak for a year because she thinks I tried to sleep with her husband, and because I spent most of my adult life using sex to deflect from the screaming void inside my empty heart.” She then turns directly to the camera and remarks, “I'm good at this.” This fourth-wall breaking technique contributes to what Ashton, after Mulvey, calls a female gaze that is “a nuanced showcase of feminism” (2019).

*Jane the Virgin*, a loose adaptation of the Venezuelan telenovela *Juana La Virgen* (2002), ran for one hundred episodes and five seasons during a period of demographic transition for the CW network (Poggi). *Jane* shares with *Fleabag* a direct address to the camera through a voice-over narrator who summarizes past events, provides backstory, and adds commentary. This narrator, a male voice revealed at the conclusion to the series to belong to a grown-up version of Jane's son Mateo, repeatedly aligns himself with the audience by calling them “friends” and referring to “our Jane.” The story he tells is a feminist showcase of three

generations of women in the Villanueva family navigating the challenges in their lives: from more mundane career-related angst to the painful anxieties of an undocumented immigration status and a cancer diagnosis to the absurd machinations of a criminal mastermind. *Jane* has been praised as a “critical darling” (Bentley) and for confronting the stereotype of the hypersexualized Latina, and in this show “viewers were privy to a complicated feminist attempting to separate her beliefs from those of her grandmother's, unlearn patriarchal mores and reconcile being a woman of faith who could actually find pleasure in sex” (Aviles).<sup>3</sup> Taken together, these two television programs fulfill a feminist politics of diverse representation and pleasure emphasized by early feminist film studies. However, it is not solely the camera's gaze or direct address that captures the interiority of these complex, contemporary women. Through their paratexts, each program positions the audience to not only watch the story, but also to occupy the viewpoint of the main character.

In his seminal *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Gérard Genette argues that book titles have a designating function, to name “as precisely as possible and without too much risk of confusion” (79). He proposes two non-mutually exclusive categories for types of titles: the thematic, referring to the subject matter, and the rhematic, referring to the commentary on the topic. In Jonathan Gray's application of Genette's theories to visual and time-based media, he emphasizes that paratexts are not only entryway thresholds, but can be encountered during and after experiencing the text, in media res (23). The serialized nature of television shows presents a distinctive challenge in distinguishing the bounds of a ‘text’ to which a paratext refers. This is because the unit of analysis—the episode, the season, the full series—dictates different conclusions. Unlike

3. See also Molina-Guzmán, Isabel. *Latinas and Latinos on TV: Colorblind Comedy in the Post-racial Network Era*. The University of Arizona Press, 2018; Pino, Ivana. “How ‘Jane the Virgin’ Defies Negative Stereotypes About Latinas.” *Latin Live*, [wearelatinlive.com/article/8678/how-jane-the-virgin-defies-negative-stereotypes-about-latina](http://wearelatinlive.com/article/8678/how-jane-the-virgin-defies-negative-stereotypes-about-latina); and Zeilinger, Julie. “6 Ways ‘Jane the Virgin’ Is Destroying Latino Stereotypes.” *Mic*, 18 February 2015, [mic.com/articles/110768/6-ways-jane-the-virgin-is-destroying-latino-stereotypes](http://mic.com/articles/110768/6-ways-jane-the-virgin-is-destroying-latino-stereotypes)



books, physical objects with front and back covers, television shows and other moving-picture media are objects in time whose internal and external edges are less clearly delineated. Titles may not appear on screen at the very beginning of a narrative, and end credits may not signal the end of narrative content. Whereas other paratexts such as promotional material or reviews are temporally and spatially distinct from the texts, title sequences and end credits are doubly liminal: boundary markers coded as part of the show but apart from the diegesis.

Gray concludes that opening credit sequences work to introduce new audiences “to the characters, genre, themes, relationships, and general subject matter” (73) and “to police certain reading strategies” (23). Gray, in his focus on promotional campaign materials, toys, spin-offs, and mashups, does not address the role of the title itself as distinct from the title sequence. End credits go unexplored, presumably under the assumption of mere legal necessity. In these brief textual structures, the encoding of meaning by producers and the decoding by audiences more easily align (Hall 131, van Zoonen 8). This facilitates not only a preferred reading but also, in *Jane the Virgin* and *Fleabag*, grounds an inhabitable feminist subjectivity.

Unlike prestige television shows that proclaim their narrative and thematic depth with abstract or symbolic title sequences, *Jane the Virgin* uses a simple title card. The screen freezes and “JANE THE VIRGIN” in white text appears on top of the action (Figure 1).<sup>4</sup> In “Chapter Forty-Seven,” the episode during which Jane consummates her marriage, a cold-open full of sexual double entendres leads to a title card ending in a question mark (Figure 2). In the following episode, the show acknowledges the inaccuracy of the show’s title by having the standard title card, JANE THE VIRGIN, appear. Then a thicker white line strikes out THE VIRGIN (Figure 3). Subsequent episodes use the same animated strikethrough and add alternative descriptors such as THE

4. A few episodes in the first half of the series add to the title card such as the insertion of “disgusting” (Chapter Twenty-Four) or “married” (Chapter Forty-Six) whereas in the second half of the series “virgin” is crossed out and replaced every episode.



Figure 1

SUPER STRESSED MOTHER-WIFE-WRITER (“Chapter Fifty-Three”), THE WIDOW (“Chapter Fifty-Five”), THE FAILURE (“Chapter Seventy-Three”), and THE GOODBYE (“Chapter One Hundred”) (Figures 4, 5, 6, 7). Each adjustment to the title captures the facet of Jane’s life most prominently featured in that week’s episode. Jane’s creator and executive producer Jennie Snyder Urman describes these flexible titles as a way “of identifying [that] people are so much more than sex. So, this is a person with so many different identities and so many things that make her character an interesting person. Once we get rid of the virgin thing, we can just open it up to other things that define her” (Nguyen). Here, Urman articulates how the show explores the multiple, and at times competing, subjectivities Jane embodies. While many programs have used variable visuals in the title sequences, from the weekly, animated gags of *The Simpsons* (1989-) to the different map locations of *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), few have done so through manipulation of the title of the show itself.<sup>5</sup>

Poststructuralist feminist theory argues that the individual subject is always heterogeneous, rather than singular or unitary. “A person’s subjectivity can thus be described in terms of the multiplicity of social positions taken up by the person in question...in this sense, a female person cannot be presumed to have a pre-given and fixed gender identity as a woman” (Ang 119). Through this quirky paratextual device, *Jane* succinctly captures and makes explicit the multiple subject positions required for Jane to inhabit modern life.

5. *Cougar Town* (2009-2015), a sitcom that aired first on ABC, then on TBS, used different on-screen text each week to mock the show’s indelicate and largely inaccurate title, but without altering the show’s title.



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

By overwriting the original subjectivity, which reduced her identity to sexual experience, Jane’s multiplicity and complexity come more firmly into focus. Jane is a daughter, mother, wife, friend. She is a waitress, teacher, student, author. She is a bilingual, second-generation Latina, living in Florida. Her relationships, her career, and her sense-of-self all fluctuate throughout the series and, once the anchor of ‘virgin’ is expunged, the show’s title fluctuates along with her.

The piecemeal nature of television narratives further highlights this fragmented subjectivity. Just as Jane is split among the roles she fulfills, *Jane* is split into episodes and seasons. Unlike series produced by digital-native distributors such as Netflix and Amazon with entire seasons released simultaneously, *Jane the Virgin* followed the more traditional route of a single episode broadcast

weekly, with the first four seasons airing on a fall-to-spring schedule. Although the show uses the affectation of “chapter” in naming each episode, a nod to Jane’s writerly aspirations, the incremental release of these chapters undermines the parallel of television show as novel. However, even as Jane’s sense of identity evolves, *Jane’s* industrial identity is recognized by critics, fans, broadcast schedules, and awards, as a single, continuous television show. Despite the prominence of changeable, episodic subjectivities, the constancy of *Jane the Virgin* also attributes constancy to Jane. Within the paratextual arena of the title card, Jane maintains a fragmented subjectivity and a unified subjectivity simultaneously.

*Jane the Virgin* ascribes an abundance of identities to its protagonist; *Fleabag* does the opposite. Although the script indicates dialogue



spoken by 'Fleabag,' the main character goes unnamed throughout the series (Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag: The Scriptures*). The show's paratext, in this case the closing credits, reinforces that missing nomenclature with the credits listing, "Written by and starring PHOEBE WALLER-BRIDGE" and no character mentioned (Figure 8). In order to reference the character, reviewers and audience members alike have taken to calling her 'Fleabag,' and Waller-Bridge has confirmed this nickname in interviews about the series (O'Keefe). "I liked the idea of withholding some of that mystery," the British actress says, explaining that "Fleabag" is based on her real-life nickname. "That word, 'fleabag,' that felt right, because there's a messy connotation to it." (Desta). For ease of reference,

boyfriend had sex with someone else. Fleabag constantly feels inferior to her professionally successful and self-contained sister, Claire. For much of the series, Fleabag minimizes her self-worth with ironic detachment, emphasizing her unlikability. In the final episode of the second season, just before his wedding ceremony, Fleabag's father has gotten his foot stuck in the floor of the attic. Fleabag finds him, and before returning to the ceremony, they have a heart-to-heart. He tells her, "I know she's [Godmother] not... everyone's cup of tea. But neither are you, darling. I mean, I'm sorry. I love you, but I'm not sure that I like you all the time." With only 'fleabag' to name the character, the audience also participates in Fleabag's unlikability, denigrating her messiness.

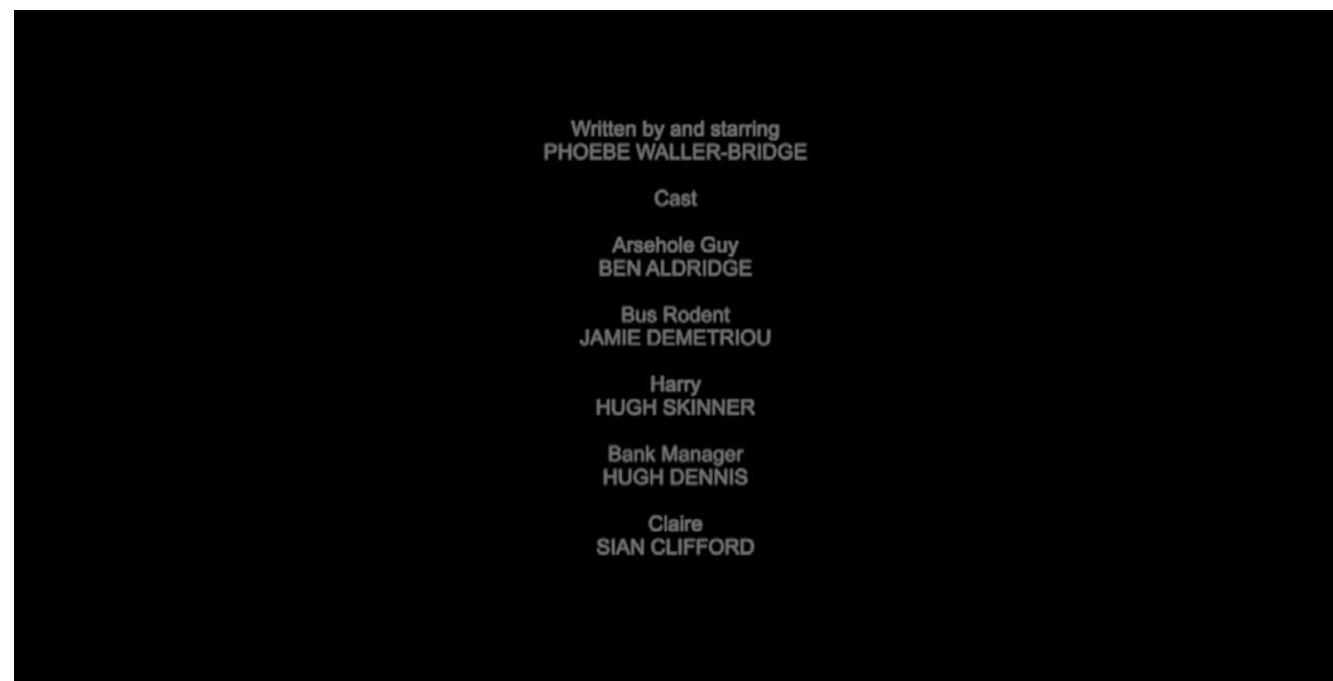


Figure 8

this essay will echo Waller-Bridge and call the character 'Fleabag,' while acknowledging that the lack of a diegetic address using this name reinforces the symbolic work done by the paratext.

By avoiding conventional naming structures, *Fleabag* forces the audience to occupy Fleabag's *weltanschauung*, at least regarding her perception of herself and her relationships with other characters. Fleabag spends the first season haunted by grief, guilt, and anger. Her best friend Boo has committed suicide after learning that her

The lead is not the only character who goes nameless throughout the series. Multiple characters are described in the closing credits by nicknames specific to Fleabag's interactions with them. Although her sister and her sister's family—Claire, Martin, and Jake—have given names, two other important characters—Godmother and Dad—do not. These characters' lack of names is so egregious that the show makes a joke of it in the final episode. At the wedding reception, Godmother starts to introduce the various artist

attendees to the family members. After she presents her assortment of extraordinary, very interesting friends, she gestures toward Dad. The conversation pauses as she gapes, having forgotten his name. Godmother continues, "Oh, my God. This is...this is...God how extraordinary. I just...I always call you 'darling.' This is the love of my life." Valorie Clark at *ScreenRant* notes, "Obviously, this joke is a nod to the audience as much as it is to characterize Godmother. We hardly know anyone's name in this show, and it can be fun to watch how the truth stays hidden" (Clark).

Beyond simply fun, these credits reinforce the subtext of the family dynamics. Due to Godmother's assertive romantic pursuit of Dad soon after her mother's death, Fleabag treats this relationship as intrusive and distasteful. *Fleabag* circumvents the fairy tale cliché of the (evil) stepmother and draws humor from the contrast between the traditional role of godmother as a mentor and protector and the character of Godmother, defined largely by her passive-aggressive cruelty. Additionally, the end credits' stress on the character's defining characteristic as godmother to Fleabag and Claire also positions her in the shadow of the unseen, deceased mother—a shadow reinforced by the statue Fleabag alternately steals, returns, and steals. In the final episode, Fleabag learns, as we do, that this bust was modeled on Fleabag and Claire's mother.

Whereas "Godmother" reinforces the distance between Fleabag and this potential material figure, "Dad" underpins an affection and emotional affinity that is only rarely made explicit on screen. Fleabag initially describes Dad just before she and Claire attend a public talk. She explains to the camera, "Dad's way of coping with two motherless daughters was to buy us tickets to feminist lectures, start fucking our godmother, and eventually stop calling." Fleabag's use of "Dad" without a possessive such as "my Dad" or "our Dad" includes the audience within the intimacy of the family. Subsequent family meals reveal Dad to be a soft-spoken man who often begins a thought without completing it. But in the final episode of each season, Dad speaks forthrightly to Fleabag, about himself and his understanding of her. In the first season, as a drunk Fleabag drops champagne glasses during Godmother's art

exhibition, Dad angrily declares, "I'm just going to say this once. I deserve to be happy. I am allowed to move on. I have a good life, and I am happy, all right?" Fleabag leaves the exhibition and finds him sobbing on his car in front of the gallery. Although he struggles to identify a similarity between them beyond forehead lines, the show emphasizes their likeness when they execute a simultaneous gesture of wiping their noses with their hands, Fleabag in the foreground, Dad in the center of the frame. He continues, "I think your mother would have admired your little performance up there." This claim unlocks the possibility of discussing their beloved ghosts. But just as Dad is about to self-disclose, Godmother appears from inside, and he quiets again. In the final episode, he further explains, "You're not the way you are because of me... You're the way you are because of her [Fleabag's mother]. And it's those bits that you need to cling to...I think you know how to love better than any of us. That's why you find it all so painful." Despite the seeming estrangement proposed by Fleabag's initial description, these conversations demonstrate a sustained empathetic understanding between parent and child.

With the uses and avoidances of sex as a key facet of Fleabag's emotional development, her perception of her male companions guides their descriptions in the closing credits. Three of the men she has sex with during the series are credited as "Arsehole Guy," "Bus Rodent," and "Hot Misogynist." These are not nicknames, per se, as these characters are not addressed with these descriptors nor do other characters mention them. These names are not inevitable as if sexual proclivities, a meet-cute, and casual misogyny are the only characteristics seen on screen. Instead, these titles reveal Fleabag's flattening of these potential partners into single characteristics, her ability to "reduce people" in order to dismiss them, and these labels are humorous invitations to the audience to perform the same flattening (Waller-Bridge *Fleabag: Scriptures*, 414-415). Similarly, the unnamed, but recurring "Bank Manager" has no identifier other than his employment, a position he leaves in his fourth and final appearance in the series. Only the lead's on-again-off-again milquetoast boyfriend, Harry, is credited with a name.



“The Priest,” a lover introduced in the second season, is the recipient of Fleabag’s genuine affection. As with Bank Manager, his name describes his occupation, and as with the other men, this credit underscores Fleabag’s perception of him. It also serves as foreshadowing for the conclusion of the “love story” introduced at the beginning of the second season. In the final episode, having had sex the night before, Fleabag and the Priest sit quietly in a bus stop. She asks, “It’s God, isn’t it?” and the Priest answers, “Yeah.” Although they confess their love for each other, his spiritual vocation triumphs over their chemistry and kinship, an outcome foretold by the closing credits. Following the release of the series in the United States on May 17, 2019, searches for “hot priest” spiked on Google for the remainder of the summer, with multiple headlines adopting the fan term of endearment. Despite the shift from the neutral “the” to the flattering “hot,” his occupation remains his defining characteristic for Fleabag and, through her, the audience. Regardless of the bond between the characters, the end credits’ episodic reiteration of his occupation affirms the inevitability of his recommitment to his Catholic career.

*Jane’s* title shifts and *Fleabag’s* end credits meaningfully defy the clichéd writing advice of “show, don’t tell.” However, ultimately these paratexts are ephemeral. Although each episode in the second half of *Jane* has a different, temporary title, these titles are not otherwise recorded or made visible. When *Jane the Virgin* is recognized in the press, it is as the unified, overarching *Jane the Virgin*, not as Jane-the-Fill-In-The-Blank. Similarly, when *Fleabag* is distributed by Amazon Prime, the streaming platform defaults to autoplaying the next episode, thus cutting the credits short. Account holders can adjust their settings, but this underlying affordance reveals a devaluing of this paratext in order to more speedily advance the narrative. The feminist implications of *Jane the Virgin’s* titles and *Fleabag’s* end credits demonstrate the communicative potential of these fleeting on-screen texts and also their fragility. These liminal spaces push feminist filmmaking to the edges of narrative television programs and compel audiences to inhabit the fragmentary, intimate, and challenging female protagonists’ world views.

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Troy Michael Bordun

## Art, Porn, and Schlock: *Fifty Shades of Grey* and the Perplexed Film Critic

*Fifty Shades may not make you come, but you'll still be glad you went.*

– David Ehrlich, “Fifty Shades of Grey,”  
*Time Out*, Feb. 11, 2015

Sam-Taylor Johnson’s R-rated *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015), starring Jamie Dornan and Dakota Johnson, did not peak critics’ prurient interests nor their insatiable appetites for sex in the cinema. They decried the film for its pornographic representations while also observing the ways it is not a work of pornography. To these critics, erotically-charged feature films were most successful when filmmakers adopted the mode and style of art cinema, and *Fifty Shades* failed to meet these standards of art film. Some critics also admitted that they wanted the film to unintentionally veer in the direction of “so bad it’s good,” but they more or less agreed that *Fifty Shades* was not incompetently crafted. Neither art, nor porn, nor schlock, then, how did critics position the film and what did they not like about it?

This article provides an overview of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* reviews published in the popular press at the time of the film’s release on Valentine’s Day Weekend 2015. As Rick Altman argues, critics are responsible for commenting upon and conserving film genres (124), thus determining the consensus on the film’s genre interventions highlights the ones that are pressing and relevant in contemporary criticism. Through a careful look at the reviews, I assess which genre references resonated with critics. In my reading of the *Fifty Shades* criticism, given that the film was neither art, nor porn, nor schlock, the only low genre left for critics to assess it was the “woman’s film.” The woman’s film designation allowed critics to denigrate the film and provide disparaging commentary about it to thereby prop up their authority and demonstrate their good taste. This follows from the view that

criticism is in a state of perpetual crisis over its claims to authority and legitimacy and, in the digital era, this state of anxiety is all the more pressing as fans post reviews on a host of websites (Frey, *Permanent Crisis* 125-139). There is no shortage of websites that allow for competition among amateur critics, e.g., review sites such as Letterboxd and Metacritic, and social media such as Twitter. For critics, then, genre comparisons and investigations are not deployed to simply better understand a film, its production, or reception. Indeed, the appearance of a carefully constructed genre study evinces a critic’s cultural capital. However, the *Fifty Shades* critics reinforced and reproduced the distinction between high and low genres while neglecting to provide more nuanced reflections on genre filmmaking, the pleasures of genre film spectatorship, and the film’s problematic representations of contemporary romance.

Before assessing the critical commentary on *Fifty Shades*, it is worth examining the role critics play in film culture. The value of the critic has been a topic of debate almost since cinema’s beginnings (Frey, *Permanent Crisis*). In part, critics are the gatekeepers of culture rather than its consumers; critics help determine which works are worthy of inclusion inside the sacred vaults (both literal and figurative) of film history. From this perspective, critics do not assist in the constitution of film genres but are its observers (Altman 28-9). A more robust approach, however, reveals that genre formation depends upon a complex intercommunicative network of producers, audiences, and critics. For our purposes, the latter deploy their knowledge of “generic competence” to make a case for a film’s participation in or miscalculations of one or more genres (123-26). Critics’ understanding of and commentary on genres trickle down to film producers who then incorporate or shed specific generic qualities in future productions (162). In this sense, filmmaking (by way of investments by and direction



from producers) is a practice of applied film criticism (44).

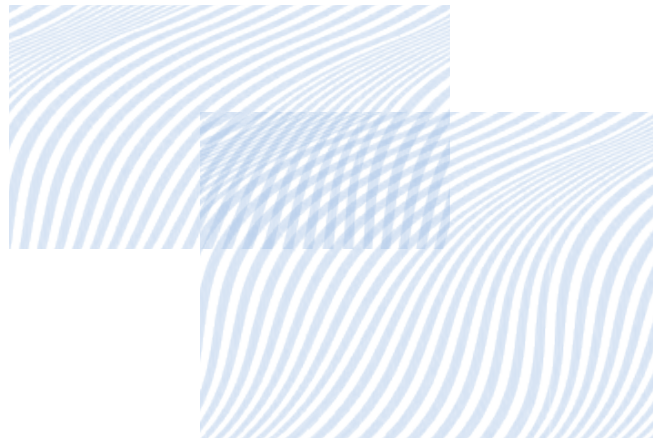
The genres of *Fifty Shades* became a stumbling block for critics as their reviews often focused on what the film was not. I examined the available reviews hyperlinked from Metacritic and a few from elsewhere on the Web. I chose this starting point because critics, besides writing for their press's audience, are also writing for the audiences of aggregate sites such as Metacritic and Rotten Tomatoes. For *Variety's* Anne Thompson, young cinephiles browse these sites with less of an interest in individual critics than for digestible critical consensus on a given film (qtd. in Frey, *Permanent Crisis* 126). Reviews, similar to other internet-circulated media such as viral videos and memes, vie for attention. For *Fifty Shades* criticism, despite Metacritic scores ranging from 0 to 80 (out of 100), with an average of 46, most reviews follow the same formula and reach similar conclusions.

Reviews often begin with an attempt to locate a genre: *Fifty Shades* is a fairy tale, romance, and BDSM-romance, not falling far from the Metacritic characterization on the film's main page: "Drama, Romance, Adult." To grab readers' attention, a more frequently used approach opens the review by embellishing the film's inability to arouse. Exemplary in this regard is Megan Daum's opening salvo, published in *Slate*:

If you come to *Fifty Shades of Grey* looking for true kink, you will have come to the wrong place. You'll get peacock feathers and satiny blindfolds, horsehair whips better for tickling than flogging and, of course, many expensive silk ties. The *Fifty Shades* phenomenon... may have courted controversy for its exploration of a dom-sub relationship, but *Story of O* (or even *Secretary*, for that matter) this is not. (par. 1)

Some critics similarly invoke softcore porn in their commentary, while others, following the line of inquiry opened by Daum, observe that *Fifty Shades* will fail to whet sexual appetites (Ehrlich par. 1, 3; Hoffman par. 5; Persall par. 8-9, 11; Stewart par. 1). Critics (metaphorically) refer to their "Peter-Meters"<sup>1</sup> as they tabulate the film's spanks and whips, identify the sex toys and bondage gear, and note the brief instances of Dornan's and Johnson's flesh. In sum, then, what critics saw was much less than the sadomasochistic porn they had seen (or pretended to

1. The Peter-Meter was a system used by Al Goldstein of Screw in the 1970s to assess a film's capacity to arouse. See Williams, *Screening Sex* 120-123



have seen) on pornography websites and, "for a movie where people are naked for a large chunk of time and play at bondage and dominance..., it sure is boring" (par. 3; cf. Bernardinelli par. 1).

Why did critics think pornography was a legitimate comparison? *Time's* Richard Corliss provides an answer. He informs readers that he is a "virgin" when it comes to the film's source material, E.L. James's *Fifty Shades* Trilogy (2011-12), having never read a word (par. 1). A few paragraphs down, however, he expresses disappointment in discovering that "a very X-rated book" has transformed into "a genteel R-rated film" (par. 9). Corliss and others, virgins or not, must believe that since *Fifty Shades* is an X-rated book, its film adaptation should be equally gratuitous. Yet these critics forgot the lesson of American film history, namely, literature enjoys a freedom of expression that Hollywood does not – Hollywood has a habit of sanitizing adaptations (Athanasourelis, 325-338; Biesen).

The uncritical observation that *Fifty Shades* does not live up to the graphic nature of the source material also serves the larger aim to denigrate the film. Corliss follows his unenthusiastic commentary on the sex scenes with the opinion that sadomasochism should be a theme for filmmaking "because it touches on the power vectors in any relationship, and because each person frequently switches roles of dominant and submissive" (par. 9). The critic cites *Last Tango in Paris* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972) and *Intimacy* (Patrice Chereau, 2001) as successful films in this genre. (Of course, neither of these films have anything to do with BDSM but illicit sexual encounters.) Corliss's approach to evaluating the film as somehow part of the mode of art cinema is not unique. On the whole, the *Fifty Shades* critics – now confident that the film is not hardcore porn – compare it to the classics of BDSM-romance, with *Last Tango, 9 ½ Weeks* (Adrian Lyne, 1986), and *Secretary* (Steven Shainberg, 2002) oft-cited alongside acclaimed art cinema directors

such as Catherine Breillat and key BDSM-themed films such as *Belle de Jour* (Luis Buñuel, 1967), *The Night Porter* (Liliana Cavani, 1974), and *The Duke of Burgundy* (Peter Strickland, 2014).<sup>2</sup>

Critics play cultural gatekeepers as they cite better examples of filmic eroticism that are more expertly crafted or authentic in their depictions. However, this is an ill-suited comparison given that the mode of art cinema champions realism, psychological ambiguity,

reading protocol for spectators to enact "a calculated strategy of shock and confrontation against fellow cultural elites" and champion a counter-aesthetic and counter-canon of films that have been "rejected or ignored by legitimate film culture" (Sconce 376, 372).<sup>4</sup> Yet Taylor-Johnson fails to meet this standard of failure. For instance, *Vulture's* David Edelstein calls *Fifty Shades* "elegantly made": it is "nowhere near as laughable as you might have feared (or perversely

## ***Fifty Shades's* criticism demonstrates a circular internal logic.**

and adult-themes in a way that Hollywood filmmaking does not (Bordwell 558-573). Combining the dual observation that *Fifty Shades* is neither art nor porn, Elliot Burton declares, "If you seek a truly erotic film made for women by women, you'd do much better with Catherine Breillat's exquisite *Romance*. If you seek mere titillation, you'd do much better with actual pornography" (par. 7). Such a comparison to art cinema and pornography allows the critic to demonstrate their cultural capital, but the turn to cultural capital comes at the expense of meaningful investigations of what the film offers as a Hollywood production in an era that has been less restrained in terms of depictions of sexuality (Williams, *Screening Sex* 216-257).<sup>3</sup> Thus criticism fails to engage a Hollywood film within the parameters of its production and audience.

Before their screenings, some critics thought *Fifty Shades* may produce visual pleasure through its technical incompetence and trite narrative (Shea par. 8). It would then become a cult phenomenon, or what many cult cinema scholars refer to as "badfilm." A badfilm is established when a "film or filmmaker seems to attempt to achieve something, seems to fail, and yet is valued for this seeming failure" (MacDowell and Zborowski par. 6). It is not a set of codes or conventions; rather, the designation of badfilm is a

hoped for)" (par. 1). Critics note Taylor-Johnson's short but successful filmography and the merits of her foray into Hollywood filmmaking with *Fifty Shades*, particularly her construction of the infamous contract signing scene, and Johnson's performance is generally declared superb. Moreover, James's insufferable prose and poorly written dialogue are transformed into a feature film that is somewhat entertaining or, at worst, only mildly insufferable.<sup>5</sup> Critics, therefore, could not recuperate *Fifty Shades* as a badfilm to "carve out an interpretive space" and distance their perverse love of a trashy film from the dominant views of film art set by earlier generations of academics and critics (Hunter 32). Similar to my above remarks on critics' invocation of art cinema to bolster their cultural capital, identifying oneself as a connoisseur of trashy films also enhances one's cultural capital (31-32). The lack of technical ineptitudes and narrative clichés in *Fifty Shades*, however, did not grant critics the opportunity to articulate their ironic and detached praise or enact the badfilm reading protocols.

*Fifty Shades's* criticism demonstrates a circular internal logic. BDSM puns fly through critics' fingers as they try to express what they found so painful about their film experience, namely, that it failed to be erotic/pornographic, art, or "so bad it's good." Through

2. Jane Giles observes that although BDSM themes have appeared in art cinema for decades, *9 ½ Weeks* is the only appropriate comparison to *Fifty Shades* since it is also a Hollywood production. For Giles, one of the few critics to take this nuanced path, *Fifty Shades* is not as good of a film as *9 ½ Weeks* because she cannot imagine a "watercooler moment or destined-to-be-classic scene" in the former (par. 12).

3. For a critical consideration of representations of sex in contemporary art cinema, see Bordun 99-122

4. While I recognize that in the quoted passages Sconce is referring, not specifically to badfilm, but to his proposed umbrella-category of "paracinema" that includes badfilm, in the interest of simplicity I have opted to treat these terms as synonymous.

5. As many critics note, Ana only says "Holy cow" once in the film while the silly catchphrase abounds in the novel. Although, according to Kadeen Griffiths, "Holy cow!" only appears 19 times in 514 pages, thus the frequency of the catchphrase is overemphasized (par. 2).



its inability to participate in these genres and styles, it is articulated just as a bad film. But what is worse than this trashy movie? “[T]he real sadism arrives at the very end of the film, and it is breathtaking in its cruelty: the promise of a sequel” (Goodykoontz par. 16).

So, what is *Fifty Shades of Grey* according to some of its reviewers? It is a film that women, in record numbers, will flock to the cinemas to see since it appeals to “the lowest common denominator of female fantasy” (Stewart par. 8; Daum par. 2; cf. Kang par. 2, 12). In short, *Fifty Shades* is a “woman’s film,” a film that features a woman as the protagonist while engaging the subjectivities of women in the audience. Altman observes that while the woman’s film era is associated with the 1940s, it was not until the interventions of scholars such as Molly Haskell and Mary Ann Doane in the 1970s and 1980s, respectively, that the genre was established. The genre has been a robust site of study for scholars in the 21st century as well.

Typically, the woman’s film places a woman’s desire for familial relationships, romantic/sexual relationships, or financial independence at its center (Greven 36-37). Scholars agree that the core thematic element of the genre is a transgressive female subjectivity. The lead character’s emancipatory project from traditional sites of women’s experience, such as the domestic and familial spheres as wife and mother, is “a failure to accept the repressive, subjectivity-denying structures of patriarchal femininity” (Pravadelli 102-107; Lang qtd. in Greven 39-40). In short, competing notions of femininity come into conflict. Of course, the patriarchy did not wane in the latter half of the 20th century, thus the thematic elements of the 1940s woman’s film have been carried forward into more recent productions. For example, Roberta Garrett argues that “chick flicks” from the early 1990s and into the 21st century are a continuation of the woman’s film (63-65). Films such as *Ghost* (Jerry Zucker, 1990) and *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (Sharon Maguire, 2001) update the genre by transplanting the site of conflict from the domestic and familial spheres to liberal feminism’s ongoing project of equality. “Postmodern chick flicks,” while still calling traditional notions of femininity into question, thus move the focal point to the protagonists’ educational and career aspirations (208). This is relevant for the *Fifty Shades* series as Christian, prone to exercising “control in all things,” must relinquish his desire for complete control over his sexual partners while Ana explores her career goals, friendships, and bodily autonomy: in the first film, at a literal bargaining table, the two lovers hash

out the terms of the BDSM contract; in the second film, Ana pursues her career as an editor while Christian pines for her to live with him and, later, asks her to become his wife; and in the final film, Christian and Ana tussle over the terms of married life and parenthood. These conflicts and tensions are oft-used themes for the “woman’s film.”

Although the *Fifty Shades* critics do not deploy the term “woman’s film,” they would categorize it as such for its generic qualities (Ana’s tussles with Christian over the form and shape of their romantic relationship), its address to women fans (as critics Sara Stewart and Daum declare), and as a shorthand to deride it. As scholars note, the term “woman’s film” is sometimes used to dismiss a film, so my reading of the genre from the critics’ perspective should not be controversial. As this genre details the everyday problems unique to women, it also renders the problems of the romantic and domestic spheres insignificant when compared to the public activities of men. Moreover, emotional responses are out of place in a patriarchal society, thus when the woman’s film makes us weep, Haskell suggests that we feel like we need be on our guard and suspicious of these filmic assaults (154). Providing the designation of woman’s film is also disparaging as it conjures “up the image of the pinched-virgin or little-old-lady-writer, spilling out her secret longings in wish fulfillment or glorious martyrdom, and transmitting these fantasies to the frustrated housewife.” To come to the point, the “‘woman’s film’ fills a masturbatory need, it is soft core emotional porn for the frustrated housewife” (154-155).

By positioning *Fifty Shades* in one of the low genres (Williams, “Film Bodies” 604-605), then, critics reinforce not only the divisions between high and popular culture, thereby bolstering their authority on matters of film culture, but also the division between films for men, which are exemplary of good taste, and films for women, here indicating poor taste. This is all the more troubling as “the male critics had a good old laugh at the film as they vied to write the most disparaging and entertaining review” (Giles par. 1). For *Fifty Shades* criticism, the woman’s film as a genre and its accompanying fans are to blame for the film’s inability to arouse, operate in the mode of art cinema, or be part of the badfilm experience. Critics’ disparaging remarks, therefore, have a dual aim: to elevate film criticism while denigrating lovers of genre films, particularly, woman’s films and their respective fans.

One of the tasks of film criticism is to evaluate (Frey, “Introduction” 2-4), yet critics sought to

evaluate this film with the assumption that the sexy novel should have been adapted into an eroticized art film or, at worst, at least a piece of schlock cinema. Preestablishing the film’s genre blocked the practice of film criticism such that critics failed to understand the film within the slowly growing body of Hollywood movies that explore sexuality in R-rated visual depictions. Better understanding the film’s genre interventions would allow these critics to better assess the problematic depictions of BDSM-romance. Although some critics were keen to observe that *Fifty Shades*’s narrative is a masterclass in sexual and psychological abuse, they nevertheless framed the film in terms of genres that are not there and refused to explicitly assess and critique it from a position within the woman’s film genre.<sup>6</sup> Had critics more closely considered the film within its historical situatedness, they would have argued that *Fifty Shades* should be the final nail in the coffin for Hollywood’s recourse to misogyny as a narrative device.

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## Top 10 Everything: WatchMojo and the Monetization of Fan Culture on *YouTube*

For much of the history of the internet, video remixes have existed at the edge of legality. The act of posting composites of copyrighted TV shows and movies online has often induced concerns over copyright infringement, resulting in these videos being removed from video hosting sites like *YouTube* (Hilderbrand 48). While remix culture was pitched as fundamentally at odds with copyright laws in the first decade of the 21st century (Lessig 85), the mid-2010s have seen media producers embrace user participation in the recirculation and repurposing of their media (Jenkins et al. 76). The liminal legality of fan-produced paratexts has also influenced the style of compilation videos, creating what Lucas Hilderbrand calls "bootleg aesthetics" (50).

Fan producers adopt bootleg aesthetics to protect their content from being removed from the *YouTube* platform. Currently, the site's efforts to curtail copyright infringement include content monitoring software Content ID. This software compares new uploads to copyrighted material that rightsholders have submitted to a database. As well, thousands of live reviewers assess material for copyright infringement and other infractions of *YouTube*'s terms of service (Wakabayashi). Yet in the past, superstitions about how *YouTube* policed their images through mysterious algorithms and crawling bots flagging videos for removal led to emerging visual and aural tactics (Atwood). Pirate users disguise media through changing pitch, adding music or distorting images with blurring, iris-ing, and tinting (Jackie-Ross Lavender; John Kroll). Fans making re-edits have adopted these tactics and developed other strategies to centralize the visibility of their fair use, ensuring their commentary was integral to the video's composition rather than relying on the video description field on each *YouTube* page. Strategies like framing the user alongside the original video they are commenting on in 'reaction-

style' videos, inserting intertitles or introductory segments, or quick cuts are elements of the genre of compilation video that make visible the claims for commentary. For these compilations, bootleg is both an aesthetic and a technical affordance.

Remixes and bootleg aesthetics are not exclusively a fan or even a cinephile practice, nor are they synonymous with low-production values. Video artists such as Candice Breitz have introduced remix and bootleg aesthetics to the art gallery with pieces such as *Her* (1978-2008) which featured a compilation of actor Meryl Streep's performances. Video essayists have built the special features commentary into a stand-alone genre, attracting interest from film festivals and cultural institutions (Lavik). Art galleries and film festivals are highbrow exhibition spaces, but, as a host for user-generated videos with little barriers to entry, *YouTube* exists outside these boundaries of good taste. Remix videos are part of a gift economy, where fans trade labour within a brand community for recognition from official and unofficial gatekeepers of the fandom (Jenkins et al. 62). Yet, not all remix videos are gifts. On *YouTube*, online video compilation makers such as ScreenRant (2014-), Looper (2015-), and Canada's WatchMojo (2007-) appropriate the bootleg aesthetics of fan viewing, yet comply with the interests of copyright holders, transforming a previously oppositional relationship into one of cooperation. WatchMojo's ubiquitous Top 10 videos have contributed to the consolidation of fan practices as dominant ways of viewing. Video content creators like WatchMojo have helped democratize the creative space of *YouTube*. However, by masking the interests of rightsholders as opportunities for cinephiles to share in fan viewing practices, WatchMojo ultimately undermines fan participation in a reciprocal gift economy and returns control of fan practices to media corporations who assert ownership of pop culture.

### Taste and Remix: fanvids, video essays, and compilation videos

Film clips serve a similar function to what Gérard Genette in his work on the paratext calls the note. For Genette, a paratext is media that guides a reader's entry into the text (2). Titles, headings, and prefaces are all paratexts that frame our access and understanding of the text. In particular, the note is a paratext that is situated within the text, navigating the reader away from and then back to a specific part of the document. As Genette writes, "the original note is a local detour or a momentary fork in the text" (327).

through a text. By leading viewers on guided tours of moving images, video remixes create arguments and observations. These commentaries take many forms, from comparative analyses of cinematography made by established filmmakers to highlight reels from DVDs rereleased by rightsholders (Rappaport; "Tarzan"). Fans make their own utilitarian videos such as "Top 20 Guest Stars on Friends" to illustrate points about favourite actors, favourite films or sequences (Ono Ramírez). Channels such as ScreenRant and Looper produce compilations of film clips that rank sequences based on categories like "Every Quentin Tarantino Film Ranked Worst to First" or "10 Movie

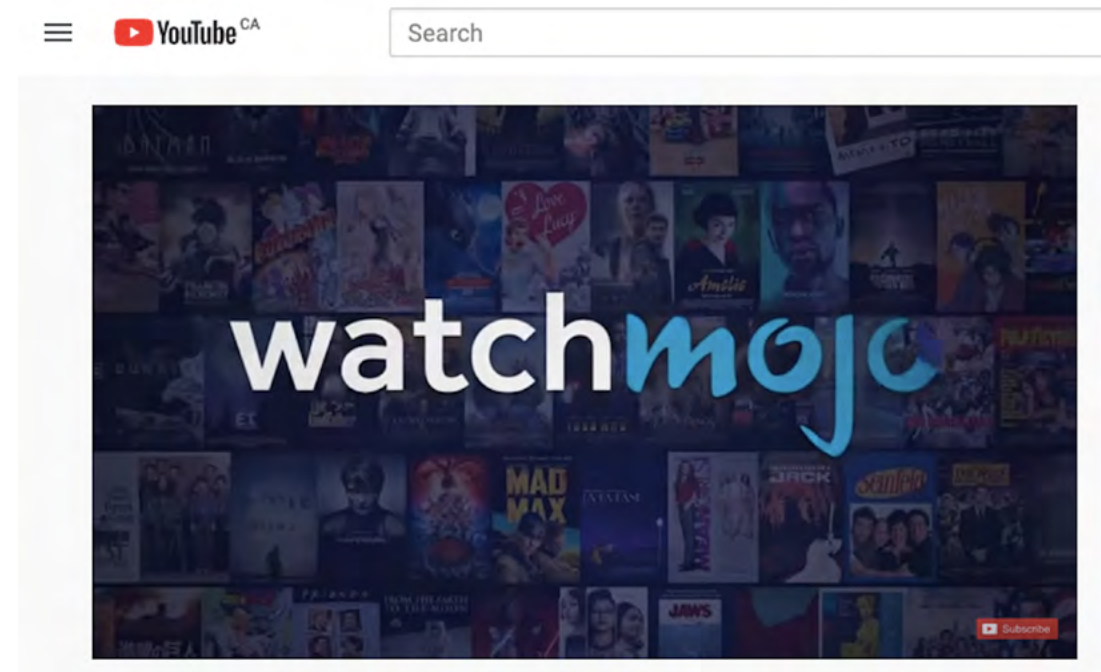


Figure 1. WatchMojo is a Montreal-based video compilation creator whose top ten videos are hosted on *YouTube*.

In a text, the note provides clarification, elaboration, or argument, from critics or the author, asking the reader to understand the text in light of a new layer of information. While it may seem intrinsically tied to the written form, the note can be compared to the isolated film clip, or film moment (Brown 78). Like the location-specific note, a film clip navigates the viewer to one particular point in the film text, casting aside the film's totality for the exemplary moment. The film clip emphasizes a particular edit, composition, or gesture, drawing attention to the film moment that is distinct from yet connected to the original. Edited together, film clips both point to specific locations in the film, and reflect intertextually on each other.

Detours and forks through other film clips are the substance of video remixes, as images are manipulated and juxtaposed to diverge from the familiar pathway

Mistakes that Slipped Through Editing." *YouTube* presents professional and amateur videos side by side, mingling together videos that use authorized and pirated forms of copyrighted media on their homepage and each user's recommendations sidebar. Distinguishing between video essays and compilation videos is a question of taste. Having grown out of fanvids and cinephile culture, both remix subgenres share the bootleg aesthetics shaped by earlier questions of access, copyright, and the technical limitations of online video sharing. The video essay has graduated from the DVD special feature to become a high-brow product with considerable Bourdieuan cultural capital (Bourdieu 2). For scholars like Andrew McWhirter, the video essay is esteemed as an important evolution in direct, visual, and complex film criticism, taking over the spirit



of intense textual engagement that enraptured film critics in the 20th century (McWhirter 369). On the other hand, compilation videos by producers like WatchMojo are unabashedly for the mainstream masses, and thus perceived as low culture; the content creator identifies their videos as reaching out to a millennial male audience that cultivates pop culture knowledge as a pastime ("WatchMojo Advertise"). Video essays are heralded as art, remix videos are part of Lessig's counterculture, but compilation videos are advertised as mass market. Yet, these videos are remarkably similar in content and their engagement with audiences through fan viewing practices. At stake is whether the audience is small, niche, and marginal, or mass, general, and dominant.

Producing a steady stream of content that viewers flock to, WatchMojo has professionalized user-generated content and fan tactics into a cohesive, corporate identity. With over 22.2 million subscribers in 2020, making it one of the highest-subscribed channels on *YouTube*, WatchMojo bills itself as "an original video pioneer of the long form top ten format" ("About WM advertise"). The channel posts five new videos each day. Over 10,000 videos, with titles such as "Top 10 Most Paused Movie Scenes" and "Top 10 Crazy Rules WWE Stars Are Forced to Follow" are available to view ("Advertise @ WatchMojo"). One expression of fan tactics is the cult mode of viewing, which seeks out paratexts that create, as Hills suggests, "endlessly deferred narrative" within the universe fans are attached to (142). For Hills, fans are essentially marginal, positioning themselves, their objects of interest, and their intense patterns of endless watching against dominant culture (22). However, WatchMojo's success demonstrates that a fan mode of viewing that is oriented towards the detouring paratext and intense bouts of viewing is no longer a marginal experience, but a dominant and growing pattern of reception.

Video essays are sometimes called compilation videos, but although both genres are part of remix culture, WatchMojo's body of work would never be confused with the video essay. However, video essays, it can be argued owe their recent circulation to relationships forged by content producers like WatchMojo with rightsholders. The creator known as Roman Holiday, named by *Sight & Sound* as a top video essayist in 2017, chose hosting platform *Vimeo* as the home for "Title Drops," a 7-minute collection of clips from 150 films (Lee and Verdeure). This video, identified as a compilation video by *Slate*, is a stripped-down composition, where rapid-fire clips cut together actors speaking the title of each film and a single,

introductory title card gives context for the significance of the remix (Berman). As a paratext, the video creates a detour through the film canon, depending on a viewer's familiarity with children's films and Hollywood classics alike. If fans demonstrate mastery through complete knowledge of their fan object, "Title Drops" invites fans to show off this knowledge as it races through eighty years of film history (Hills 74). In fact, WatchMojo's channel features a similar 2015 video called "Top 10 Movie Title Name Drops." While WatchMojo's careful relationship with rightsholders may no longer be a prerequisite for the continued online presence of their videos, their legitimization and assimilation of fan aesthetics has helped ensure that high-profile compilations like "Title Drops," can appear on *YouTube* (*Slate*, "Title Bout").

Amid this permissiveness toward compilations of



Figure 2. WatchMojo's compilation video about films with title name drops gives credit to each film's distributor.

copyright images like video essays, *YouTube* is taking steps to limit the viability of user-generated media on its platform. New rules that restrict monetization of even highly-viewed videos for accounts without demonstrated regular viewers mean that individual producers are having what little money they receive for their participation in pop culture stripped from them, pushing them to rely on the goodwill of the gift economy ("*YouTube*"). WatchMojo has cautiously obeyed copyright, ensuring their continued existence on *YouTube*'s unreliable archive in a way that the fan video producers who inspired their success cannot.

#### WatchMojo and Fan Viewing

WatchMojo emerged in 2006 as a standalone video content producer with their own site, WatchMojo.com,

but in 2007 transitioned to using *YouTube* as a host. The earliest WatchMojo videos were eclectic, with content such as local Montreal sporting and fashion events, medical myths, travel advice, original skits, and, of course, "top ten" countdown compilations. Videos from a semi-professional group of contractors featured a patchwork of low production values, hesitant hosts, and a constant rotation of various series and sets. Due to the relatively short length of videos restricted by *YouTube*'s upload size, these videos were portioned into clips of two minutes or less, with not-yet-standardized best-of lists and Top 10s presented as a series of single entries. Although most videos were how-to guides for subjects as diverse as public speaking and diamond buying, the first series uploaded in April 2007 was a proto-Top 10, "Wonders of the Modern World" ("Guide to Diamonds"; "Tips for Public Speaking") Although not explicitly called a Top 10, the divided, sequential format of the top ten translated well to the hosting limitations of *YouTube*.

Even in their early days, WatchMojo videos demonstrated careful respect for *YouTube*'s terms of agreement and copyright policies. Top 10 videos avoided copyrighted material. Movie reviews showed talking heads in a white or black studio setting, punctuated with press stills rather than clips ("Review of JARHEAD"). Emphasizing original content rather than appropriated clips, WatchMojo was attentive to the boundaries of copyright as part of their business model. At the time, CEO Ashkan Karbasfrooshan saw the future of WatchMojo as a video library with the potential to license products to other media companies (Kelly). To build a video library to which they unquestionably owned the rights, the content producer needed to walk the line between bootleg aesthetics and respect for rightsholders.

As they walk that line, WatchMojo videos give the impression of sharing credit between rightsholders and fan contributors. In 2011, WatchMojo established their current Top 10 model: a voiceover counts down a top ten in a given theme within a single video of 6 to 15 minutes in length, featuring clips from each film narrated by disembodied voiceovers. By 2013, each clip credited the distributor of the images ("Top 10 Superhero Movies (2012)"; "Top 10 Epic Movie Cameos"). In addition, descriptions on *YouTube*—as in "Top 10 Epic Movie Cameos"—can include shout-outs to Watchmojo.com users who submitted themes that inspired the final video. Registered on WatchMojo.com, users submit their Top 10 themes to be voted on by other members on the website. However, the vague criteria for Top 10s hides the limiting factor of

**Rather than encouraging any particular fandom, the professional content creator served up a format that appropriated fan behaviour to create a service for interchangeable brands.**

copyright that determines which user-submitted lists are ultimately made into WatchMojo videos. Just as licensing permissions made the creators of fanvids and recuts wary of litigious rightsholders, copyright dictates WatchMojo's "Top 10" content.

In a 2016 FAQ webpage for potential licensees for countdown videos, WatchMojo clearly state that they control "global rights for all platforms" and that they "own[ed] the content on the site" ("Corporate Licensing"). In the 2010s, WatchMojo focused on creating branded content for media companies ("WatchMojo Advertise"). Both video content and the contexts in which Top 10s are shown are tailored to create encounters between the viewer and client brands ("Advertise @ WatchMojo"). As well as "tagging" brands in video descriptions, pre-roll, and, the content creator produces "targeted and relevant video content" that includes the brand's products in related video Top 10s ("Advertise @ Watchmojo"). In 2018 Paramount and Nintendo were listed as some of the "Brands We Work With" by WatchMojo, with corollaries in videos like "Top 10 Nintendo Switch Games that Look Promising" ("WatchMojo Advertise"). Professionalizing bootleg aesthetics, WatchMojo Top 10s distinguish themselves from user-generated content with slick graphics and narration by voice actors. The aesthetics remain, but the liminal legality that enforced bootleg tactics have disappeared: as part of their professionalization, WatchMojo has established brand partnerships and licensing permissions that formalize their access to the films and media products they profile.

On *YouTube*, WatchMojo and user-generated content are coterminous, linked to each other to create a seamless cult experience of intense and detail-oriented watching. The click-through patterns of viewing made possible by *YouTube* have transformed the intensity of fan viewing practices like the film marathon into the mainstream practice



of idle binge watching; indeed, the recommendations function is what drives prolonged viewing rather than direct searches (Solsman). WatchMojo attributes its success to the fact that fan practices are mainstream, proposing to advertisers that capturing the clicks of the fan viewer means capturing a massive share of *YouTube*'s audience. In 2018 advertising materials, WatchMojo explicitly identified their viewer as a fan user: the "super fan audience built under the radar" ("WatchMojo Advertise"). Audiences watching fan-produced content on *YouTube* could be diverted with a single click to licensed content whose commercial interests were flying under the radar. Initially, WatchMojo pitched potential licensees on capturing this click-through binge-viewer, creating residual value for existing media content (Karbafrrooshan). In this model, sheer quantity of media and breadth of subject matter cast a wide net for the viewer clicking "randomly" through *YouTube* (Karbafrrooshan). Yet, by 2011, WatchMojo had begun to identify the kind of "organic viewing time" the *YouTube* platform encouraged with fan behaviour, renewing their focus on a trivia-invested viewer and the Top 10s ("WatchMojo Advertise"). The changing description of their audience within WatchMojo's marketing materials suggests that they had identified the supposed randomness of viewing patterns on *YouTube* as, in fact, the spread of fan-oriented viewing practices. Rather than encouraging any particular fandom, the professional content creator served up a format that appropriated fan behaviour to create a service for interchangeable brands.

In compilation videos, opportunities for advertising are packaged for the audience as criticism, clarification, and fan viewing. While fans are usually focused around a particular object—whether a franchise, character or actor—WatchMojo and other similar content creators engage with multiple fan objects in an attempt to interest as many groups as possible. They enlist fan labour through their website to generate Top 10s, seeking legitimacy through fan recommendations and, more recently, even feature member voiceovers for their videos (WatchMojo, "Top 10 Crazy Rules..."). For video content creators and the brands they partner with, fandom represents a dominant way of interacting with media that is paratextual and transmedial. In the past few years, media rightsholders have embraced fans and fan labour instead of copyright enforcement (Jenkins et al. 62). As Jenkins et al. cautioned, this welcoming of fan labour has created an uneven gift economy, where fans receive little reward either creatively or

financially for their dedication. Fanvids initially tested the limits of copyright enforcement in the gift economy, and were often struck down from *YouTube* as violations of copyright. Compilation creators like WatchMojo created the Top 10 market only after they had established there was an audience for remix videos, following the emergence of intense fan viewing practices like binge-watching as an identifiable pattern on *YouTube*, and as rightsholders began to see the value of spreading their brand across media (Jenkins et al. 24). Convincing rightsholders of the profitability of the residual redistribution of their media for fans, WatchMojo has benefitted from and shaped the relaxation of the enforcement of copyright on appropriated images.

As paratexts, WatchMojo videos sit alongside a wider body of remix videos that adopt bootleg aesthetics and reflect fan labour given as part of a gift economy. Yet, Watchmojo's videos are far more visible than fanvids or video essays because of their legitimate relationship to rightsholders. While video essayists claim their work falls within exceptions for commentary and fair use, rightsholders continue to assert ownership of appropriated images. The ability of fan producers to distribute their remix videos remains subject to goodwill and good luck. Watchmojo, however, has safeguarded their library through reciprocal relationships with rightsholders. Like many fan practices, bootleg aesthetics have become mainstream, professionalized by content producers like WatchMojo who have taken them out of a gift economy and transformed them into a remix genre that reflects dominant modes of viewing.

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## 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.

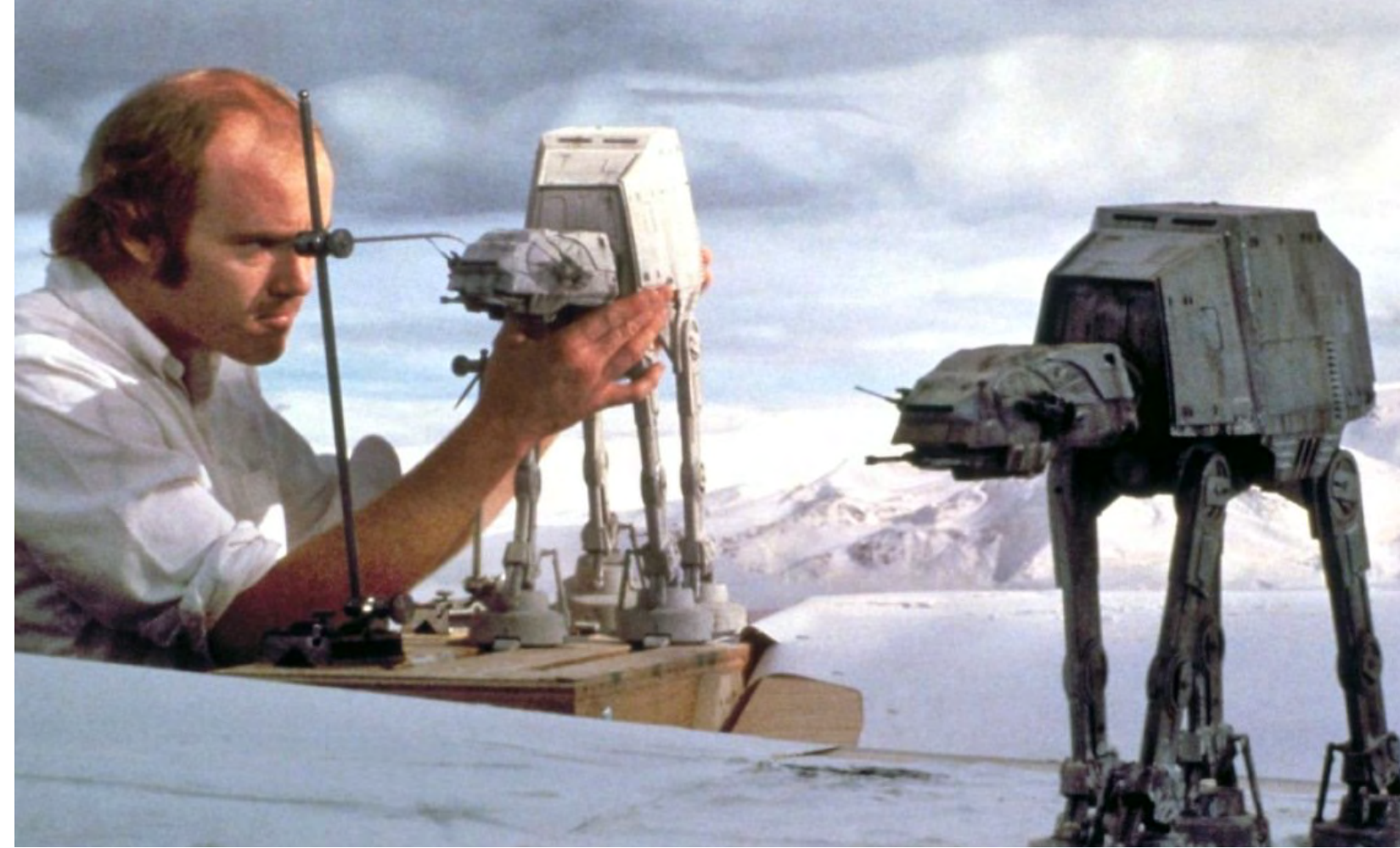
To examine how cinematic special features are contributing to an evaluation of a specific form of corporate auteur, the “digital auteur”, this article engages with the paratextual materials accompanying the home releases of George Lucas's *Star Wars* prequels, *The Phantom Menace* (1999), *Attack of 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 constructs 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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### **Instead of centering on the individual or even corporate identity involved in film production, the rhetoric emphasizes the means of production themselves.**

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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,



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

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 a 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

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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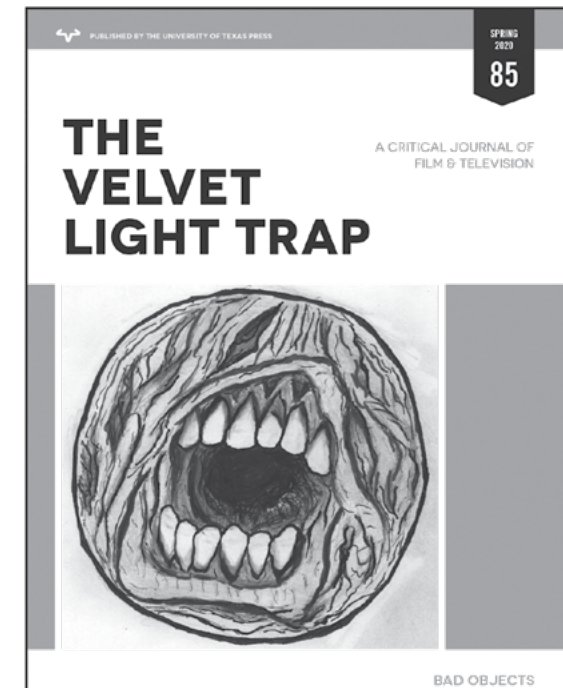
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## Beyond the Space Jockey: *YouTube*, Morphogenetic Paratexts and the Alien Universe

The *Alien* cinematic franchise has been subject to much critical scrutiny within the academy. From the moment the first installment burst onto our movie screens in 1979, scholars have attempted to unpack and decode the latent and manifest sociocultural meanings embedded within this seminal series of cinematic horror. Studies have built a rich tapestry of understanding, exploring the franchise via lenses such as the monstrous mother (Creed; Kember; Newton); abjection (Kristeva); dreadful architectures (Benson-Allott); infertility (Grech et al.); gender inversions, male-birthing and the feminization of the hero (Greenberg; Kavanagh; Luckhurst); a-sexuality (Dervin); post-humanism and sexual violence (Hurley); as well as human, technological and environmental hybridity (Littau).

It is the latter of these conceptualizations, Karin Littau's discussion of morphogenesis, which is of most interest to this paper. For Littau, the morphogenesis of the titular alien's reproductive cycle is mirrored by the cycle of canonic hybridization within the cinematic franchise. Each new installment can be seen to hybridize with elements of the preceding installments (as well as the *Predator* franchise) and explore new genre modes, allowing the series to simultaneously inhabit a number of distinct filmic niches (Littau 19-32). For example, where Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) is a slow paced exploration of confined survival horror, James Cameron's *Aliens* (1987) is a fast paced action movie, leaving David Fincher's *Alien 3* (1992) and Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Alien Resurrection* (1997) to inhabit separate cult spaces, before Paul W. S. Anderson's *Alien vs. Predator* (2004) and the Brothers Strause' *Aliens vs. Predator: Requiem* (2007) moved the franchise into the realm of the monster mash-up, paving the way for Ridley Scott to return and tie up (or perhaps not) the loose ends via his prequel installments *Prometheus*

(2012) and *Alien: Covenant* (2017).

This hybridization is not, however, limited to the motion pictures alone. Littau extends this process to the ancillary products and narratives of the franchise, such as comic books, novelizations and games (22). Considering this is a form of cross-media storytelling, which "is not the same thing as adaptation, but [...] involves adaptation at each juncture 'as' or 'where' a serial fragment is tied into the 'whole'" (Littau 32), Littau situates the *Alien* concept as cross-medially realizable, where the *Alien* concept crosses itself with the host-medium rather than performing a separation, therein resisting the notion of definitive or single authorship. Indeed, it is these processes of cross-media storytelling and shared ownership, along with the advent and expansion of the *YouTube* platform, which invite the return to, and further exploration of, the morphogenetic properties of the *Alien* concept, via the lens of the consumer created paratext.

In the lead up to the cinematic release of *Alien: Covenant* in 2017, there was a proliferation of *Alien* related 'lore' and 'explained' videos across the *YouTube* platform. These fan generated videos, produced independently from 20th Century Fox, Brandywine Productions or Scott Free Productions, explained, recounted and speculated upon the backstories and potential future narratives of the *Alien* franchise. *YouTube* channels such as, *Mr H Reviews*, *AcidGlow*, *HN*



*Entertainment* and *Alien Theory*<sup>1</sup> serve as key examples of how such ancillary texts can function as consumer generated cross-media artefacts, contributing to the development of an *Alien* 'mythos' that configures, and is configured by, consumer experiences and audience expectations.

The creators behind such channels use the *YouTube* platform to enable a more immersive mode of consumption for those fans of the *Alien* franchise who, like them, are motivated to search for information that exists beyond the canon texts. Through the production of 'lore' or 'explained' videos, the *Alien* related artefacts produced by the channels are specifically designed to surround (Consalvo 177; Genette 1-5; Genette and Maclean 261), and negotiate expectations about (Bilder and Rathemacher 50), the wider *Alien* concept.

In this fashion, these videos clearly function as paratexts, connecting additional knowledge and interpretations to the *Alien* concept, thereby framing and configuring consumer experience (Consalvo 177; Malone 19). The crucial difference here, in relation to conventional cinematic paratexts such as movie posters and trailers, is that this knowledge is processed and curated by fans, for fans, out of the purview of 20th Century Fox and its official licensees. For the consumers of such *YouTube* videos, therefore, these unauthorized paratexts become a part of the apparatus through which the wider *Alien* concept proposes itself (Genette and Maclean 261).

This places the *Alien* related outputs of channels

1. As of December 15th 2019, The HN Entertainment *YouTube* channel has approx. 411,000 subscribers with 236,973,911 total views; the MR H Reviews *YouTube* channel has approx. 226,000 subscribers with 84,270,690 total views; the Acid Glow *YouTube* channel has approx. 202,000 subscribers with 106,174,667 total views; and the Alien Theory *YouTube* channel has approx. 165,000 subscribers with 33,659,273 total view.

such as, *Mr H Reviews*, *AcidGlow*, *HN Entertainment* and *Alien Theory* in a similar paratextual hierarchy (Brookey and Gray 102) as the official paratextual output, where they share the same spatiality in relation to the location of the central *Alien* concept (Genette 4-5). As such, both forms of paratext, official and unofficial, operate outside (Brookey and Gray 102) the central core of the *Alien* concept, forming thresholds (Klecker 402) that negotiate entrance to (Draper 131), and influence consumer reception of (Klecker 402), that central concept. It is important to note, however, that in doing so, these unofficial 'lore' and 'explained' videos are not forms of fan fiction or 'fanon' texts (Jenkins) in the traditional sense, but rather, evidence based paratexts, compiling and (re-) presenting existing information drawn from the narrative complexity of the central *Alien* concept.

This mode of paratextual creation draws, therefore, upon a forensic mode of fandom that invites viewers to dig deep beneath the surface of the canon texts, 'drilling' down through the complexity of the *Alien* cinematic universe to understand, unpack and probe the mechanisms of the story and its telling (Mittell "Lost in a Great Story"). In this way, the *Alien* related outputs of channels such as, *Mr H Reviews*, *AcidGlow*, *HN Entertainment* and *Alien Theory* can be conceptualized as fan forensics, positing "interpretations about the story world and its potential outcomes [...] to theorize possible explanations, to play paratextual games, and to draw connections among the broad range of [...] transmedia extensions, and external cultural references" (Mittell "Forensic Fandom"), thereby enriching the intellectual property of the *Alien* cinematic universe, rather than specifically creating new works of fan fiction that modify or advance the *Alien* concept.

For Mittell, such modes of paratextual fan creation and curation "aggregates engagement by directing it inward toward the core" (Mittell "Forensic



Fandom") of the canonic texts themselves, facilitating a form of collective engagement for a smaller, but more dedicated, audience of fans. This would appear to “run counter to many of the practices and examples of spreadable media”, with “drillable media typically engag[ing] far fewer people, but occupying more of their time and energies” (Mittell "Forensic Fandom"). In this way, Mittell proposes that spreadable and drillable texts occupy opposing vectors of cultural engagement, where spreadable media encourages horizontal ripples that accumulate eyeballs, whereas drillable media encourages vertical descent into a text's complexities. However, as the very nature of the *YouTube* platform, and its process of monetization, depends upon and encourages creators and consumers to spread content, the *Alien* related ‘lore’ and ‘explored’ videos can be seen to operate on both



Figure 1



Figure 2

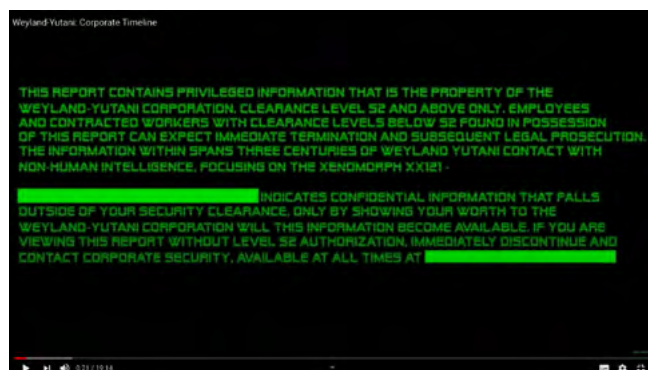


Figure 3

vectors simultaneously (a position not precluded by Mittell).

Much like Littau's notion of the canonical hybridization within the *Alien* cinematic franchise mirroring the titular alien's reproductive cycle (25), such simultaneous ‘spreading’ and ‘drilling’ can also be seen as analogous to the parasitical nature of the *Alien* as an invasive species. Starting the procreative cycle with a clutch of Eggs laid by an *Alien Queen*, the *Alien* lifeform ‘spreads’ to hosts through physical contact, where, upon close proximity to a potential host, the Egg releases a larval *Facehugger*, which uses a proboscis to ‘drill’ down into the esophagus of the host and implant an embryo, which, after a short gestation period, ‘drills’ out through the host body to emerge as a *chestbuster* that quickly grows into a mature *Alien*, which in turn, occupies itself with starting the cycle anew.

As such, it is possible to view the *Alien* related output of channels such as, *Mr H Reviews*, *AcidGlow*, *HN Entertainment* and *Alien Theory* as a furthering of the morphogenesis of the *Alien* concept. In this morphogenesis, the processes of multiple authorship, and the unclear and contested creative progenitors of the *Alien* cinematic universe (Littau 21-22), have led to the evolution of a loose, intentionally ephemeral and imprecise conceptualization of the *Alien* franchise. Conceptualized in this way, the canonical entries function as drillable texts that can be crossed with the spreadable *YouTube* host-medium. This crossing opens up paratextual pathways for curious fans, who seek clarity and understanding beyond the ambiguity of the canon texts, to enter into discussion outside the sphere of the canon, by consuming, and thereby funding, the videos that appeal to them most. Indeed, many of the aforementioned channels offer Patreon as an optional content funding platform, further bringing the *YouTube* audience and creators together in the *development* and direction of the fan forensic videos produced. In this way such ‘lore’ and ‘explained’ videos hybridize with the canonic texts and their audiences enabling the *Alien* concept to inhabit another simultaneous niche, that of a wider fan-curated *Alien* mythos that lies beyond the sole authorship of the official licensees or *YouTube* creators.

Of the channels mentioned above, the output of the *Alien Theory YouTube* channel serves, perhaps, as the most marked example of this paratextual and authorial morphogenesis. With a sixty-nine member Patreon fan community, known as the Hive,

contributing \$359 US dollars per month<sup>2</sup> beyond any Google AdSense revenue generated by channel views,<sup>3</sup> the *Alien Theory* channel creates video content that explains the lore of the *Alien* cinematic universe. In doing so, the channel draws heavily on the aesthetics of Scott's *Alien* and Cameron's *Aliens* to form simulacra that cross the aesthetics of the *Alien* cinematic franchise with the *YouTube* medium to construct a look and soundscape that is instantly recognizable to the consumers of the wider *Alien* concept. Indeed, such are the aesthetics of the feature video on the *Alien Theory* channel homepage, *Weyland-Yutani: Corporate Timeline*,<sup>4</sup> that at first glance, the content seems almost indistinguishable from the officially licensed outputs.

Adopting the green and black low resolution color palette utilized by the computer and video monitors of the original movie, the video opens with the distinctive interference patterns and associated static sound effects familiar to the consumers of the first two cinematic installments (figure 1). This is followed by the mimesis of a *Wayland Yutani Corporation* operating system, utilizing the official form of the *Wayland Yutani* corporate logo from the cinematic franchise (figure 2), before transitioning to a faux official privileged information disclaimer (figure 3).

This cooption of the cinematic aesthetic at the outset of the video serves to immerse the viewer in the *Alien* concept via familiarity and negotiate viewer expectations about the forthcoming content. These initial textual elements hybridized from the cinematic franchise become, therefore, peritexts, or paratexts situated in the space of a text (Genette and Maclean 263-264). This forms a cyclical paratextual relationship, where the *Weyland-Yutani: Corporate Timeline* video is a paratext of the wider *Alien* concept, and the textual elements borrowed from the cinematic franchise are peritexts contained within that paratext, “emphasizing generic elements which promote certain reading strategies and shape (...) viewers’ textual understandings” (Bernabo 169).

After this set up, the narrative of the video continues to draw upon, select and reorder, specific textual information from across the main canonical texts (figures 4-6), utilizing these narrative fragments, along with connective narration and additional stock

2. Patreon data correct as of December 15th 2019.
3. Google AdSense data is proprietary and as such cannot be quantified in this paper.
4. As of December 15th 2019, The *Weyland-Yutani: Corporate Timeline* video on the *Alien Theory YouTube* channel has 486,911 total views.

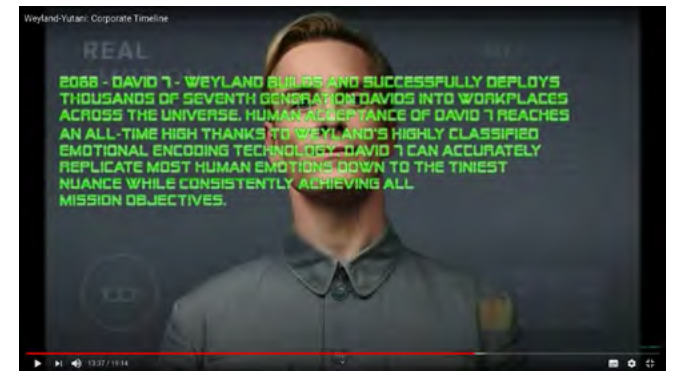


Figure 4



Figure 5

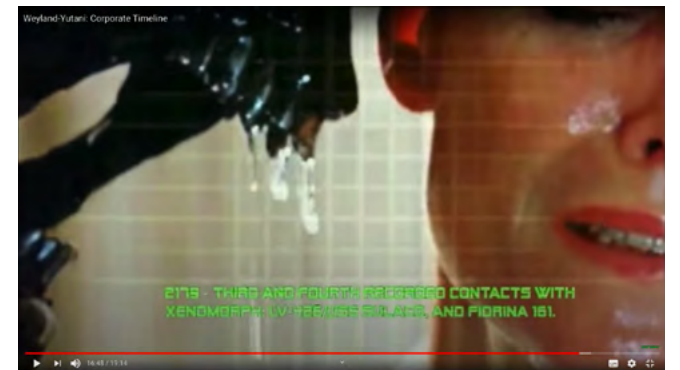


Figure 6

footage, to curate an accessible understanding of the *Wayland Yutani Corporation* for the viewer. In doing so, the video constructs a unified concept (Mahlknecht 418) located in one confined space, rather than diffusely spread across the wider *Alien* concept, becoming the “would-be urban planner[...] and land developer[...] of the textual world (...) trying to direct us one way or another, to get us through a text in a particular way” (Brookey and Gray 107). Conceptualized as such, the video is a notable example of Littau's notion of cross-media storytelling, where adaptation of the canonical texts occurs “at each juncture ‘as’ or ‘where’ a serial fragment is tied into the ‘whole’” (Littau 32) mythos of the *Wayland Yutani Corporation*.

This curatorial process can be seen, therefore, as an attempt to focus the viewer's attention on the core *Wayland Yutani* narrative spine, which, beyond



the titular alien, is the most consistent organizing principle of the cinematic franchise. Here, the content of the *Alien Theory* channel drills down into the mythology of the canonical texts, selecting and reorganizing textual fragments to construct a paratextual archive that functions as a threshold (Klecker 402) negotiating entrance to (Draper 131), and influencing the consumption of (Klecker 402), this central element of the wider cinematic franchise. In this way, the *Alien Theory* channel acts as the fan archivist, forensically extracting pertinent information from across the cinematic universe to “create magnets for engagement, drawing viewers into story worlds and urging them to drill down to discover more” (Mittell “Forensic Fandom”).

Inspired by Littau’s articulation of how the morphogenetic nature of the *Alien* concept facilitated the intra-canonical hybridisation of the core texts of the cinematic universe, this paper demonstrates how those same morphogenetic properties have, via content creators such as *Mr H Reviews*, *AcidGlow*, *HN Entertainment and Alien Theory*, further hybridised with the properties of the *YouTube* platform to develop a nexus of unofficial paratexts. By coopting the aesthetics of the *Alien* cinematic franchise, these ‘lore’ and ‘explained’ videos construct paratextual and peritextual materials that promote, via familiarity, particular reading strategies for their audience. However, rather than functioning as conventional fan fictions that expand the *Alien* concept with ‘new’ content; such videos created by fans, for fans, function as a form of forensic fandom, drawing upon the cross-medially realizable properties of the wider *Alien* concept to expand the notion of ownership.

Indeed, while ‘lore’ and ‘explained’ *YouTube* videos exist for other cinematic franchises, it is the ephemeral and imprecise elements of the wider *Alien* concept, brought about by the shifting and inconsistent authorship of the canonical texts, along with the associated increase in narrative complexity of the cinematic franchise, that makes the texts of the *Alien* universe particularly drillable. By their very nature, these unofficial paratexts are designed, therefore, to surround (Consalvo 177; Genette 1-5; Genette and Maclean 261), and negotiate expectations about (Bilder and Rathemacher 50), the *Alien* concept. By drilling deep down into the body of the canonical texts, content creators such as *Mr H Reviews*, *AcidGlow*, *HN Entertainment and Alien Theory* extract narrative embryos, which, after a period of gestation where they hybridize with the *YouTube* host medium, erupt from the body of the canon as morphogenetic paratexts, to

spread a fan curated mythos that both configures, and is configured by, consumer experiences and audience expectations.

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Keith M. Johnston

Jesse Balzer

Erin Pearson

# Talking Trailers: Promotional Materials, and the Value of the Paratextual Turn

In the last decade, the term ‘paratext’ has become increasingly popular and dominant in studies of promotional materials, applied to study a range of different media forms. Genette’s term appears in *Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers* (Kernan 2004), before being developed in *Show Sold Separately* (Gray 2010) and a special issue of *Critical Studies in Media Communication* (Brookey and Gray 2017). The latter issue states that ‘we know that paratexts walk amongst us’ and that paratextual analysis has advanced ‘a wide and impressive range of academic debates’ (ibid, 101), but there has been little discussion about the use value of such a term for the broader work that exists around the production and reception of promotional materials (see, for example, Hesford and Johnston 2015; Johnston 2019). What follows is a discussion between three scholars whose work spans different aspects of promotional materials, to think through the advantages and limitations of the paratextual turn and the future of this field.

**Keith M Johnston:** The term ‘paratext’ has clearly gained academic purchase in the last decade – although it has little crossover into wider cultural debates – but what value do you think that term has in studies of trailers or promotional materials more generally?

**Erin Pearson:** On the one hand I think it’s important to say that it’s one of the forefront theories that privileges these media forms. Gray’s work

certainly shifted my thinking away from trailers and posters being the ‘wrapping’ or the ‘cultural trash’ that surrounded film texts, towards thinking about the meaning-making processes that surround and converge with them. But then as I began my own work, I found it a little bit constraining just to think of these texts as paratexts. If you’re going to analyze the trailer specifically as your primary object and you’re trying to think through the history, the practices, the contexts – whether that’s advertising, marketing history, industry – paratextual theory doesn’t really encapsulate that and it certainly doesn’t lead to the best analysis. You have to go to other places for that.

**Jesse Balzer:** There’s something limiting about the term. It might make sense when you’re studying reception and want to think about how audiences engage with media, but you also lose quite a bit, particularly if you’re thinking beyond reception and textual hierarchy to, say, labor and industry. Gray’s book sees the paratext as one of many entry points to a larger nexus, but one of the things I keep trying to think about is all the times that you turn down a paratext, when you watch the trailer for the movie and then decide not to watch it. This is still a very meaningful encounter with that text – and one that I think stands on its own, where the concept of paratext doesn’t really open up quite as much in terms of understanding.

**Keith:** Watching the trailer – the act of viewing the trailer as a cultural object – is interesting in itself, without it needing to be a paratext for something else. I think the trailer for the film you never go and see, the trailer for the film that is no longer available to view in any archive, those are experiences that paratext analysis seems to overlook. I know that Jonathan [Gray] has revised this idea in later work, but despite that, I think the paratextual approach inevitably sets up a hierarchical relationship between promotional elements and the film, television show, video game, or whatever.

**Erin:** My question is: Is it entirely possible that a trailer, for instance, can be a paratext as well as being a primary object? It just depends on the lens that you’re looking through. So, if you’re interested in meaning making, or representation, and your focus is an original film object then perhaps paratext is the term for you. But it can also be something greater than that, not just an add on or doorway to another text.

**Keith:** And for researchers like ourselves who look to study things in different ways – we’re not just interested in what does this trailer or this poster tell us about this film, we’re interested in the creative labor behind it, the historical context, or the different ways in which you can view and understand what these materials do. What is interesting to me, I guess, is why this term gained purchase over, say, ‘epiphenomena’ (Heath 1976), or ‘consumable identity’ (Klinger 1989)?

**Jesse:** I think it’s partially because the term fits in with a more traditional trajectory in film studies and comparative literature. It fits in very well with the kind of textual focus of that field in its most conservative or old-school traditions.

**Erin:** Completely. The cynic in me thinks that the literature background lends it a certain weight, whereas ‘consumable identity’ does point towards those aspects of the film industry that perhaps traditional film studies hasn’t always engaged with so much – notably, ideas around selling. My second feeling is that it is a really handy term, an umbrella term to encapsulate all of those media forms that we haven’t been able to otherwise quite fit within film studies, so it seems quite convenient in that aspect. And it’s not actually until you start to work with it a bit and find its limitations that you realize it’s perhaps not the best term.

**Keith:** Given the term has achieved this status, how do you adopt, use or challenge that term in your own work? I feel like I’ve been addressing it in different ways across different articles over the last few years – sometimes deliberately sidestepping it because it doesn’t help me engage with the history (Johnston 2018; Johnston 2019), sometimes addressing it more directly and taking issue with its limitations (Hesford and Johnston 2015).

**Jesse:** Most of the time I end up side-stepping it because most of my research is about the labor and the history and archival work, so I kind of dance around it very gently. I find that a lot of the stuff that needs to be done around histories of trailers or histories of promotion needs to be done in terms of understanding the people who are working on it and the history of it. Doing ‘readings’ of the trailers can be relatively simple compared to that – because there’s not a lot done around the history of trailers, or a history of that labor. That can be supplemented with paratextual analysis, but that’s not the focus for me.

**Erin:** It was my window in to this work, but when I started working with those materials a bit more I realized I was just going to end up saying the same thing over and over again – I’m just going to end up doing textual analysis of these forms and not really thinking through them in any great depth. Because my own work analyzes space and spatial theory in terms of film culture, I found I have less use for a paratextual approach. I don’t actually tend to engage as much with primary film objects at all, so I’m not particularly interested in the way that these frame specific films. It just became unworkable.

**Keith:** Obviously, my early work combined textual analysis of trailers with historical and archival work (Johnston 2009). I never felt that I wanted to talk about the fact that some scenes are in the trailer, but not in the film, or to make that hierarchical connection so concrete. Even given its use in Lisa’s book (Kernan 2004) – which is ultimately more interested in rhetoric than paratexts – and then Jonathan’s work (Gray 2010), I never felt we needed that term to make sense of the trailer, or other materials. However, the term’s popularity clearly proved me wrong!

What’s also interesting to me is that, although it isn’t the term that would be used, most media commentary on trailers has fallen into that paratextual model of ‘this trailer reveals something about this forthcoming film / television show / video



game'. So my uncertainty about the academic value of paratextual analysis has to be balanced against that being a dominant cultural discourse.

**Erin:** It goes back to the point that if your analysis is around the audience reception of particular films or trailers then it's a salient point to bring up paratextuality. If that's the way that people are talking about these texts, and the way that they are using them, then it would be very difficult for the reception studies researcher to avoid using that framework. But, if you're more interested in the way that a text persuades and how its particular persuasive dynamics have developed over time, then you're going to need a much deeper and interdisciplinary analysis of those forms.

**Keith:** So do we need a better – or at least different – term for this sub-discipline of film or media studies?

**Erin:** I feel really strongly that forming links with industry would help us develop those theories: what terms are they using? What is the rationale behind those? I worked with an AdTech company that was cutting six-second trailers and I was interested in why they had developed that form, how they had developed it and what they called it. They didn't call them six-second trailers, they called them bumper ads (Campbell and Pearson 2018). And they were equally fascinated by the textual perspective that researchers could bring – the ability to read images for meaning, to interpret images for meaning, are qualitative skills that these firms don't necessarily have. So developing those stronger links might help flesh out something that could be called trailer studies or promotional studies broadly, that has a number of branches under it.

**Jesse:** That's true in my work as well. When I go to the Clio Entertainment Awards or the Golden Trailers and you look for the industry terms that they're using, at the Clio Entertainments, they don't always have an award just for trailers. They have categories like 'Theatrical AV', and awards for Social Media Partnerships and Influencer Kits and Packaging. The focus is much broader than that. In that same way, for us researchers I think something broader like 'promotional media studies' or 'promotional studies', as opposed to 'trailers studies' would capture all of that other stuff that's being produced, often by the same people.

**Keith:** I like those names – and there is a need to pull these threads together. I've long been an advocate of a trailer studies approach, the more I think about where the trailer sits within industry and academia, I think ignoring the very potent intertextual relationship that trailers have with posters and press kits and six second ads – we are missing a trick in not connecting that work up more. And paratexts has not necessarily offered us a way to do that work, either.

**Erin:** That's a much bigger project. There absolutely needs to be trailer studies to think through all of the dynamics and everything that makes up a trailer historically and now. But then we could also be looking at online video ads, we could be looking at six second trailers, GIFs, memes, posters, cinemagraphs, we could be looking at all of those things at the same time. We could also reach out more and involve people who research advertising and marketing perspective – a huge number of academics work in those fields that we don't currently align ourselves with.

**Keith:** Is there an issue of academic silo-ing here, then? Obviously there is a small cohort of people who study trailers and promotional materials within the arts and humanities, but this field still struggles to be part of the mainstream of research and teaching.

**Jesse:** There is a funny kind of taste culture in academia in terms of what objects you study, and what has prestige. I sometimes tell people what I study, and they will say 'Is there really enough to write a dissertation on that? Trailers are only two minutes long'. And a minute or two later, if I'm any good at describing my research, they'll be fascinated by the idea of studying it, and will actually have a lot to say about it. So, at least on the surface of things, it's maybe some kind of institutional taste cultures that are there to say what's worth studying and what's not. And our job is to convince people that that's not true!

**Erin:** I think the hiring culture of universities has a lot to do with it. If you think about the ways that we pitch and get funding for certain PhD projects – in that there has to be a certain interest from particular researchers, or a department etc. – and the ways that we achieve full time tenured positions, it makes sense that our departments can become very secular. I think it's a deeply embedded problem that expresses itself within film studies through precisely these kinds of discussions.

**Keith:** You're right that there's a taste issue here, which suggests the trailer might still be a 'bad object' of study – is that still intrinsically linked to its dual nature as a creative object that has a specific business objective?

**Jesse:** There is definitely that connotation of being a bad research object. I think the trailer in particular is still treated as subsidiary, in service of something else in that hierarchy of objects we study. Interestingly, that often mirrors the industry situation as well: many speeches at the Clio Entertainments, for example, will underline how much they are indebted to the studio for giving them something great to work with, but they will also talk about their work as somewhat independent and possessing artistic merit of its own. Likewise, in academia, I think it's still an object that people look down on, it's lesser-than, it's shorter, it points to something else. I think that's a lot of it.

**Keith:** I think the lack of a central author plays into that – which bring us back to dominant theories and trends within film studies. We know that trailers tend to be put together by multiple teams. So, we can't say that 'x person made that trailer' – as if identifying a director would give it cultural validity. I think that feeds into the sense that promotional materials are 'bad' objects – or at least uncertain objects – because we can't assign authorship to it. It has a largely unknown creative and collaborative industrial background and it has a business perspective.

**Erin:** It's the same with posters and the analysis of posters as well. It is just a poster, and it could be wrapping paper, unless it's a Saul Bass poster and then suddenly it's amazing.

**Jesse:** People are often surprised to learn that there's an award show like the Golden Trailers. They're surprised that there are people who get up there and give speeches. So, there might be an assumption or an easy way of thinking that a trailer just kind of tumbles out of the movie at some point. And you have to tell them that no, there are people doing the editing, the sound design, that they're writing it to some degree. There's creative work going on, it's just that the public generally can't see it surface in the way they expect for directors, screenwriters, producers. One of the few times where you'll actually see or hear from those involved in trailers or promotion is when there's a clear-cut authorial figure: Saul Bass, Don LaFontaine, and so on. I think that's one of the problems that we

have in terms of using this as a research object is that it doesn't speak to those disciplines, especially film studies, the way that they're used to. Trailers don't quite work the same way as a research object.

**Keith:** So, as PhD students who are working on different perspectives of this field or discipline – as opposed to me, who has been around for years – what do you see as the future of promotional studies, or promotional media studies? What should it be exploring?

**Erin:** I would like to see a lot more interdisciplinary work. I would like to see more of that synthesis happening, maybe through symposiums or edited collections. I'm really interested in looking back at the methods that work for my project and the specific media forms that I'm looking at, and ask: what have I done there? What have I used? And how could that be picked up and reused if someone else is looking at similar things in the way that I was?

**Jesse:** I'd like to see more interaction and interface with archival spaces. It's hard because trailers and other promotional materials have been treated very much as ephemeral and subsidiary, so unfortunately this material is often gone and/or not documented well. But I know that material is out there and archivists are working hard to preserve and prepare it, so I'd like to see more work in terms of building a material history of trailers and promotion.

**Keith:** I feel like I've spent the last six or seven years looking at different ways to approach this idea of where trailer or promotional studies could go. I did a piece on radio trailers (Johnston 2014), the trailer audience research project with Ed Vollans and Fred Greene (Johnston, Greene and Vollans, 2016), a historical industry piece on the British National Screen Service trailer company (Johnston 2017), and a recent piece on the methodology for researching historical promotional materials (Johnston 2019). It's also very exciting that Vinzenz, who wrote the first book on trailer history (which has only been available in German until now: Hediger 2001), will be publishing the English language translation soon. But I also agree with you both that more work on the history of the trailer and the trailer industry would be great, as well as getting more researchers working with / alongside current industry to understand what is happening there – possibly in a similar way to Paul Grainge and



Cathy Johnson's project a few years ago (Grainge and Johnson 2016).

**Jesse:** I think it would be beneficial to speak more with those people who are working in trailers and promotion to help with that history, but also as a kind of solution to what we were just talking about: trying to increase the visibility and viability of our research object within film and media studies. It might actually help to surface more of the people working in these industries and talk to them directly.

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**Erin Pearson** is a PhD candidate in Film Studies at the University of East Anglia. She has a keen interest in the ways that promotional materials work to build film cultures. Her research spans trailers, posters, film festivals, review journalism, and fashion media coverage. Erin has also worked with video AdTech firm Unruly Media to analyse a range of online video phenomena, such as sound-off video (Campbell and Pearson 2018) and 6-second advertising.

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## 2019 Reviews

### Atlantique



Construction whirs and dust blows in the opening minutes of Mati Diop's feature debut, *Atlantique*. But soon it is Senegal's coastline that transfixes, its waves an unrelenting presence for those that live in Dakar. Returning to themes first addressed ten years prior in her documentary short of the same name, Diop dreams in the liminal space between social realism and the supernatural. Her protagonist Ada (Mame Bineta Sane) faces these tensions personally, pulled between the magic of first love and the reality of being betrothed to an older, richer man. As the narrative submerges genre boundaries, the camera moors us to the tender and material—the roaring ocean, sun-strewn curtains, touch. The result is a spellbinding study of atmosphere that is both melancholy and hopeful. With a historic Grand Prix win at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival, Diop presents with *Atlantique* a transportive and hypnotic experience that powerfully reinterprets the horizon.

Review By Jemma Dashkewytch

### Parasite



Arguably the most discussed film of the year following its historic 'Best Picture' Oscar win, *Parasite* is a powerful addition to the contemporary South Korean cinema canon. A natural progression from director Bong Joon-ho's previous films like *The Host* (2006) and *Snowpiercer* (2013), this global sensation oscillates effortlessly between moments of calculated absurdist humour and vocal indictments of income disparity. Through these components characteristic of Bong's work, *Parasite* expresses the duality inherent to a globalized Millennial generation. From Park So-dam's instantly iconic "Jessica Jingle" set to the tune of "Dokdo is Our Land," to the Kim family's *banjiha* or semi-basement dwelling, *Parasite* is rife with decidedly South Korean attributes. Even the massive economic imbalance central to the film is indicative of the 1997 IMF Crisis which ravaged South Korea's economic landscape. While Bong expertly weaves explicitly South Korean elements into the film's narrative, *Parasite's* themes remain accessible to any group touched by capitalism. Even viewers unfamiliar with South Korean culture can easily tap into the frustration and resentment lingering just below the surface. Balancing a universal cautionary tale with a specifically South Korean societal critique, *Parasite* is a text sure to be referenced—whether it be for memes or social change—for years to come.

Review by Kate Wise

### I Was At Home, But..



At the beginning of Angela Schanelec's *I Was at Home, But...*, thirteen-year-old Phillip walks out of the woods at sunrise covered in dirt. His shoes are caked with mud. Then, he's clean and waiting with a teacher at his school. Seen through a window, Astrid (Maren Eggert) cuts over an empty schoolyard spotted with fall leaves and collapses at her son's feet. Phillip has been missing for a week, but this information is only obliquely given, if at all. A clue as to why comes later, when Astrid collapses in the dirt at the foot of her husband's grave or, at the end of the film, when she's again resting on the ground, in the palm of a stone in a river. Schanelec's films are always oblique, working around an event without necessarily voicing it. Or, you could say they're attentive to the mundane. If this film moves around grief, it's about other things: Astrid buying then returning a used bike; talking with a filmmaker about the difference between illness and acting; sleeping, sometimes, with her younger daughter's tennis coach; balancing reciprocal support and independence from her children. Phillip's class is performing Hamlet, in the same dry and measured style the film uses to draw attention to the materiality of passing moments. This coolness exaggerates any outbursts—M. Ward's cover of David Bowie's "Let's Dance" and Eggert's shouts and caresses. *I Was at Home, But...* is a rare case of generous cinema. Stories can offer ways of practicing grief.

Review by Harrison Wade

### The Lighthouse



Following a slow and anguished pace reminiscent of his 2015 predecessor *The Witch*, Robert Eggers' *The Lighthouse* teems with more psychological unease. Shot in black and white and at a 1.19:1.6 ratio, the almost entirely squared frame thrusts viewers into a hypnotic realm that privileges the formal perplexity of symmetrical composition and a highly contrasted, exquisite play of light and shadows. Spatially and narratively, we are confined to a small island off the coast of New England, forced to closely confront the harsh tendencies of Ephraim Winslow (Robert Pattinson) and Thomas Wake (Willem Dafoe) while they tend to a lighthouse for four weeks. As the film progressively unravels their tumultuous and oppressive relationship to each other and their own selves, Eggers' psychoanalytic exploration is coupled with, if not dwarfed by the brilliant cinematography of Jarin Blaschke, whose work in this film was rightfully nominated for an Academy Award. Emphasizing a complex intimacy with twisting lines and shapes, the abstracted forms of the limited "things" on this small island become visually and conceptually linked to the ultimate and forbidden attainment of light, an unconscious drive toward ecstasy and the unknown made uncomfortably palpable by a consistently entrancing aesthetic program. While the logical development of events remains uncertain, seemingly magnified by pure affect, Eggers innovatively represents character motive as wavering indistinguishably between demented desire and cruel reality. *The Lighthouse* consequently foregrounds a gritty yet polished thesis on the human spirit under strain, desperation, and mania, confronting viewers with new limits of abjection and unmitigated drive.

Review by Marcus Prasad



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