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Book Review


A Companion to Media Authorship is essential reading for any scholar who is interested in the intersections of individual artistic authorship and collaborative, corporate, and intervening forces in production cultures. The edited collection contains 28 chapters divided into five parts: “Theorizing and Historicizing Authorship,” “Contesting Authorship,” “Industrializing Authorship,” “Expanding Authorship,” and “Relocating Authorship.” This breadth of scholarship demonstrates the rare incorporation and the subsequent interdisciplinary nature that renders the field of media studies so intriguing, relevant, and worthy. In this collection, some of today’s foremost media scholars, as well as other experts in academia and media businesses, examine the state of the author pervasive in film, television, radio, and beyond. The unifying thread of each contribution is based on the assumption that in today’s popular media landscape, authorship expands beyond any notion of singular, independent agency or identity, and that contemporary authorship is a multifaceted and collective—if not often disjointing—process that merits detailed analysis in order to properly understand any body of work.

Gray and Johnson’s “Introduction: The Problem of Media Authorship” and the two subsequent chapters, John Hartley’s “Authorship of the Narrative of the Self” and Kristina Busse’s “The Return of the Author: Ethos and Identity Politics,” provide a critical backdrop on defining the central concerns of authorship and a further reevaluation from previous historical foundations. Gray’s second contribution, “When is the Author” further details the trajectory of understanding authorship, from Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author,” Michel Foucault’s “the author function,” to critical research in production cultures such as Horace Newcomb and Robert Alley’s The Producer’s Medium. In the end, he firmly concludes that no text or final product has one single author, marking on his own study of The Blade Runner, and proposes the examination of clusters of authorship, hence the “when,” in the various stages and processes of media works.

For many of us, our first formal education of authorship came through film courses and an evaluation of influential auteurs. In “Hidden Hands at
Work: Authorship, the Intentional Flux, and the Dynamics of Collaboration,” Colin Burnett dissects the working relationship between renowned French auteur Robert Bresson, known for his minimalistic storytelling and narratives, with his cinematographer Léonce-Henri Burel, to propose a new model of authorship he calls “author's intentional flux” (p. 112). Burnett suggests that this process “involves gathering evidence about initiating ideas for a project and the commitments and principles the authors hold, and about how these ideas and commitments morphed into the problems the authors intended to solve during production” that leads to a “fuller, richer, appreciation of the artistry involved” (p. 118). Suzanne Scott also takes on an updated stance on the auteur in “Dawn of the Undead Author: Fanboy Auteurism and Zack Snyder’s ‘Vision’” with a thorough trajectory of the implications of the gendered identity of director Zack Snyder and reception of his films—from *Watchmen* to *Sucker Punch*. With a variety of materials and paratexts available on the contemporary director, Scott’s chapter further proves the complex nature of discerning authorship in the study of the auteur. Daniel Herbert seeks to find how the *auteur* is conveyed at video rental stores in “Auteurs at the Video Store,” drawing from fieldwork of the businesses that witnessed a critical decline, 2008–2012. Despite this fate he likens to drive-in theaters, Herbert concludes “the impact that video stores have upon ideas and practices of *the auteur* will get dispersed and transformed in other arenas” (p. 502).

The book considers well-known authors of media and gives credit to otherwise underresearched facets of authorship. One of the most appreciated components of *A Companion to Media Authorship* is a range of chapters on diverse global perspectives: Brian Ekdale’s “Telling Whose Stories? Re-examining Author Agency in Self-Representational Media in the Slums of Nairobi”; Stephen Teo’s “Cynical Authorship and the Hong Kong Studio System: Li Hanxiang and His Saw Brothers Erotic Films”; Aswin Punathambekar’s “Authoring Hype in Bollywood”; Hector Amaya’s “Authorship and the State: Narcocorridos in Mexico and the New Aesthetics of Nation”; and Katrien Pype’s “Scripting Kinshasha's Teleserials: Reflections on Authorship, Creativity and Ownership.” Because many of these chapters provide details on how a country handles media economies, these contributions thus shed light on how industrial contexts can provide further insight on national identity. This can also be said for Catherine Johnson’s piece, “The Authorial Function of the Television Channel: Augmentation and Identity,” distinguishing how TV channels serve as brands with a detailed study of U.K. and U.S. broadcast networks that leads to her latest insight on how we as scholars can understand brand identity in the digital era of TV. Within this function of brand identity, Lindsey Hogan’s chapter, “The Mouse House of Cards: Disney Tween Stars and Questions of Institutional Authorship,” uses the relationship between Hilary Duff and Disney beyond an analysis of contemporary stardom, “but also the ways in which that star persona informs
other increasingly influential and related texts in this era of cross-promotion and conglomerate formation" (p. 297). Given that Hogan is the sole graduate student who is a contributor in the volume, it is fascinating to see how she establishes her authorial agency while noticing a thread in research between her and Gray and Johnson, her professors at University of Wisconsin, Madison.

In “Authorship Below the Line,” John T. Caldwell investigates the roles of below-the-line workers, defined by their involvement in “physical production” who should be credited for far more creative labor, when they instead habitually defer to the above-the-line workers as a necessary political and career measure. In evaluating data from his two-decade-long industry fieldwork in Los Angeles, California, Caldwell also suggests that “integrating social scientific theoretical paradigms and methods within critical humanities and aesthetic studies can provide a much more useful foundation from which to understand the considerable complexities of media texts and their production” (p. 353). In the next chapter, David Brisbin continues Caldwell’s thread of unexplored media practitioners in “Production Design and the Invisible Arts of Seeing,” coming from his own prolific career as a production designer, professor and documentary filmmaker. Olufunmilayo B. Arewa, a law professor, provides a distinctive perspective in “Making Music: Copyright Law and Creative Processes.” Beginning with an outline of authorship in classical Western music traditions, she leads with a history of appropriation of traditional African-based music such as Blues to written sheet compositions and White-dominated pop music, declaring the ultimate failure of recognition of the author, or composer, when considering power dynamics and socioeconomic hierarchies embedded in copyright law, which she states “reflect outdated assumptions about creativity” (p. 82). In “Never Ending Story: Authorship, Seriality and the Radio Writers Guild,” Michelle Hilmes details a chronology of how the ownership/authorship battle between the author and station of the first broadcasted, serialized soap opera prompted the establishment of the Radio Writers Guild to protect the rights of such individuals battling corporations. She concurrently reveals the significance of radio’s streaming seriality and its visible influence in contemporary television.

Yet, another interesting format in the book is the interview, which also highlights collaboration in academic publishing itself, from Gray and Johnson’s interviews with, for example, media-studies-academic-turned-Lucas-Film-employee Ivan Askwith and TV composer Bear McCready, to Megan Sapnar Ankerson’s conversation with Molly Wright Steenson, an expert and scholar in digital media, from her work teaching at the University of Wisconsin–Madison to involvement in online companies such as Reuters and Estronet. The significance of the interview format and collaboration is emphasized in the final chapter of A Companion to Media Authorship, Johnson and Gray’s joint effort titled “‘We Never Do Anything Alone’: An
Interview on Academic Authorship with Kathleen Fitzpatrick.” In this self-reflexive conversation between the editors of the volume with the Director of Scholarly Communication of the Modern Language Association, she concludes on an excellent note:

It's my greatest hope that the kinds of networked scholarly many of us are now producing—forms of authorship that are making use of a broad range of media—will find ways to create connections between the academy and the many publics with which we have the potential to interact (p. 550).

This book is critical reading for anyone interested in not only media industries from its inception to the digital era, but also how the 21st century impacts the state of academia and media studies aligned, as scholars should examine their own modes of authorship.

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