

A Companion to Media Authorship

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Edited by
Jonathan Gray
and
Derek Johnson

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2013
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Wiley-Blackwell is an imprint of John Wiley & Sons, formed by the merger of Wiley's global Scientific, Technical and Medical business with Blackwell Publishing.

Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A companion to media authorship / edited by Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-470-67096-5 (hardback) – ISBN 978-1-118-49525-4 (epub) – ISBN 978-1-118-49527-8 (epdf) 1. Arts – Authorship. 2. Creation (Literary, artistic, etc.) I. Gray, Jonathan (Jonathan Alan), editor of compilation. II. Johnson, Derek, 1979–editor of compilation.

NX195.C66 2013

302.23 – dc23

2012042777

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover image: Main image © Katie Edwards / Getty Images; girl with laptop

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Cover design by Cyan Design

Typeset in 11/13pt Dante by Laserwords Private Limited, Chennai, India.

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Introduction

The Problem of Media Authorship

Derek Johnson and Jonathan Gray

Why write a book about media authorship when it seems that so much is already being said about it? Perhaps we would be better off turning to Facebook, for example, where our news feeds are often dominated by discussion of the creative practitioners behind popular culture and their significance to what we see on our screens. “David Cronenberg makes strange movies,” announced the first line of one article shared by one of the editors’ acquaintances.¹ Just two items down, a picture from another friend mapped the writing staffs of many popular American television shows back to Joss Whedon as supposed father figure. Whedon reappeared in another friend’s post linking to a *New York Times* review of *The Avengers* whose title boldly announced “A Film’s Superheroes Include the Director,”² and that linked to a slide show on “The Work of Joss Whedon.” Yet, Whedon’s star was dwarfed on this day – May 4th, or “*Star Wars* Day” to some – by many items discussing George Lucas, some of which extolled his virtues as a master storyteller, many of which expressed dismay with his “meddling” with his films, and many of which compared him to other franchise author figures such as Christopher Nolan, J.K. Rowling, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Suzanne Collins. Other posts debated or glowingly commended various newspaper columnists and media pundits’ comments from the morning or the night before. Yet another linked to the latest video by online auteur and actress Felicia Day. And while clicking on these links, many of the accompanying ads used their authors to sell: one sidebar, for instance, sold *The Five Year Engagement* as “from the producer of *Bridesmaids*,” while another announced *The Lucky One* as being “from the acclaimed bestselling author of *The Notebook* and *Dear John*,” and another for the new *Walking Dead* videogame offered a more complex authorial trail by noting that it was based both on the comic book series by Robert Kirkman and on the AMC television series. In this same feed, television scholar Jason Mittell even announced that he had just published a chapter (about television authorship,

no less!) of his book-in-progress, *Complex TV*, in an experiment in ongoing peer review, whereby Mittell encouraged readers to comment (thus, in some way becoming “co-authors”?) so that he could revise the book prior to publication in paper. Projects such as this call attention not only to the authorship of media, but also to how authorship is mediated, where the technologies and platforms that we use in the course of creativity seem to enable social and collaborative forms of cultural production. So while the news feed of a Facebook user who happens to be editing a book about authorship may certainly be shaped by a bit of self-selection, it seems reasonable to conclude at the very least that there’s a vast discourse about authorship already in circulation, and that perhaps this book is thus not needed to call our attention to the importance of media authors or media authorship.

What this book can do, however, is point to what often goes unspoken in all the discourses and issues of media authorship that surround us in everyday life. To see press or marketing for almost any item of media today without seeing the invocation of at least one author figure is rare. Yet each and every item carries with it the ghosts of authors not mentioned. *The Five Year Engagement* might be from the producer of *Bridesmaids*, for instance, but who directed it? Who wrote the script? One comment on a friend’s Facebook post about *Star Wars* Day alleged that *Star Wars* was taken largely from Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*,³ while another noted *A New Hope*’s (1977) multiple borrowings from *Hidden Fortress* (1958). Discussions of adaptations often lead to accusations of “ruining” a pristine original and of textual infidelity, moreover, so to invoke “the acclaimed bestselling author” of *The Notebook* and *Dear John* is not only oddly to summon an author without a name, but is also to risk igniting concerns about poor adaptation, and a divergence from “the way the author intended it.” And behind each and every one of the above-mentioned texts, we could list at the least tens, and perhaps even thousands, of other faces of the author-as-hero, of individuals who contributed to the creation, envisioning, and realizing of the text, and yet whose names are not listed. If we examine *Star Wars*, for example, even beyond pointing out the obvious influences from Campbell and *Hidden Fortress*’s director, Akira Kurosawa, we might ask about the authorial power of other directors, writers, producers, cast, production designers, special effects designers, matte artists, sound designers, foley artists, and so on. Some of these figures have gained authorial or pseudo-authorial status in popular culture themselves, as with John Williams, the composer of the *Star Wars* music, Ben Burtt, the sound designer, or Carrie Fisher, a cast member who went on to become a writer and who has thus often been suspected to have written parts of the dialogue. Yet others remain untouted, except by the most loyal and informed fan and/or production communities.

On one level, the constant invocation of authors reveals a cultural fascination with them and with the super powers ascribed to them. The narratives – both fictional and non-fictional – that the media delivers become resources for so many discussions and thoughts in our waking and sleeping lives, making it only natural that we often find ourselves keen to find out who made them and how they

made them. The author as figure is often posited as the individual who created the product, he or she who can variously be thanked or blamed, and he or she who then “gave” it to us (witness the language of texts being “from” an author, as if a parcel in the mail). The author is thus imagined to stand at the gateway and threshold between creativity, innovation, wonder, and magic, and us – all of those experiencing and taking pleasure in media culture in the mundane spaces of everyday life. If we are to understand how that world of wonder and magic works, the author is often posited as the figure we must capture and study. Why wouldn’t we want to know not only who the magician is, but also how his or her tricks are performed?

On another level – lest all this talk of wonder and magic has readers crinkling their cynical brows – this widespread interest in authorship also reveals a cultural suspicion about precisely how magical they are. Instead of taking this whole system of creativity, mundanity, and the author-as-magician positioned in between for granted, we should see it as a discursive construct. Whose interests does it serve to see the world divided into the magical and the mundane, and if the author is the mediating figure, who has the power to create this figure and to install him or her on that threshold? What, in other words, is at stake in seeing authors in general as magicians, but what too is at stake in seeing any particular individual as an author-magician? As noted above, every nominated author has a wealth of ghost authors standing behind him or her, those whose names have not been invoked – whether by an ad campaign, a review, or a fan in question. What are the strategic reasons, then, to sell one author (“the producer of *Bridesmaids*”) in one setting, or another in another setting (“from the acclaimed bestselling author”)? Who gets to determine who “counts,” who argues over this, and *why* might we argue over it? What cultural work is the author’s name expected to do?

Let us follow up on the case of George Lucas briefly. When Lucasfilm or Twentieth Century Fox sell him as a remarkable author figure, they clearly have their reasons to do so. In a world full of many more movies than any one person could ever see, announcing that *this* movie is special, that it comes from a true visionary, aims to make any film of Lucas’ stand above others. In this sense, media authorship plays very similarly to the star system: a form of product differentiation cranked out of the marketing and promotion machines of Hollywood to distinguish product in a crowded marketplace. Of course, this similarity helps us to realize that it’s also not quite that simple, since Lucasfilm and Fox in fact sell the movie as multiply-authored, pointing to other members of the cast and crew whose work we are similarly encouraged to see as wholly unique, pathsetting, and magical. This poses actual challenges for those working on “a film by George Lucas,” as hierarchies need to be created of who gets to control what. If a whole host of people have supposedly unique visionary powers, how does one bring them all together? In any artform that requires collaboration – as with almost all forms of mass media – authorship will therefore require not just magical ideas but also no small amount of management. How do Lucas, Lucasfilm, and Fox ensure, in other

words, that John Williams can write his best music, Harrison Ford can offer his best performance, Lawrence Kasdan can write his best script, and so on, yet that they can still come together and form something that is not just a cacophonous collection of contrasting creative acts? But the management that these individuals and their marketing teams must perform is also *discursive*. For beyond the actual acts of who does what, Lucas, Lucasfilm, and Fox (and now Disney) will encourage us to see some authors as more active than others. Hierarchies of control and value are not merely required on set: they are required in the press and in the popular imagination regarding what creativity is.

Witness here the battles between Lucasfilm and some *Star Wars* fans. The latter have often contested the idea that *Star Wars* “belongs” to Lucasfilm, and have thus felt free to author it themselves. Some fans create fan film or fan fiction that add new characters to the mix, and that transform other already-existing characters or events. To do so is to challenge the notion of Lucasfilm and Lucas having a monopoly on the realm of magic, as the fans now position themselves on the threshold of magic and mundanity, and allow themselves freedom of movement, rather than seeing themselves wholly as receivers of the gifts from Lucasfilm-approved authors. At times, Lucasfilm has “allowed” this by not challenging the fans over the legalities of their actions, and usually these allowances come when Lucasfilm feels its economic and semiotic interests are not challenged inasmuch as it doesn’t stand to lose revenue or control over what the *Star Wars* franchise means and what it does. However, when their interests are challenged, as with much of Hollywood, it has then quickly invoked legal discourses of authorship, rights, and ownership in order to deny authorial rights to fans. Moreover, its approach is not simply reactive, as it also invests considerable capital – through press junkets, “making of” specials, Blu-ray bonus materials, licensed merchandise and books, and so on – in determining exactly who counts as an author, and who counts how much, so that when and if battles do occur, the battles take place on an uneven playing field.

Authorship is therefore about control, power, and the management of meaning and of people as much as it is about creativity and innovation. That makes authorship one of the more vital processes in modern media and culture. The author is a node through which discourses of beauty, truth, meaning, and value must travel, while also being a node through which money, power, labor, and the control of culture must travel, and while frequently serving as the mediating figure standing between large organizations (such as Lucasfilm or Fox) and the audience. No wonder academics and citizens alike are all endlessly fascinated by authors. And no wonder we all discuss authors so frequently, since arguments about creation, beauty, the audience, production, the industrialization of culture, labor, and flows of meaning and cash will often be couched in terms of authorship.

With the author performing so many actual and discursive roles in society, so much is thus at stake in understanding how authorship works, and authorship is a key entry point into examining much of how media culture works. In an age of new and digital media, these issues become even more interesting. For if we have

briefly discussed the authorship of something like the *Star Wars* franchise above, let us also consider the portal through which we arrived at such a discussion, and ask what authorship looks like on something like Facebook. Who authors our Facebook feeds or our Twitter streams? These are massively collaborative productions that defy notions of singular heroic authorship, and that also require us all the more to ask questions of management, by organizations (Facebook), by individuals (Mark Zuckerberg, or an individual Facebook friend), by policy (Facebook's notorious, and ever-changing, privacy settings that determine what we see and can't see), and by algorithm and code. Even individual status updates or tweets quite often defy simple notions of authorship, as they might on the one hand combine the poster's words with another's (retweeting or embedding), and/or on the other hand frame whatever is linked to in a way that adds the voice of the poster to the linked-to subject's words.

Ultimately, then, while the last hundred years or so have been a period of intense fetishization of and dogged belief in the singular author in Western societies, with the likes of Facebook, Twitter, Final Cut Pro, blogs, YouTube, and Pinterest making collaborative, fused, remixed authorship all the more obvious *and normative*, it now strikes us as a particularly opportune time to stop and take stock of exactly what an author is and how authorship works. Along with enabling everyday authorship, perhaps the digital era has cleared away some of the Romanticism and belief in magic that has often doomed discussions of the author to beatification. Such is our hope, and such is the reason for us offering a collection of new statements about media authorship now.

Within academia, considerable debate has raged about what authors are, how much authority they have over a text (or how much author is in authority), how much power our practice as analysts accords them, how much power we should or should not accord them, what their relationship to the text is, what they do for and to texts, and what is at stake in studying them. The chapters in this collection revisit these questions to offer fresh answers. Whether we care about art or industry, creation or reception, production or consumption, text or theory, culture or aesthetics, or all of the above, the author naggingly reappears as a problem to be solved. If authors need "solving," though, this also suggests that fresh answers, theories, and understandings of how authorship work may have significant knock-on effects for our understandings of how art, texts, production cultures, audiences, power, identity, aesthetics, and meaning work.

We have endeavored to collect voices from across various disciplines and addressing various media products. Thus, chapters cover authorship of everything from the films of Robert Bresson to the videogames of Square Enix, from Disney's institutional authorship of Hilary Duff to collaborative cultures of making music, from the video store clerk as author to the nation-state as author of itself and of citizens, from amateur video storytelling in the slums of Nairobi to the business strategies of advertising and promoting Bollywood, from authorship on Twitter to authorship in the board room, and from the penning of comic books to practices

of authorship by fans, music coordinators, production designers, cast members, academics, and more. Authorship has more often been studied in highly contained settings, and yet our goal in assembling such a diverse selection of subjects, writers, and disciplinary frameworks has been to eke out some grander truths of authorship through comparison. We have no definitive answer of what an author is, no easy statement to share in this introduction that could be underlined or highlighted and that could thus spare the reader the journey ahead. Rather, we hope that the chapters that follow will challenge readers to think of the many different ways in which authorship works: as a mediator of aesthetics and meaning, as an act of power and control, as industrial strategy, as something to be practiced, something to be contested, and something to be won, awarded, denied, hoarded, and/or shared. All in all, this means that the business of solving the problem of media authorship is as much about asking critical questions as it is about providing concrete answers.

Chapter Summaries

While each of the chapters in this book offers its own unique perspectives on media authorship, a shared set of research questions unites them all. While the popular discourses of our Facebook feeds (and other sites where authorship discourses are constructed) seem to suggest that we know it when we see it, the chapters comprising this collection first and foremost problematize the question of what authorship is. This means not just accepting tacit definitions of practices and tacit assumptions about what constitutes creativity, but also engaging in critical thought about how all that cultural production is imagined and made meaningful. Through what discourses and cultural processes is media authorship produced? How does the authorship of different media – and the mediation of authorship more broadly – demand that we give our attention to the contexts in which creative agents and their practices unfold and are made culturally intelligible? This means thinking not just about where media authorship comes from, but also who that authorship is constructed around, how, by whom, in what kinds of cultural spaces, and for what purposes. Authorship is therefore not just a question of art and individual expression, but also of social and institutional structures that govern cultural production, enabling, compelling, and authorizing some forms while constraining others.

By interrogating authorship as culture – and thereby, as something we can both construct and deconstruct – we are able to do more than legitimate creative genius worthy of note in those Facebook feeds; instead, we can explore how the attributions of authorship and claims of authority we make give specific value and meaning to the practices, creative or otherwise, of mediated everyday life. We can conduct grounded research into how authorship is rendered visible and invisible. We can understand how authorship is not a natural phenomenon, but a set of

cultural values and concerns variably mobilized in different historical moments and geographic locales. We can think about how authorship has helped constitute the hierarchies between media, considering how literature and film have been legitimated through claims of the genius and vision of individual auteurs compared to forms of cultural production marked as more commercial or collaborative in television, videogames and emerging digital media – in which competing claims to authorship have now worked to construct new structures, practices, and ideals of creativity. In interrogating its relationships with struggle and power, we might not be able to define authorship in a neat, systematic way, but we can start to make sense of the culture that informs it and that it supports in turn. Asking questions about authorship, rather than just producing new claims about authorship, is the best way to get at that culture.

With these shared questions, the authors showcased in this book were able to study authorship in a wide variety of contexts and yet produce a collective intervention. The answers they offer in the attempt to solve the problem of authorship feature a diversity of tones and registers, but from this diversity of approaches and case studies comes a harmony in which the most valuable ideas reinforce one another. Again, this collective contribution is not a definition of media authorship, but something that goes beyond while leaving the topic an open question; instead of a single definitive statement, the book works as a whole to propose a plan of how media authorship might be further problematized in both creative practice and scholarly examination of it. From that outlook, media authorship can be theorized and historicized as a discursive, legal, and practical phenomenon; it can be contested as a site of struggle between multiple parties claiming authority; it can be industrialized within structures and institutions of cultural production; it can be expanded to include new labor categories, emerging sites of creativity, and shifting understandings of the audience; and it can be relocated outside of the commonsense realm of creativity in spheres like retail, marketing, the nation-state, and even the divine.

The first section of the book, **Part I: Theorizing and Historicizing Authorship**, therefore, aims to demonstrate what that theorization and historicization of authorship might look like. On the level of theory, the chapters in the section all extend from a shared concern with authority and agency, seeking to understand how authorship has been deployed as a concept to mediate tensions between the two. On the level of history, these chapters seek to understand how creative practices are themselves dynamic, changing phenomenon, but together they recognize that what practices count as authorship in what contexts has also been a matter of flux and change.

In the first of these chapters, John Hartley seeks to distinguish between creativity and authorship, arguing that in historical usage the term “author” “never was a simple individual, but *one who channels system-level or institutional authority into text*” (original italics). While his chapter is far reaching – tying authorship to emergence, public sphere, industrialization, and property rights – Hartley begins, in fact, with

the figure of God as the authority from which creativity was derived and made powerful through the idea of authorship. In conceiving of authors as agents of systems more so than sources of individual intention and agency, Hartley casts a critical eye on the “narrative of the self” and the way that do-it-yourself publishing and social media have everyone responsible for participating in authorship. Kristina Busse follows up these concerns with an exploration of the ethical basis of authorship, asking how and why it matters who the author behind a text might be. Surveying literary understandings of the author, as well as those of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, she focuses specific questions of authorial responsibilities, privileges, and identities in specific contexts of production and reception. From examinations of hipster racism to fandom, she argues that it matters not just who is authoring culture, but also how the context we have for making sense of that authorship matters. Complementing these ethical perspectives, Olufunmilayo Arewa follows with an examination of authorship from a legal perspective, equally concerned with the history of copyright as with musical forms as well as race and ethnicity. Arewa argues that Western traditions of classical music have sat at odds with models of creativity based in collaboration, borrowing, or copying in African-based musical forms like blues, jazz, gospel, soul, and rap. Uncovering the ways in which hierarchies of race and class have shaped authorial rights, she makes a compelling argument about the inadequacy of copyright and issues a call for alternative structures that “recognize borrowing as a norm and incorporate better delineation of the scope of acceptable borrowing and mechanisms for compensation that better recognize the reality of sharing and collaboration in creation.”

Jonathan Gray follows this critique of copyright’s racial hierarchies with a similar attempt to uncover the contingency and selectiveness of authorship discourses. Seeking to understand the temporality of authorship, Gray sees authority over a text as a something of a moving target, constructed in specific discursive circumstances but reconfigurable and reconstructed in successive moments. His argument, ultimately, centers upon the idea of authorial flux, in which clusters of authorship and authority are continuously built and rebuilt. Equally concerned with this idea of flux is Colin Burnett, who problematizes the notion of fixed authorial vision and worldview in examining the collaborations between film director Robert Bresson and his frequent cinematographer Léonce-Henri Burel. Studying production materials, Burnett theorizes an “intentional flux” in Bresson’s work that can account for the historical and social conditions in which individual creators’ intentions are negotiated and in which solutions to creative problems are found. Pointing to the “hidden hands at work” in film as well as television and videogames Burnett explodes the concept of intention often assumed as the basis for authorship while paying close attention to the specific choices made by human agents working in social relations. Together, these five chapters push us to understand authorship in terms of shifting social relations, specific contexts, and systems of power.

The second section of the book, **Part II: Contesting Authorship**, builds upon these theoretical interventions to posit authorship as a field of contestation. This means correcting utopian rhetoric about creativity and free expression – particularly in a digital age defined by social media and participatory culture – and engaging in questions of conflict based in ownership, creative constraints, competing claims to authority, and above all, marginalization within the kinds of hierarchies that so often mark the cultures of media authorship. In concert with one another, these chapters examine authorship as something asserted amid the power relations of industry and other social institutions, in which multiple claims to authorship circulate in tension with one another.

Looking at the ways in which contemporary media culture is understood to be a site of co-creativity, participation, and collaboration on the part of consumer-users, Derek Johnson considers the politics of collaboration and asks how the discursive imagination of audiences in those terms reinscribes them and their creative practices within dominant hierarchies and markers of legitimacy. Putting the gendered devaluation of toy/television property *My Little Pony* in tension with claims of authorship surrounding producer Lauren Faust and the franchise's participatory audience, Johnson complements Foucault's notion of the "author function" with an "audience function" in which certain gendered, sexed, and aged audiences serve as a prop in the process of constructing and imagining authorial legitimacy. Brian Ekdale continues this corrective to the utopian rhetoric of participation, arguing that marginalization and difference persist even when removed from the industrialized realm of Hollywood. Focusing on young producers of non-profit self-representational media in Nairobi slums, Ekdale describes authorship as a battle between creativity and constraint where personal stories are not produced or owned by individuals or communities, but "constructed at the intersection of individual autonomy, personal histories, existing stories, and circumstances." Even in self-representational media, therefore, authorship is something fought for, negotiated out of the constraints of production.

Returning to the commercial realm, Michele Hilmes offers in her chapter a historical examination of how claims of authorship have been attributed and arbitrated in the broadcasting industry by trade organizations such as the Radio Writer's Guild. In addition to its relevance to debates about seriality and writing for broadcast media today, Hilmes' history offers insight into how authorship has been asserted in the face of institutional structures and forms aimed at effacing the work of creativity. In radio broadcasting, she identifies the emergence of what she calls "streaming seriality," in which ongoing production and the lack of a closed, individual text has troubled traditional notions of originality and authorship. Moving from broadcast history to the contemporary moment, Matt Hills explores what he calls discourses of "counter-authorship," wherein competing claims to television authorship emerge in response to industry power relations. Hills argues that "[a]nalyzing processes of TV authorship in this manner means starting not from the end-product's credits, but rather addressing the

journey whereby a range of authors are effectively written out, or opt out, along the way.” Offering a case study of the BBC series *Torchwood*, and the authorship claims made by and attributed to figures like “absentee landlord” Russell T. Davies, showrunner “tenant” Chris Chibnall, and US networks like FOX, Hills suggests that the identities of channels, programs, and author cannot all be aligned without compromise, contestation, and struggle. Closing this section is Ian Gordon’s analysis of multiple authorship in comic books, wherein he argues that industry structures have been set up to deny the authorship of figures like Joe Shuster, Jerry Siegel, and Jerry Robinson with moral claims to characters like Superman and Batman, in favor of contractual obligations to other parties. Gordon offers an account of moral authorship, legal limbos, and negotiation over corporately owned resources shared by for-hire labor over long periods of time. In positioning authorship as a site of multiplicity, and offering a detailed account of how rights to authority are assigned, Gordon – like each of the authors in this section – understands media authorship as a site of cultural tension.

While many of the above chapters recognize authorship as a phenomenon made meaningful in and by industrial forces, the third section of the book, **Part III: Industrializing Authorship**, works to push these observations further, focusing on how corporate structures shape and are shaped by authorship. This means that these chapters aim to rethink some of our common assumptions about authorship, rejecting ideas that it might be tied to art free of industrial constraints and that the most commercial of popular culture is not authored in its market-driven purpose. Instead, these chapters put authorship in direct relation to the commodification of culture and the reification of social identities; they situate collaboration as a site of compromise and institutional control; they think about authorship as a kind of identity suited to product differentiation; and above all, they consider authorship as a strategy and practice tied up in commercial and institutional demands.

To open this discussion, Anamik Saha explores how, in the commodification of production by the culture industries, diasporic subjects find their work undermined and their alternative or oppositional narratives of cultural difference reified. Drawing from an ethnography of British South Asian cultural production in the theater, and critiquing works of cultural studies that would divorce study of texts from their context of production, Saha argues that non-white playwrights and theater companies working in the West find their work impeded and subverted in such a way as to demand that we consider those industrial structures as authorial forces in and of themselves. To position *industry as author*, Saha argues that “the increasingly standardized and rationalized processes of contemporary cultural production limit and restrict creative freedom and that thereby takes on authorial powers in itself.” Following Saha, Stephen Teo too seeks to understand what happens when cultural production occurs within highly rationalized systems, exploring the work of film director Li Hanxiang in the Shaw Brothers studio system of 1950s and ’60s Hong Kong. Unsatisfied with approaches based in either auteurism or collective collaboration and seeking to account for non-Western