Research Article

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Showrunner as *Auteur*: Bridging the Culture/Economy Binary in Digital Hollywood

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Abstract: This article engages the metaphor of *showrunner as auteur* to examine freedom of expression in television. News articles offer the metaphor of *showrunner as auteur*, with Hollywood journalists discussing the writer-producers of the new Golden Age of Television. Media convergence, including cable and digital technologies, has disrupted traditional TV organisations and power brokers, bringing about a renaissance. Jenkins (2006) challenges scholars to see media convergence in terms of *voice* and *participation*, rather than technology. Following Jenkins, this study engages auteur theory, and Marshall McLuhan's analysis of the medium and the message, to better understand TV showrunners. Critical insights from Marx and Bourdieu are considered with regard to the interplay of cultural and economic forces. The analysis compares earlier film directors—Jim Jarmusch and the Coen Brothers—with showrunners of the cable and digital era, including David Chase, the Wachowskis, David Benioff, and Diablo Cody. Because of disruptive technologies, TV showrunners are able to break free from media restraints and bridge the culture/economy binary that structures TV as a field of production. No longer bound by broadcast censorship and scheduled programming, TV showrunners are producing shows that express their signature messages, transforming TV into a cinematic experience.

Keywords: digital television, freedom of expression, McLuhan

Introduction

Sarah Cooper's *The Soul of Film Theory* (2013) traces the concept of the *soul* across a hundred years of film theory. For Cooper, *soul* is a multi-faceted signifier. It appears, disappears, and reappears in successive waves of theory. Cooper suggests that the *soul*, as a sign, is equivocal, enigmatic, elusive. But if/when the sign is placed in the context of a theory, it becomes a heuristic device to deepen understandings of film history. Cooper explores a sign of individuality—the *soul*—to examine a cinematic history. In this study, I explore another sign of individuality—the *auteur*—to examine the renaissance in TV production in digital Hollywood. (The term *Hollywood* is used in the broadest sense to mean the global entertainment industry, as theorised by Miller.)

The renaissance in TV production is being fuelled by innovations in cable and digital technologies, which have disrupted power relations. As long ago theorised by Marx and Engels, changes in the technologies of production lead to changes in the relations of production. The availability of hundreds of shows on multiple channels and devices unleashes a new freedom of expression. Not only is there a greater demand for content, but there is also a new openness to produce different types of material and tell unusual stories, breaking down the barriers of the broadcast-network system of episodic TV. This is evidenced, for example, by *Orange Is the New Black*, a show about complicated women characters living in the unglamorous setting of a women's prison, says *Variety* writer Cynthia Littleton ("Band of New Female Showrunners").

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The renaissance is also attributable to the greater freedom of expression on cable and other non-broadcast TV shows, in the United States, compared to broadcast. Under law administered by the Federal Communications Commission ("FCC"), broadcast shows are held to a standard of decency because the broadcast spectrum is a public resource. The U.S. Supreme Court, in *Playboy Entertainment Group, v. U.S.*, clarified that cable shows are not held to the broadcast-decency standard. In the *Playboy* case, the U.S. government sought to regulate the content of cable TV, but the high court ruled that the proposed regulation would violate the free speech guarantees of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Cable and other non-broadcast shows are also not subject to the corporate broadcast censorship.

Another factor contributing to television's renaissance is that shows now can be accessed by audiences via "over-the-top" distribution ("OTT"), meaning that a show can be watched on a variety of devices on demand. McLuhan famously said that the medium is the message; however, TV shows, once largely influenced by the constraints of the broadcast medium, have now *broken free* (McLuhan 9; ch. 2). TV shows are not bound to the television set. Consumers are engaging in time-shifting and binge-watching behaviours—watching shows when, and for how long, they desire. There is also a new freedom in production. TV producers now have much more than a week (and often larger budgets) to produce an episode of a show, in contrast to the constraints of a regularly programmed, broadcast TV series.

Because of all these factors producing shifts in the television industry, journalists covering Hollywood are writing about the strategic moves of power brokers to regain economic dominance in digital TV. For instance, during the summer of 2017, Todd Spangler, writing for *Variety*, reported that Disney decided to cut ties with Netflix and launch its own streaming service; and elsewhere, Bill Chappell reported that Facebook is entering the digital TV market with a service called "Watch." By the Fall of 2017, five major studios had joined Disney's streaming service, called Movies Anywhere, which offers consumers the ability to link together existing digital media accounts—for example, accounts with Amazon, Google Play, iTunes and Walmart—and watch any purchased movie on nearly any device. News analysts, including Claire Reilly for *CNET.com* and Lisa Richwine for Reuters, were quick to suggest that Movies Anywhere was a warning shot for market-leader Netflix.

Amid these transformations, Hollywood reporters also are writing about a new occupation of the digital era: the *showrunner*. According to *Hollywood Reporter* writer James Hibberd, the new job position of showrunner emerged because TV shows now exist on multiple platforms and are experienced by fans across media. Brian Lowrey, writing for *Variety* more than a decade ago, placed showrunners at the centre of the new Golden Age of TV. He remarked that TV dramatic series were experiencing "a creative and commercial renaissance," characterised by "true singularity of vision, filtered through a handful of influential showrunners" (23). This new social position, emphasising authorship and business skills, confirms that voice and participation are key elements of media convergence and communication technologies advances, which disrupt existing economic power relations.

Media Convergence and Voice

Henry Jenkins (2006) challenges scholars to see media convergence as a *participatory process* made possible by new technologies, focusing on voice rather than technology. Convergence is not about new digital products, platforms, and services, but about new ways of production/consumption. Jenkins says the media is no longer populated by "media producers and consumers occupying separate roles," but by *participants who interact* with each other" (3). Writing about democratising effects of new media, Jenkins explains:

> The current diversification of communication channels is politically important because it expands the range of voices that can be heard: though some voices command greater prominence than others, no one voice speaks with unquestioned authority. The new media operate with different principles than the broadcast media that dominated [politics] for so long: access, participation, reciprocity and peer-to-peer rather that one-to-many communication (208).

In line with Jenkins, this study poses this question: How have the new opportunities for production in multiple media, now available to showrunners, resulted in a renaissance in TV shows, where writers can express their individual, auteurial signatures?

This article engages the metaphor of *showrunner as auteur* to examine shifts within television production in new Golden Age. With freedom of expression, new media, and OTT distribution, what are the signature messages of TV showrunners as *auteurs*? Many scholars have addressed the new participatory role of the TV *consumer*. Kuntz, for example, looks at the phenomena of fandom around the film *The Big Lebowski*. Similarly, Gray et al. and many others are studying fan fiction. Fewer studies have looked at renewed creativity and freedom of expression on the *production* side of television. This study finds that new freedoms in TV production have allowed showrunners, as *auteurs*, to express their signature voices, leading audience members to a more cinematic experience.

After brief summaries of the terms *auteur* and *showrunner*, this study compare several film directors of the pre-digital era with selected TV showrunners. It is found that with the restraints of government and economic power brokers loosened, TV showrunners can leverage their cultural capital to gain economic and artistic success. The signature shows of the showrunners are examined to see how these *auteurs* cross the culture/economy binary and express their voices. Three time periods are examined, starting with Jim Jarmusch and the Coen brothers in the pre-digital era. Next, the *HBO effect* is discussed, including the work of David Chase (*The Sopranos*) and David Benioff (*Game of Thrones*). Third, the crossover and transmedia stories of the Wachowskis and Diablo Cody are analysed.

What is an *Auteur*?

Auteur, at the basic level, means an author or artist. Fathallah says that a singular, originating author is "possibly the strongest discursive mark of quality in traditional criticism of the arts" (80). An *auteur*, according to film theory, is a director with a signature style, who expresses a unique vision. According to Sharp, auteur theory holds that certain film directors have a unique style, unfettered by economic influences, such as the financial power of a studio or network (8). French New Wave critic Alexandre Astruc, writing in 1948, suggests that films can be vehicles for artistic expression by the auteurial director, who writes with the tools of film production in the way that a novelist writes with a pen. In Francois Truffaut's seminal essay, "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema," he draws a contrast between post-war films in the "tradition of quality" and auteurial films. He says that films in the tradition of quality—i.e., films produced with commercial purposes during the post-war period—limit the role of the director to simply adding pictures to an existing text in a formulaic manner. In contrast, artistic directors are the author of the stories they direct using visual storytelling (16). According to his biographers De Baecque and Toubiana, Truffaut was contemptuous of the blasphemy and perverse characters in the films in the tradition of quality (72). Another biographer, Annette Insdorf, says that films in the tradition of quality were adapted from novels and dependent on plot and dialogue, rather than auteurial storytelling (21).

In his essay, Truffaut argues that *auteurs* know how to translate a script to the screen with creative vision so that the audience can see the story for themselves. For Truffaut, the director of films in the tradition of quality works in a mechanical fashion; the films of quality, he says, were formless, insipid and indistinguishable from one another, appealing to low-level, commonplace, and bourgeois values (13-14). *Variety* writer Cynthia Littleton made a similar point about TV showrunners in the digital era. "The real value of a good script in this town hinges not on the eloquence of the prose or the cleverness of the plot but in its execution from page to screen. Nobody understands this Hollywood truism better than television showrunners" ("Showrunners Write" 2).

Auteur theory, which has been a part of film discourse for over 50 years, has sometimes fallen into disfavour but has never disappeared entirely. Film scholar Barry Keith Grant collects many of the important essays and studies in auteur theory in his 2007 edited volume, including Andre Bazin's call in 1957 for the film director to take a more creative position in the field of production. Also included is the 1962 essay by Andrew Sarris, who introduced auteur theory to the United States. According to Sarris, the first premise of

the theory is that *auteurs* must be competent film directors. The second premise is that they create visual works expressing "the distinguishable personality of the director," rather than mass-produced works having formulaic plots (562). He says that, over a group of works, the auteur exhibits "certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature" (562). The third premise is that the film is imbued with *interior meaning*, expressing the tension between the auteur's personality or biography, and the material. He says that interior meaning expresses "the élan of the soul" (563).

The *auteur* is an individual, occupying a singular position within the field of production. This is not to say that films and television shows are not collaborative works. For instance, Ostrowska, discussing Danish *auteur* Lars Von Trier, acknowledges that the film director is not only a singular creative agent but also acts collaboratively with other filmmakers, as well as being engaged in the financial arrangements and production of a film (195).

Media scholars recognise that leading theorists—such as Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault—have argued that the author is not so much as an individual person, but a social category with significant material and discursive effects (Kompare 96). Other film theorists, such as Timothy Corrigan, recognise the connection between the romanticised image of the *auteur* as a solo voice—and the commercial promotion of visual works. Corrigan says there is "exploitation of auteurism as a category for reception," rather than, as originally conceived, auteurism being related to the production of cinema as art (44). Allen and Lincoln also explore the idea that the *auteur* is a category used for commercial promotion.

For Kompare, the moment has come to analyse the television *auteur*, who has emerged because of changes in the industry, driven by the availability of multiple channels and new distribution forms. Since the early 2000s, Kompare says, it has been common to attribute authorship of distinctive TV shows to the showrunner (98).

What is a *Showrunner*?

Showrunner, as a word denoting a position in television production, was first acknowledged by the Oxford English Dictionary in 1995. Showrunners, as members of a recognised occupation, started to appear shortly after the advent of the public Internet in the early 1990s, although the showrunner position has roots in the work of TV pioneer Norman Lear, in the 1970s and 1980s, according to commentators Bernardi and Hoxter (114).

By the 2000s, there was a flood of media, including books, a documentary, websites and Twitter accounts, about showrunners and producing for transmedia TV. In 2006, the Writers Guild of America West started a Showrunner Training Program. The "showrunner's mantra," according to the founder of the WGAw program, Jeff Melvoin, is "Quality scripts on time." The mantra reveals the industry's need for a steady stream of worthwhile scripts to fill the digital-video pipeline (WGAw, video file). In 2013, screenwriter Neil Landau published a book offering practical tips and strategies for showrunners, lighting the path for how TV writers can become producers. A documentary titled "Showrunners: The Art of Running a TV Show" was released in 2014 by Black Sheep Productions. The same year, Bennett wrote an introductory book focusing on the art of being a showrunner, while writer-producer Nuno Bernardo published a more advanced guide to transmedial storytelling.

By mid-2017, Hollywood journalists around the world were discussing the power of showrunners. Jeffrey Fleishman (*Los Angeles Times*) claims the job of the TV writer, once considered the bottom of the totem pole, is now elevated to *auteur* status. According to *Los Angeles Times* writer Scott Collins, one key difference between old/new media is that people now watch *show*s instead of *series*. The trend is toward Internet television, and away from terrestrial television (i.e., broadcast TV or "over the air" television). A *show*, then, is the story or content (message) to be distributed, via multiple new-media channels—web, broadcast, cable or streaming, video hosting, etc.—and accessed on phones, tablets and computers (medium). In McLuhan's terms, the message is no longer contained by the medium.

The trend toward watching "a show," via streaming video, is called the *Netflix Effect*, according to media scholar Cameron Lindsey, but there is also the *HBO Effect*, a term offered by Dean J. DeFino, which

recognizes the influence of the leading pay-TV company with shows such as *Sex and the City* and *The Sopranos*. These two effects come together, as new distribution methods have led to renewed quality in TV shows. To be successful, showrunners must bridge the divide between the cultural goals of creativity and the economic goals of commerce. They must bridge the culture/economy binary.

Theorizing the Culture/Economy Binary

The cultural sphere is about meaning-making, while the economic sphere is about structures of exchange. There is a binary tension between these two types of social interaction. Marx and Engels argue that actions in the economic sphere will necessarily determine outcomes in the cultural sphere (93-96). They say that all activities and passions of human beings are subject to the machinations of the economy and the drive for capital (96). For Marx and Marxist scholars, the prevailing cultural ideas are those of the ruling class, while disruptions in the technology of production, and in the relations of production, will rewrite the prevailing culture, as the economic base determines the cultural superstructure (Legros 30).

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, following Marx and Engels, acknowledges that the market interests often dominate cultural expression, for example with false consciousness and ideologies of oppression. Bourdieu, however, takes the position that cultural interactions can be *relatively autonomous* of economic forces. Actions in the cultural realm can be self-determining, rather than overdetermined by economic interests. Bourdieu explains that the cultural field of production is the economic world reversed, with cultural capital sometimes shaping opportunities and actions in the economic sphere (37-38). By reversal, Bourdieu means that in a field of cultural production, cultural capital has its own worth. Cultural capital is sometimes placed above raw, economic interests—recognising, of course, the need for economic capital for production.

Bourdieu explains that the social processes and positions taken in a field are structured by the tension between cultural values and economic interests, that is, by the cultural/economic binary. The culture/economy binary comes into play because storytelling is subject to economic powers and constraints, often organized around technological and political restraints (e.g., broadcast licensing regulations requiring on-air decency). When these constraints are drawn back, a cultural renaissance is likely, including economic success for *auteurs*.

Analysis 1: Comparing Film *Auteurs* of the 1980s and 1990s.

Jim Jarmusch and the Coen brothers are film *auteurs* of the pre-digital era. This section of the interpretation will compare selected films by these *auteur*s. During the decades of the 1980s and 1990s—the field of film production before the digital era—a cultural/economic binary structured the field into independent and studio films, although their relative power has waxed and waned over the decades. In the 1990s, hybrid forms of production were being pursued as a strategy to re-organise power in the field. By the turn of the twenty-first century, most of the major studios had started to create independent divisions, referred to as "indiewood," in response to competition from independent filmmakers. Film scholar Sánchez-Escalonilla states that, with the emergence of the indie divisions, "major studios began to hand over creative control of their projects to young or unknown directors, who aimed to produce a more humane and intelligent cinema that respected the audience" (22). In this field of production, Jarmusch remains a classic *auteur* and a fierce independent who walks on the cultural-capital side of the field of production. He is known for his signature use of long tracking shots, and for lingering in a scene after the action has completed. In an interview, which Criterion included with the disc of *Down by Law* (1986), Jarmusch points out that his tracking shots are often from left to right, which asks the audience to read the film in the opposite of the usual direction. Thus, his very signature is contrary to prevailing ideas about filmmaking. Jarmusch also says in the interview that he looks for iconic landscapes, and then turns 180 degrees to see what lies in the opposite direction: perhaps a decaying wooden hand railing or an empty sidewalk? Another signature of Jarmusch films is the use of black and

white. In *Down by Law* the blacks are grainy, while in an earlier picture, *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984), the shades are rich and snappy.

In accord with auteur theory, there is a different level of character development when a "pure indie" film, such as Jarmusch's *Down By Law,* is compared with *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, a hybrid, indiewood vehicle from the Coen brothers and MGM. In *O Brother*, the characters are well developed, but are so broad as to be allegorical. In *Down by Law*, the eclectic characters reveal the Jarmusch signature of filming characters who do not engage in excessive action. The characters in his *Down by Law* and *Stranger Than Paradise* are peculiar: from their looks to their voices, to their jobs, and their heartfelt expressions (or failures to express). Characters without plot, lingering in a chiaroscuro landscape might be a shorthand way of summarising Jarmusch's vision.

In contrast to Jarmusch, an indie filmmaker, the Coen brothers are *auteurs* who work at transitional points of cultural and economic power in the cinematic field. Films by the Coen Brothers bear their signature, even when produced in the studio system. Their 2000 release *O Brother* is a study in the contrasts between two worlds. This is a Coen signature. One world is inhabited by the fugitives on the run from a chain gang, and the other world is inhabited by politicians and lawmakers. Commentators Gonzalez and Ruppersburg offer detailed cultural analysis of the film. In summary, the Coens use cuts between scenes to develop the theme of two worlds colliding, taking the audience back and forth between the fugitives and the lawmakers Similarly, in *Fargo* (1996), the Coens use cuts between scenes to draw contrasts between the world of kidnappers and the world of the main character, a salesman (played by William Macy) who sets in motion the kidnapping of his wife. Their signature expression of interior meaning, conflicts in values played out in social dynamics, is seen in both works.

The Coen brothers' films are located at the hybrid level of the field of production, between independent and studio production, but moving toward the economic power of the studios, according to Bourdieu's field theory. The brothers were able to get *O Brother* produced at MGM, a major studio, because they previously worked with an indiewood division of a major studio, Touchstone Pictures, a major-independent division at Walt Disney, in the making of *Fargo*. This move toward economic power positioned them to turn out what they called a "'Ma and Pa Kettle' movie with big production value," in featured interviews included with the *O Brother* product. In accord with auteur theory, their studio film still bears their signature. *O Brother* is an example of the hybrid form, in which a high quality of character development and plot are present in a commercial film.

The Coens, who take a different position in the cinematic field, needed to serve a wider audience to recoup major production costs, and developed more highly structured plots—to align with the standards of blockbuster or high concept filmmaking. They do not indulge in lingering in a scene (character without plot expressing interior meaning), because of the demands of major studio production, which focuses on economic return.

Analysis 2: The HBO Effect: *Auteur* or Not *Auteur*?

The field of cinema production in the 1990s was still largely divided from the field of television production, but the lines would start to blur with the advent of pay television in most households in the late 1990s. The TV showrunner starts to emerge in this period, and offer audiences, on pay television, a cinematic experience not previously available on the small screen (due to the broadcast-decency standards enforced by the FCC). But not every TV showrunner who works in the cable market is an *auteur*, according to the criteria expressed by Truffaut and Sarris.

When thinking about TV's new golden age, many observers, such as Allen Rucker, agree that the turning-point show is HBO's *The Sopranos*, created and written by David Chase. *The Sopranos*, which first ran on HBO in 1999, followed in the footsteps of *Sex and The City* (SATC), which ran on HBO from 1998 to 2004, in bringing a grittier type of show—without broadcast censorship, and without annoying commercial breaks—to living room TV sets. *Sopranos* went further, however, by leaving behind the formulaic scripts of SATC. Chase was writing unexpected plot twists, including killing off primary characters, which was not expected in traditional, terrestrial TV shows.

Chase also revealed multiple contradictory sides in his lead character, Tony Soprano, who ranged from a murderer to vulnerable therapy patient, starting with the first episode. Truffaut might have expressed contempt for the failure of family values expressed in the show, but cultural critics, such as David Lavery, recognise the show as a game changer in the way that audiences experience television. It was finally possible to question everyday values and express an interior meaning of distress or dysfunction in a show presented on the small screen. As actor James Gandolfini told reporter John Doyle, *The Sopranos* is a "show about America," which might be taken to mean it is a show about the criminal edge of capitalism that is not bound by ethnic stereotypes.

While the show is remembered for its cultural references and violent imagery (including a gun hanging from the show's black-and-white logo and an aggressive soundtrack), the first and following seasons follow Tony's struggles in therapy. According to Higgins and Romano, these creative expressions lead to the recognition of the *HBO effect*, and also brought profits to the creators and actors, thus crossing the culture/economy divide in the field of production. Applying the criteria of Sarris, Chase is a competent writer who expresses a signature look and feel in his show. Moreover, he expresses interior meaning that relates to his own biography and personality. According to an interview published in *McLean*'s, like Tony Soprano, Chase is of Italian descent and also suffered with a difficult, angry mother throughout his life, leading him to deal with mental illness issues. Despite the complexity and interior meaning expressed in Tony Soprano, ultimately the character and the show are about power, and power wielded in criminal ways. Joseph S. Walker writes about the visual cues used in *The Sopranos* to express the use and operation of power. For Walker, Tony knows the systems of power within which he operates and he uses the cultural codes to dominate those systems, whether in the medical office or the counting room with his mobsters.

Position-taking by Chase as a showrunner-*auteur* was converted into economic capital because he brought a cinematic experience to TV. For example, as early as 2005, the show was being bid for sale into re-runs, at the rate of $1.8 million per episode, according to report by Martin and Dempsey in *Daily Variety*. This places Chase in a new and different position in the field of production, compared to positions of film director *auteurs* (either pure indie *auteur*s or indiewood directors).

Working in the pay-television market in the new media era does not mean that every showrunner is an auteur, however. The critically acclaimed HBO show *Game of Thrones* ("*GoT*") is a digitally available TV show, based on the adult fantasy books, *A Song of Ice and Fire,* by George R.R. Martin, which have sold over 15 million copies worldwide. According to Krishnamurthy, the fiction series brings a wide array of transmedia narratives, in cultural comic books, card and board games, video games and the TV show.

David Benioff and D. B. Weiss as the showrunners of *GoT* are an example of how world-building narratives, found in other media such as novels, can be produced and distributed on TV, in ways not conceivable during the broadcast era. The economic success of Martin's novels generated a wealth of cultural capital, which has been developed by Benioff and Weiss to create a blockbuster show. The *GoT* success story illustrates that the culture/economy binary can be transversed in multiple ways in the digital era. And yet, the criteria of *auteur* status appear to be missing. According to the showrunners, in an interview given to Joanna Robinson of *Vanity Fai*r, the show remains faithful to the novels, despite some non-book deaths of characters on the show. The faithfulness to the novels violates both Truffaut and Sarris criteria for auteurism, but then again, *GoT* is a massive production with hundreds of actors on the payroll. It would be hard to say that it is an exercise in simply adding pictures to the novel. It is more than a depiction. A showrunner or director who works on a show, such as the Emmy-winning *Game of Thrones* that is recognised for its world building and collaborative authorship, as well as economic success, may be redefining auteurism for the digital era in ways not anticipated in the 1950s and 1960s.

Benioff and Weiss engage with fans as production is ongoing, having set up a new website, *www.makinggameofthrones.com,* where they blog from the set, according to interviews given to Idaho Public Television. Yet the co-creators told IPT that they draw the line at audience participation in the scripts or plots. They share the responsibilities of cultural creation (writing) and economic development (marketing). Their novel position as leading showrunners of the transmedia era means they pay nearly constant attention to the show. Benioff's IMDb biography and profile explain the work involved in the production: "Almost immediately after finishing filming, [Benioff and Weiss] start writing the outline for the next season. At the

same time, the previous season is in post production phases like editing and sound mixing, and they [have] to oversee all these procedures while writing, and later deal with marketing of the upcoming season as well."

In the IPT interview, the showrunners say that combining the writing and producing tasks for a digital streaming show has caused them to make multiple mistakes as they travel the learning curve. Even if closely following the novels, Benioff and Weiss bridge the culture/economy binary with a show that offers the complex character development and intricate plots that were, at one time, only to be expected in an auteurial film production.

Analysis 3: How to Enter the Film Industry From Another Medium

Lily and Lana Wachowski are transitional players in the convergence of the film and TV. As film *auteurs*, they converged comic-book expressions, with both film and game expressions, bringing film production into the transmedia era. Starting with a background in the comic-book medium, they now express a unique, auteurial signature in the film and TV field of production with works distributed by Warner Bros., a legacy studio, and, more recently, distributed by Netflix, a new-media entity. The Wachowskis became showrunner-*auteurs* who bridge the culture/economy binary in a number of ways.

One way is their recent decision to apply their film expertise to storytelling for the digital-streaming market. The Wachowskis became TV showrunners with their latest move to write, produce and direct for small screen(s) with the streaming-video show *Sense8* (Netflix 2015-2018). *Sense8* is the story of eight strangers, living in different cultures and parts of the world, oddly linked via psychic connections. As with their other signature works, especially *Bound* and *The Matrix*, the digital show turns on questions of identity, power struggles and the body, and the binary of reality/illusion—as well as emphasising spectacle. The recurrent characteristics of the Wachowski signature is their exploration of personal identity and the interconnectedness of people. This theme is made hypnotically visual in a number of ways, including having the "sensates" or characters in *Sense8* see through each other eyes. This signature builds on the epic visual style the Wachowskis first expressed in *The Matrix*. The best-known Wachowski style point from *The Matrix* is "bullet time," an effect showing different rates of speed for different characters (who can dodge bullets, etc.) in the same frame.

The Netflix series *Sense8* won the 2016 GLAAD Media Award for Best Dramatic Series. At the awards, Lily Wachowski said, "while the ideas of identity and transformation are critical components of our work, the bedrock that all ideas rest upon is love." Their debut film *Bound* also expresses this signature, as did *The Matrix* trilogy. A central sign of *The Matrix* is individuality (or soul), and a central question of the film is whether the character Neo (played by Keanu Reeves) is "the one." In *The Matrix*, the Wachowskis were able to convert their cultural capital, gained in comic books, to create a market success with the film trilogy.

The Matrix is an example of transmedia *auteurs* using a cultural aesthetic from one media, to gain economic power by aligning with a major economic actor in another media. According to *Variety* reporter Jonathan Bing, Warner Bros. executives did not understand the script of *The Matrix*. The anti-authoritarian message and the planned visual effects were not part of the studio's vocabulary of high-concept filmmaking. The Wachowskis needed the funding of a major studio to reach the required production value for their "special effects extravaganza"—but they did not want to adopt the aesthetic of a conglomerate studio film (37).

Because *The Matrix* was produced in the years before widespread, streaming digital-video shows, the trajectory for getting *The Matrix* produced had to follow the rules of old-media production. Bing explains that the executives needed artwork to see the Wachowskis' vision for the film, which became a blockbuster franchise, albeit with an indie feel. With the studio backing their transmedia work, the Wachowskis "tested the limits of what the studio would allow and what could be rendered on film" (37).

Coming later into the film and TV field, Cody Diablo also used multiple media forms (including her body) to break into Hollywood. She started her career as a part-time stripper, part-time blogger. Cody was later discovered by a producer, who enjoyed Cody's blog, and suggested she write a novel. When *Candy Girl*,

a novel about her adventures in stripping, was published, Cody had the leverage to write for film and TV. *Candy Girl,* even though a novel, shows the recurrent characteristics of style that serve as Cody's signature and can be seen in her later works, the Oscar-winning film *Juno* (2007) and her digital show, *The United States of Tara* (Showtime 2009-11).

The signature of her storytelling is the atypical smart but punky girl, who is disconnected from the adult world. The interior meaning connecting with Cody's biography (in part told in *Candy Girl*) and personality is the conflict between what a woman is struggling with in an external environment and her internal struggles. In *Juno*, the girl is pregnant, but has issues with the adults in her life who behave in ways less mature.

A key quotation, from her Academy-Award winning screenplay for *Juno*, is:

> I never realized how much I like being home unless I've been somewhere really different for a while.
> — June MacGuff, played by Ellen Page, *Juno* (Fox Searchlight 2007).

This expresses Cody's signature and auteurial message that moves beyond the media in which she works. Cody's work addresses the demand that women be nurturing of others in a community or family when the individual woman does not have everything figured out for herself. This signature is also in evidence in her TV show: *The United States of Tara*.

In *Juno* and *Tara*, Cody expresses her identity, as *auteur*, to challenge, and subvert, dominant cultural representations of the pregnant body and the strictures of motherhood. *Tara* is about a woman with multiple personalities or "alters." The social position that Cody takes in the transmedia field of TV production is that of a newcomer, and a devil-may-dare original. Her cultural capital is her economic capital, meaning that her message is what creates the value in her shows. Because of the freedom of expression in the TV medium in the digital era, she is able to express an unapologetic female voice, which nevertheless appeals to mass audiences. In her IMDb profile, she says:

> The attitude toward women in this industry is nauseating. There are all sorts of porcine executives who are uncomfortable with a woman doing anything subversive. They want the movie about the beautiful girl who trips and falls, the adorable klutz. When you're in a competitive environment, always give out the impression that you don't care. It makes people want you more (IMDb, "Diablo Cody").

While even though (some) business executives working in the confines of a studio system may not understand her message or location in the field, she is a showrunner-*auteur* who has leveraged opportunities in the digital era.

Conclusion

Theorizing the TV showrunner as *auteur*, it is suggested that the showrunner functions as a translator of cultural capital *into* economic capital. TV showrunners have the opportunity to bridge the culture/economy divide that structures the field of production. The disruptions of power structures in the field, precipitated by new technologies of production, as well as freedom of expression guaranteed by the First Amendment, provide ample opportunities for showrunners to leverage the mode of delivery (medium) and produce signature-quality shows (message).

Shifting opportunities in the TV medium are transforming the quality of the message, because individual writers are able to express their signature voices, using new media and digital distribution avenues. Each showrunner examined revealed different ways of leveraging technological disruptions in media, over the timeline from 1999 to 2017. The timeline moves from David Chase making a cinematic show for cable TV distribution in 1999—to the Wachowskis using comic books and electronic games to express their auteurial message in traditional films and digital TV.

Next Cody was able to enter the film and TV field unconventionally through blogging, and then to beat a path higher along the economic hierarchy of the new market, creating a social space for expression not bound by broadcast censorship or the gendered consciousness of network TV. She has been consecrated

with the highest award given to screenwriters, as per the understanding of Allen and Lincoln regarding auteurism as a category of promotion. Each showrunner in the study has crossed the culture/economy binary to express individual agency as a showrunner-*auteur*. Future research might examine other showrunners, including, for example, David Simon (*The Wire*, *Deuce*), Terence Winter (*Boardwalk Empire*), Jenji Leslie Kohan (*Orange is the New Black*), and Matt and Ross Duffer (*Stranger Things*).

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