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Technology in search of an artist: questions of *auteurism*/authorship and the contemporary cinematic experience

Abstract: In contemporary culture questions of authorship keep recurring. The music industry has for a long time been battling the ubiquity of authorship and using techniques of sampling and re-mixing. New media has accelerated the effect and the possibility of sampling not just from music but from many other digital sources such as images, videos, texts, source codes, software etc. Today, in many cases, it is difficult to clearly identify an author. Rather, we see emerging a system of multiple, hybridized, collective authorship. New technology demands new knowledge and skills from the traditional authors; the Artist, the Architect, the Scientist, the 'Master' Film-Maker and encourages them to work in an interdisciplinary multimedia context. By considering, among others, the latest trends emerging on the fringe of mainstream Hollywood (Hollywood 2.0) and the most experimental cinematic expressions (Internet cinema, the 'Future Cinema' exhibition), this paper investigates whether a new model of co-authorship which (inter)actively involves the audience is surfacing or whether, conversely, we are witnessing an 'illusion of authorship', while the aura of authorship (albeit under new semblances) is firmly reaffirmed right at a time when it is most challenged.

Being a director is lonely job. You are in the midst of a crowd, but you are on your own. Everybody else looks to you. (David Lean)

The work of art is valuable only in so far as it is vibrated by the reflexes of the future.

(André Breton)

Questions of authorship keep recurring since 'The Death of the Author' was first claimed by poststructuralist philosophy. Since the term hypertext was invented by Ted Nelson in 1965, theorists like George Landow and Michael Joyce have transferred the core thesis of poststructuralist thinking to the literary application of hypertext. Hyperfiction, seen as a 'garden of forking paths,' seems to semantically represent the looseness of the signifier-signified-relation as the multiple narrative lines subvert any control by the reader and undermine the author's power to fix all contexts and therefore all meanings of the text sequences. Although Landow sees this hypertextual dimension as a fulfillment of the poststructuralist claim - that meaning is only constituted by the reader and not determined by the author - one cannot but wonder whether the eighteenth/nineteenth-century legal and aesthetic discourses which have constructed the ideal of authorship still persist today, in other words whether the 'question of the author as a privileged moment of individualization' (Foucault) can tame collaboration's democratic potential. It has been suggested that the notion of hypertext, by altering hierarchical and linear structures of

reading/writing and by diffusing individual authorial control has political ramifications, in this sense Deleuze's comments on his working relationship with Guattari are illuminating:

We are only two, but what was important for us was less our working together than this strange fact of working between the two of us. We stopped being "author." And these "between the twos" referred back to other people, who were different on one side from on the other. ... In these conditions, as soon as there is this type of multiplicity, there is politics, micro-politics (Deleuze and Parnet 2002, 17).

If we leave the literary sphere and consider other fields such as music, cinema and the visual arts it becomes apparent how new forms of cooperation and communication are deeply changing the notion of the author in ways that supersede artistic or disciplinary boundaries. Today, in many cases, it is difficult to clearly identify an author. Rather, we see emerging a system of multiple, hybridized, collective authorship. New technology demands new knowledge and skills from the traditional authors; the Artist, the Architect, the Scientist, the 'Master' Film-Maker and encourages them to work in an interdisciplinary multimedia context. By considering, among others, the latest trends emerging on the fringe of mainstream Hollywood (Hollywood 2.0) and the most experimental cinematic expressions (Internet cinema, the 'Future Cinema' exhibition), this paper investigates whether a new model of co-authorship which (inter)actively involves the audience is surfacing or whether, conversely, we are witnessing an 'illusion

of authorship'. It is my contention that the aura of authorship, under new performative semblances, appears to be reaffirmed right at a time when it is most challenged.

The impasse of *Auteur*/Author theory

The aim of this section is to succinctly reassess *auteur*/author theory by tracing what I call the 'various incarnations' of the *auteur* from the early formulations in the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, its (hastily) proclaimed 'death' in the late sixties, to the commercialization of authorship typical of postmodernity. The impasse that characterises *auteur* theory today is not entirely due to the impact of the so called 'digital revolution' on the medium of cinema, rather such a revolution has magnified pre-existing inner tensions between the medium's 'unauthored' qualities and its persistent faith in the distinctive creative drive of the 'Master' film maker. The terms *auteurism*/authorship are purposely juxtaposed through the section - and the essay - given their conterminous character.

Cinema resists being thought of in terms of traditional notions of authorship. Scholars have frequently emphasized the collaborative nature of the medium, its commercial underpinnings, and its reliance on analogic modes of representation as evidence of its 'unauthored' qualities. Nevertheless, the author-director remains one of the primary categories through which we (allegedly) understand film. Interest in film authorship is far from over, as recent collections by Virginia Wright Wexman (2002) and David Gerstner and Janet Staiger (2003) have shown. My contention is that, since its first appearance in the 1948 article by Alexandre Astruc for the Marxist film journal *Ecran Français*, called "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: le Caméra-Stylo" - reformulated a few years later by François Truffaut in the *Cahiers du Cinéma* – the *auteur* has

undergone various incarnations, the latest one being the figure of the ‘technically-savvy’ director. During the 1960s, when cinema first entered the academy as a serious object of study, the primary focus was on *auteurism*, or on film’s authorship. With the ascendancy of structuralism and post-structuralism and the publication of seminal essays by Roland Barthes, "The death of the author" (1968), and Michel Foucault, "What is an author?"(1969), however, the idea of the author came under greater scrutiny. More recently, feminist scholars such as Judith Mayne (1990) have denounced its “distinctly patriarchal connotations”, while others like Giuliana Bruno (1992) have considered women's authorship in early, avant-garde, and classical cinema from a perspective that stresses professional agency. So, where do we stand today, in defining the *auteur*? Identifying a film author from among all the filmmakers who have produced films within the last century remains a challenging enterprise. The qualifications for the title of film author, or *auteur*, despite decades of debate and attempted clarification, are blurred for the modern critic. What is certain is that in modern Hollywood filmmaking, the director's reputation can sell a film almost as successfully as its stars. According to Sarris (1962), the *auteur* theory leads us to believe that a bad John Ford is better than a good Henry King. *Auteur* analysis means that there is something worthwhile to be found in the worst of an *auteur's* films, therefore it is impossible for him to make a truly ‘bad’ film. This, of course, is the principal selling point of the commerce of authorship; the *auteur* once established becomes a 'seal of quality' on a work. As Corrigan puts it:

The international imperatives of post-modern culture have made it clear that commerce is now much more than just a contending discourse: if, in

conjunction with the so-called international art cinema of the sixties and seventies, the *auteur* had been absorbed as a phantom presence within the text, he or she has rematerialized in the eighties and nineties as a commercial performance of the business of being an auteur (Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls* 121).

The value of the director as selling point of a film, a familiar concept in art cinema, is now applicable to commercial cinema as well, thus confirming the post-modern drift across the boundaries of 'high' and 'low' art. With the post-structuralist theory the *auteur* is no longer a 'real' person but an objectified construct within the text. Nowadays, to quote Corrigan once again, "*auteurist* movies are often made before they get made" (120), they create a critical expectation that makes viewing the actual film unnecessary. It is quite ironic that the artistically motivated concept of *auteur* now serves to support the financial gains of the film industry itself, since the *Cahiers du Cinéma's* aim in identifying the first *auteurs* was precisely to rescue them from this same world of profit-focused filmmaking.

To my mind, the value of the director as a selling point also suggests that the artist is still overwhelmingly conceptualized as a wholly individuated, creative genius. Walter Benjamin's contention of 1935 that art has been forever destabilized by the conditions of a technologized world still holds true, however: while we can fetishize the objects of that 'art' which is mass-produced (supposedly aura-lacking), we still cling tenaciously to the *aura of the artist* – an increasingly untenable idea in a situation where the arts become

indistinguishable in the digital code and can only figure 'intermedially' as quoted forms of their media. Still, even the practice of media production (film, video, other) that requires group collaboration due to the scale and technology of the project, betrays a hierarchical division of labor in existing models. This serves to reinforce the notion of authorship - the idea that the entire configuration may be attributed to a singular genius. And yet the industrial, technological/mechanical production method for films contradicts the singularity and autonomy associated with the artwork quality in much the same way that the idea of authorship is contradicted by the collective production method, which is, indeed, still based upon a hierarchy among the collaborators. Thus, the interpretation and history of films as artworks directly contradict the idea of artwork and its creator. It is at this impasse that the *auteur* theory lies today.

The Politics of collective authorship

In the previous section I noted François Truffaut's intervention on *auteurism*. More specifically he expressed his ideas in an article titled "Une certaine tendance du cinéma français" (1954), in which he describes the so-called *politique des Auteurs*. The ideological implications of Truffaut's 1950's film criticism have been widely discussed over the years. According to some biographers, Truffaut's reactionary polemics were a rhetorical style or a 'moral' stand rather than a reflection of ideological convictions on his part (de Baecque and Toubiana, *Truffaut*). Others have expressed a different take on the political subtext of Truffaut's *auteur* theory, John Hess, for instance, has suggested that:

La politique des auteurs was, in fact, a justification couched in aesthetic terms, of a culturally conservative, politically reactionary attempt to

remove film from the realm of social and political concern, in which the progressive forces of the Resistance had placed all the arts in the years immediately after the war (“La Politique des auteurs” 1974).

Truffaut despised ‘message films’ and what he called the ‘cultural political activism’ of leftists and Marxists involved in literature and the arts. Some of the questions regarding Truffaut’s ideological agenda (and the consequences for the subsequent formulations of *auteur* theory) remain open: did his arguments stem simply from a belief that politics had no place in filmmaking? Was he arguing as an aesthetic purist or as a political dogmatist? This section takes its lead from such unresolved ideological issues to discuss authorship’s latest incarnation: collective authorship - and its activist *politique* - as it is articulated in contemporary computer culture.

Probably one of the most interesting discussions being conducted on the World Wide Web right now is about intellectual property and digital copyrights (or *copylefts*, as they have been renamed in activist quarters). The open source movement liberated the computer code with the general public license and the Linux operating system, and the repercussions for issues of authorship within artistic practices have been enormous. In an article titled “Who is the Author? Sampling / Remixing / Open Source” (2002), Lev Manovich examines several models of contemporary authorship, one is ‘authorship by selection’, i.e. when a user is made to feel like a ‘real artist’ by the fact that software packages allow her/him to quickly create a professional looking work by selecting from a few menus. Then there is the case of the authorship which arises from the collaboration

between the author and the software used, this is the so-called ‘software authorship’, particularly interesting is the OPUS project (2002) inspired by the Open Source Movement. The aims of the OPUS project are:

To build a creative commons with a community of media practitioners, artists, authors and the public from all over the world. Here people can present their own work and make it open for transformation, besides intervening and transforming the work of others by bringing in new materials, practices and insights. The Discussion forums are there to open out the works to comments and reflections. Opus follows the same rules as those that operate in all free software communities - i.e. the freedom to view, to download, to modify and to redistribute. The source(code), in this case the video, image, sound or text, is free to use, to edit and to redistribute (<http://www.opuscommons.net/main.php>).

Manovich contends that the OPUS collective is significant because it is both a software package and an accompanying ‘theoretical package’. Thus the theoretical ideas about authorship articulated by the collective do not remain theory but are implemented in software available for everybody to use. In short, this is ‘software theory’ at its best: theoretical ideas translated into a new kind of cultural software. Manovich concludes his essay by advocating a critical vocabulary to be applied across media. It should be able to legitimate cases of authorship which make use of current practices such as mixing,

sampling, hyperlinking; montage, collage and other forms of appropriation. Crucially, though, he shares Ulf Poschardt's reluctant conclusion that "however much quoting, sampling and stealing is done – in the end it is the *old subjects* that undertake their own modernization. Even an examination of technology and the conditions of productions *does not rescue aesthetics from finally having to believe in the author*. He just looks different" (qtd in Manovich 2002 emphasis mine).

Undoubtedly, the 'old subjects' have undertaken a modernization of sorts, postmodernism has deflated the status of the *auteur*, but the art industry and its discourse (that same aesthetics which cannot be rescued from believing in the author) have remained dependent upon a litany of individual name-brand producers that circulates like global aesthetic currency. As the collective Critical Art Ensemble poignantly puts it:

The individual's signature is still the prime collectible, and access to the body associated with the signature is a commodity that is desired more than ever--so much so, that the obsession with the artist's body has made it into "progressive" and alternative art networks. Even community art has its stars, its signatures and its bodies (qtd. in Sholette 1999).

The Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), founded in Florida in 1987 by Steve Kurtz and Steve Barnes, is a collective project involving performance, theory, video, painting and guerrilla-style intervention. As in the case of OPUS, it also comes with a good deal of

‘theoretical packing.’ In 1994 a manifesto of resistance was published, “The Electronic Disturbance”, followed in 1996 by “Electronic Civil Disobedience”, a blend of Marxism, Poststructuralism, Situationism and Anarchism. Collectives such as the CAE, the Italian Luther Blissett Project, the Dutch Foundation for the Advancement of Illegal Knowledge and the British Mongrel Collective all see themselves as a sort of ‘technocratic avant-garde’ who can disrupt capitalism through technologically informed means. Opinions differ as for the political and aesthetic validity of such enterprises. Peter Berger contends that the contemporary neo-avant-garde deceptively produces autonomous art in the guise of social engagement (qtd in Sholette 2002) and Terry Eagleton counters that today’s avant-garde art simply parodies the radical intentions of its once radical agenda (qtd in Sholette 2002). More optimistically, Gregory Sholette (2002) argues that “the new dot.com-*gardism* by using modern marketing techniques treats the author as a producer even as its artistic agenda mixes aesthetic play with profiteering. This new entrepreneurial artist has finally closed the gap between an imagined bohemian lifestyle and the rest of society”.

Sholette offers here a postmodernist remake of Benjamin’s piece “The Author as Producer”, in which it was proposed that the artist must actively re-tool (*umfunktionierung*) his or her means of artistic production in the same way that the revolutionary worker seeks to transform the means of production and thus alter social conditions away from capitalist exploitation. To conceive the contemporary collective artist (even the most activist one) involved in altering the social conditions of the worker seems to me rather disingenuous. The gap between an imagined bohemian lifestyle and the rest of society is far from being closed, not least because access to computer

technology, for artistic or other purposes, is far from being universally widespread even in Western societies. It is interesting, however, to note the recurrent emphasis across today's media on the need to re-tool the means of artistic production and the impact that such ideas have on the contemporary status of authorship. Let's consider for example the film website Plugincinema (www.plugincinema.com). In 1999 it launched the "Pluginmanifesto" which stated the following:

The Internet filmmaker needs to search for the appropriate form for films on the Internet. If the filmmaker doesn't do it the broadcasters will, in the same way that the studios did for film. Filmmakers have an ideal opportunity to experiment and *push the technology creatively....Use the tools that are appropriate for the job*. Filmmaking for the Internet is not filmmaking for the cinema. We should be taking the tools invented for the medium such as flash, html and compression algorithms and pushing them to see what they can do in creative terms. This is the job of the filmmaker and artist. The camera and celluloid defined films for the cinema, computers and the internet will define this medium. (www.plugincinema.com emphasis mine).

The emphatic call to 'push the technology creatively' reverses the consolidated view within the 'philosophy of technology', according to which the positive effects of

automation are incompatible with creativity and heterogeneity (Pierson, "No Longer State-of-the Art: Crafting a Future for CGI" 31). As for Internet Cinema's new rules:

This is a different venue, with different requirements: The Internet has severe bandwidth limitations, there's a lot fighting for the viewer's attention, and there is a significant *community* aspect unique to the medium which should be taken into account. This is not a theater. Here, *the viewer is in control*. (www.plugin cinema.com emphasis mine).

The community aspect unique to the medium is a widely debated topic in the field of Internet and New Media Studies and opinions differ as to the democratic ethos of such forms of active participation (Rheingold 1993, Thonton, S. H. 2002). In this sense, it is not surprising that such an issue arises in connection with Internet Cinema, more importantly we need to consider with caution any idealistic pronouncement and try and assess the true degree of 'control' exerted by the viewer when s/he is asked to take a seat in the Director's chair.

In the Director's chair

Over the past five years the World Wide Web has been host to a range of experiments in digital film, at sites such as The New Venue, that claims to present the most innovative "new movies for a new medium" to a world-wide media-savvy

community (www.newvenue.com), or the above mentioned Plugincinema (www.plugincinema.com). Nowadays there are web film festivals and many European film makers have created collectives to showcase their works, combining resources to create a larger presence. Among the best known: Bechamel (<http://www.bechamel.com/>) and Holott (http://www.analogiksindians.com/analogiks_indians.html) based in Paris, Moccu (<http://www.moccu.com/>) in Berlin, and 8081 (<http://www.8081.org/>) in Turin. The first Independent Net film Festival (<http://www.niff.it/>) took place in 2004, the jury, composed uniquely by internet users, having watched the entries online for a month, voted *Paris Dabar* by Paolo Angelini best *lungometraggio* and *Estasi e Tormento* by Giuseppe Gigliorosso best short film, both to be distributed online at www.carofilm.net, the production company that co-sponsored the event. This is all part of an increasing quantity of entertainment (short movies, film trailers, brief animations) available on the web. Among the best known suppliers are: Atom Films (www.atomfilms.schockwave.com) and the more commercially oriented IFILM (www.ifilm.com). Interestingly, on IFILM it is not only possible to watch movies, but also to submit one's own, as the site proudly announces:

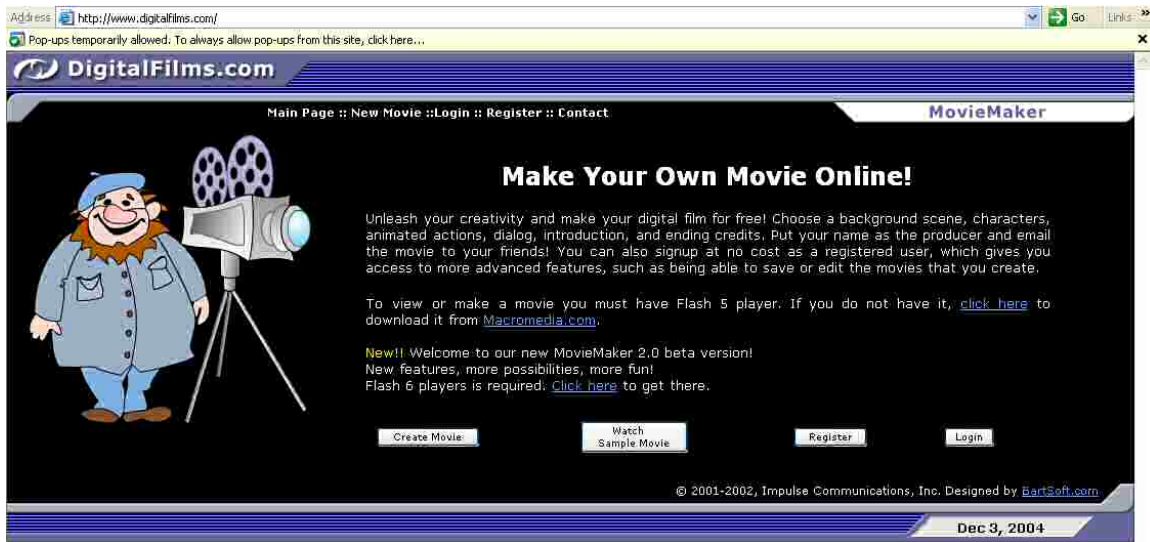
There is no more efficient, cost-effective way to get your film seen than by submitting it to IFILM. We're the largest Web portal celebrating the world of film... we've struck a number of online and offline distribution deals that provide our filmmakers with options for getting your films onto other

Websites, as well as onto DVD's and television and into movie theaters (www.ifilm.com).

It has been noted that until recently the world of film has been immune to the problems that have beset the music industry. Peer-to peer sharing of large film files is beyond the resources of most web users, however “Technology, it seems is catching up with Hollywood. The DivX codec for example shrinks video to about a fifth of its original size, making it possible to download a full-length movie from the Net to one’s hard drive in less than an hour” (Rawlings, "The Revolution Will Be Digitized": MP3, Napster & Hollywood”). The appearance of such Napster style system of film files sharing has significant consequences for independent, technologically-savvy *auteurs*, they are now able to put in place their own distribution system online and derive an income via users’ membership schemes etc. Another important aspect connected to technological innovation and its impact (in Benjamin’s terminology) on the re-tool of artistic means of production has to do with the fact that ever more web sites support movie production by offering tools and tutorials, thus blending “the production of culture with the culture of producers” (qtd in Shaw and Weibel, *Future Cinema* 541). The digitalfilms web site, for example, has the following to offer to its users:

Make Your Own Movie Online! Unleash your creativity and make your digital film for free! Choose a background scene, characters, animated

actions, dialog, introduction, and ending credits. Put your name as the producer and email the movie to your friends! You can also signup at no cost as a registered user, which gives you access to more advanced features, such as being able to save or edit the movies that you create (<http://www.digitalfilms.com/>).



Interestingly, if we examine the iconic signature of the site, the corpulent film director on the left, we are confronted with an ironic reconfiguration of the image of the typical *auteur*-director, wearing a French-style beret, emblem of a time when cinema was an artistic craft and celluloid reigned the day. This is still the way in which a true *auteur* looks like in the collective *imaginaire* of the *cinophile*! The reappropriation of the past in order to sell the present (and the future) is nothing new as far as marketing techniques are concerned. What is particularly interesting to note is that contemporary discourses about digital cinema, in its various manifestations, as we will better see later on, often present

themselves under similar vests to those of the earliest cinema pioneers. The ‘tools’ of artistic production might have entered the digital domain, but still the avant-garde, pioneer (individualistic) spirit is intact; it has lost none of its appeal. It looks as if technological advances had to continuously re-fashion themselves in order to gain status and acceptance. Nora Barry, in an attempt to offer a working definition of web cinema, cannot but stress the enduring ‘individual’ voice of the true *auteur*:

Online (web) cinema is frequently watched by a solitary viewer, stories tend to be very short ... secondly web films are generally created by just one person ...the story told online has a clear individual voice [*truly auteur*]... finally it allows for several narrative possibilities (in Shaw and Weibel, *Future Cinema* 545 emphasis mine).

Web films, according to Barry (who is the chairwoman of the Druid Media cinema web sites network <http://www.druidmedia.com>), are based on what is defined as ‘pass-along narrative’ i.e. a film maker starts a story and places it online and filmmakers or viewers add to it. As an example she mentions the series *Scums* (1998) <http://fly.to/scums>, by Marco and Antonio Manetti. Also worth mentioning is *Story Streams* (2003), a film created in real-time by networked directors in Paris, Montreal, Mexico City and Philadelphia. The directors were linked together by using broadband, instant messaging, webcams and chat rooms, this allowed them to upload their footage to

the central point in Philadelphia, where a master director mixed together the separate files in real time to create a new film. But e-films are not confined to the web; an interesting case of multimedia production (television and digital cinema) is represented by “E”, the first interactive Italian film available on the cable TV Ebismedia. The spectator, by using the remote control, can choose at will from among several scenarios, thus the film becomes a love story, a psychological thriller or a comedy. Also, it is possible to follow the story only from the point of view of one character. According to Ercole Egizi, who wrote the script(s) for “E”, the idea was to do exactly the opposite of what happens in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (Woody Allen 1985); it is now the spectator’s turn to become the actor, script-writer and director (www.corriere.it).

It is worth recalling that multi-narrative is not exactly a novel device within the cinematic tradition, already in 1950 Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon*, caused quite a sensation by presenting a collision of narrative accounts. Recent, albeit in many ways different, examples are *Sliding Doors* by Peter Howitt (1998), Mike Figgis’ *Timecode* (1999) and the Danish *D-Dag* project (http://www.geocities.com/lars_von_trier2000/d-dag.htm) launched on 1 January 2000 by seven Danish TV stations. Rather, what is new is that digital technology allows for a more (inter)active role of the audience in the creative process. The actual situation reflects, in my opinion, a further moment of impasse in the already troubled history of cinematic *auteurism*/authorship. While, on one hand, digital technologies clearly reaffirm the individual voice of the new technologically-savvy *auteur*, on the other authorship appears to be displaced, scattered over cyberspace in countless, faceless *auteurs* to be. Amateurism (a well established early cinematic tradition) finds a fresh revival in the self-gratifying, ‘performative illusion of

authorship' available for all. And what about the new 'creative role' for the spectator? Is s/he ready and/or willing to take such an active role? Conceding that this might not be the case, Margi Szperling, author of the interactive film *Uncompressed* (www.substanz.net/), proclaims, with typical avant-garde elitist disdain, that: "makers of interactive cinema aren't waiting around until they are. By combining the interactivity of a video game with the depth of the film environment, these moviemaking pioneers are doing nothing short of redefining the passive role of the traditional theater audience" (Szperling, *MovieMaker*).

The rhetoric of the cinematic pioneers becomes the dynamic force which drives change and frees the audience from their subjugated position, technology its new Bible. Ultimately, for such moviemakers "this technology—which they believe will put everyone in the director's chair—is as exciting as any on the immediate horizon" (Szperling, *MovieMaker*). But to free the viewer from passivity is not enough, "To better utilize this freedom, an understanding of the audience's interactions within the digital medium will need to occur. Or, as Bertold Brecht stated not so very long ago, 'cinema needs new tools'" (Szperling, *MovieMaker*). The importance of the 'new tools' has already been pointed out, only this time the process involves not just the filmmakers but the audience as well: "To add to Brecht's apt comment, the public needs to come to a new understanding of what is possible with these tools. Interactive cinema will help the audience to learn the capabilities of non-linear language" (Szperling, *MovieMaker*).

I am puzzled at Szperling's confident contention that "Interactive media allows vast amounts of information to speak at a rate that can be easily reviewed and evaluated,

creating an environment that is completely natural to the understanding of the viewer” (Szperling, *MovieMaker*). In my opinion, interactive media often speaks at a rate that is too *fast* to be easily reviewed and evaluated by every user and speed does remain an age discrimination factor. Further, to talk of an environment that is ‘natural’ to the understanding of the viewer appears bizarre in the context of artificially created environments in which the spectator embraces a surrogate form of co-authorship; s/he becomes a game player within a set of carefully pre-determined systems. The dialectic between computer/video games and film is interesting to note at this point and would deserve a more detailed discussion than space here allows, suffice it to say that there is a significant merging of languages, narrative strategies, and genres. Remediations (to use Bolter and Grusin terminology) between games and cinema are not a new phenomenon, the earliest example being *Tron* (1982) followed by *Joysticks* (1983), *Super Mario Brothers* (1993), *Toys* (1993), *Mortal Kombat* (1995), *Wing Commander* (1999), *Lara Croft:Tomb Raider* (2001), *Final Fantasy* (2001) and *Resident Evil* (2002), to name just a few. Such films do not simply ‘borrow’ videogame characters, they adopt some form of game narrative structuring as well, thus offering an exciting combination of media ‘vernaculars’ to media savvy audiences. It has been suggested that the convergence between film and cinema at many different levels has led to the emergence of a brand new film genre, the ‘technoludic’ film, a sort of commentary upon which society projects and re-enacts the fascination and fears brought on by this relatively new technology (Bittanti, *L’Innovazione technoludica* 1999). Films produced within the software environment of the video game even have their festival called ‘Machinima’ (machine cinema). At <http://www.machinima.com/> it is possible to download films produced by

other players and a kit to produce one's own machine film, thus *performing* the role of the film director. Once again, the convergence between games and cinema seems to confirm the 'performative illusion of authorship' as a constant in contemporary intermediatic narratives. What needs to be examined next is how professional directors, working within or on the fringe of Hollywood, have reassessed their own authorship in the light of the digital revolution.

Hollywood 2.0

In November 1997 *Wired* magazine featured a special report on the future of Hollywood filmmaking titled "Hollywood 2.0". The traditional film industry based on studios, theaters and stars was depicted as evolving, under the impact of new technologies, into something completely different, 'Hollywood 1.0' was soon to become 'Hollywood 2.0', an entertainment world where:

computer-generated actors are competing with flesh and blood. Studios are not studios: feature films are created on desktop computers for less than US\$1,000. Theaters are not theaters: the cinema experience is being transferred to theme parks and onto massive video murals that will forever change our cityscapes. Film is not film: celluloid is going the way of vinyl records as movies are distributed digitally. And Hollywood is not Hollywood: the industry has gone global as fiber-optic cables allow simultaneous work on the same movie by creatives working from Cannes

to Calcutta (Daly, "'Hollywood 2.0' How technology is transforming film-making" 1).

The article introduces some of the best representatives of the 'new' Hollywood, such as Gerard Howland, producer of innovative 360-degree, 3-D full-motion theaters, whose goal is to take cinema out of the theater and into "entertainment environments" (3) and Bart Cheever director of DFilm, the Digital Film Festival (<http://www.dfilm.com/>) a collection of independently produced films made with the help of computer technologies. As Cheever reckons: "It's not hard to conceive of a time when you can shoot a film, edit it in your living room, put it up on your server, and anybody who wants to can stream it" (5). Interestingly, *Wired's* commentator stresses that "Despite his affinity for the avant-garde, Cheever is no cinematic snob", according to him "What it comes down to is the artist's vision...Technology is just a tool". Cheever might not be an avant-garde snob, but he has no qualms about seeing himself as an artist (an *auteur*) with a vision (5). In the same article we also read of a technological tool destined to enhance the new 'Master' figure of the technologically-savvy director: The Brainstorm editing system, developed by Richard Goodman and Jeb Johenning. Thanks to The Brainstorm, directors have unprecedented on-set control: they can view a scene backward, change the frame rate, replace a bluescreen background on the fly, thus instantly seeing if their ideas work (7).

The *Wired* article has been considered by Pierson in his "Welcome to Basementwood: Computer Generated Special Effects and *Wired* Magazine" (1998). Pierson notes the frequency with which *Wired* has covered Hollywood's special effects

industry over the years and the fact that in 'Fetish' (a section that reviews the latest electronic gizmos), readers are even addressed as producers of special effects. According to Pierson, "references to special effects appeal to readers' fantasies of producing such images themselves". I would push Pierson's argument further and argue that spectators' increasing exposure to special effects (whose applications exceed Hollywood feature film), since the early 1990s - a period of parallel growth for the computer game industry - has stimulated viewers' fantasies of home-image production, thus fostering the *performative illusion of authorship*.

Digital technologies have obviously changed the way in which (some) filmmakers view themselves and their profession. Scott Billups portrayed in a *Wired* article of 1996 (Parisi, "From Shot by an Outlaw") as a 'lone ranger cinemagicians' and 'one of Hollywood's baddest pixel-packing cowboys', even prophesies extinction for the studios. In typical techno-utopian mood he claims that, although "Computers started out as something for the moviemaking elite, they're evolving into something liberating for everyone. The computer is the 'modern camera'" (1-2). The familiar reaffirmation of authorship comes as no surprise at this point: "It's getting back to the single person, the author, who has an idea and can go with it without having to run the gauntlet of a tableful of studio lawyers" (2). The exposition of technology as an empowering tool follows, "A little guy like me, I'm shooting film, directing my action, creating my virtual environments, building the models and animating them, and printing back to film" (3). A new age of domestic movie-making is ushered in, Hollywood becomes 'Basementwood'. But how has Hollywood 1.0 reacted to the emergence of similar prophetic discourses? Some distinctions need to be drawn. As Pierson convincingly argues, while "Hollywood

has reacted conservatively to new technologies in some areas of film production, it has also opted in some areas for technical novelty over any strict calculus of risks". This is the case of computer generated imagery (CGI). However, a rather conservative, self-preserving stance surfaces when Hollywood is confronted with the threatening rhetoric of film directors *à la* Billups. One might consider *SimOne*, by A. Niccol (2002). In this movie Al Pacino plays world-weary film director Viktor Taransky (an aptly exotic name for a character who embodies the typical independent *auteur*). Recently sacked by his studio due to a fall out with the egomaniac star of his last movie, he is offered the chance to save his career by a dying computer engineer who has created a synthetic actor. Viktor is reluctant to use 'Simulation One' (shortened to Simone) because he is not computer literate, but he quickly changes his mind when he realizes that "this is a classic case of technology in search of an artist, of somebody with integrity and with vision". I have discussed elsewhere the implications of the digital star phenomenon in contemporary cinema (Notaro 2005), for the purpose of this paper suffice it to say that the 'Master' film maker's *hubris* is in the end harshly punished. Victor's increasing reliance on computer technology, his Pygmalion-style manipulation of Simone in order to be lauded for his arty movies, is short-lived. Hollywood's willingness to experiment with new technologies cannot contemplate the possibility of its own extinction. The technological *creative push* has to be contained within the confines of CGI, at least for the time being, that is.

Future Cinema

When it comes to experimental cinematic expressions, it is worth emphasizing that the technological creative push has played a relevant role throughout cinema's history. Among the early attempts at interactive cinema, one could mention the film *One*

Man and his Jury, shown in 1967 in the Czechoslovakian pavilion at the World's Fair in Montreal where special buttons on the armrests of the first interactive movie theatre allowed audiences to change the course of the story (<http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/kinoautomat/>). The multimedia 'play' *Kyldex* went one step further in that the fifteen sequences of the performance could be retrieved or varied by the audience in a repetition, at either double their speed or slower than before (<http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/kyldex/>). In the early 1990s Loren and Rachel Carpenter developed the Cinematrix Software first presented at the SIGGRAPH in Las Vegas and later used for interactive games played by a large audience on a big screen at the Ars Electronica Festival in Linz (Karl Gerbel and Peter Weibel (eds.), *Ars Electronica, Intelligente Ambiente—Intelligent Environments*, 1994). It is my contention that contemporary experimental cinema, such as the iiC_inema (Interactive and Immersive Cinema) research programme funded by Cinemedia (Melbourne) picks up the threads of such early examples. iiC_inema focuses on the research and development of digitally expanded cinema, a type of cinema in which the interactive viewer assumes the role of both camera person and editor. As a consequence, in truly Bakhtinian fashion, the works speak with a voice that escapes that of their author in a 'genuine polyphony' (Cantz, *Dis/Locations* 9). This is the case of *Pentimento* by Dennis Del Favero, produced in the context of the above project, in that it uses spaces containing a set of pre-written narratives, interactively triggered and arranged by the viewer. Other important research and international cooperation projects include the ZKM-Institute for Visual Media in Germany and the Centre for Interactive Cinema Research based in Sydney. In 2002 the ZKM organized "Future Cinema, The Cinematic Imaginary after Film"

(<http://www.zkm.de:81/futurecinema/>), an exhibition of “current art practice in the domain of video-, film-, and computer-based installations that embody and anticipate new cinematic techniques and modes of expression” (Shaw and Weibel, *Future Cinema* 20). According to the intentions of the curators, Jeffrey Shaw and Peter Weibel (two *auteurs* of cinematic experimentation), the emphases are on works that “explore more immersive ... environments such as multi-screen, panoramic, dome-projection, shared multi-user, and on-line configurations” as well as “creative approaches to the design of non-linear narrative content by means of multiple points of view and/or interactivity” (21). As for the exhibition’s catalogue, its aim is “to document *the historical trajectory* of the variegated cinematic experiments that *prefigure, inform and contextualize* our current cinematic condition” (21 emphasis mine). I find it baffling that the most enthusiastic practitioners of non-linear narrative content do not hesitate to propose linear, teleological accounts of the current cinematic condition. Maybe, as Jon Dovey has convincingly argued, “one of the effects of cyberculture is a kind of retro-technological imagining, in which our media histories are remapped from the new vantage points of the digital domain. ... cinema history is rewritten as a teleology of the virtual, in which immersive VR is the end to which film has always been heading” (in Rieser and Zapp, *New Screen Media* 135). With regards to the ‘historical trajectory’ that has brought about the current cinematic condition, Shaw is very keen to make some distinctions: Future Cinema does not recognize itself in the Hollywood, industry-based, tradition of movie-making, its roots lie in the early history of cinema, a time when “idiosyncratic *individual* experiments ... were conducted ... before the industry instituted its narrative axioms and production/presentation techniques as the overriding, exclusive modality of cinematic

experience” (Shaw and Weibel 26 emphasis mine). The artists featured in the exhibition are the new pioneers, visionaries who believe, in the words of the film-maker Raul Ruiz, that “a new kind of cinema and a new poetics are still possible” (27). With inspired fervor, Ruiz also condemns the compulsive attributes of the central narrative in the Hollywood cinema, calling for strategies whereby the autocracy of the director and his subjugating optical apparatus, can be shifted towards the notion of a cinema that is located in the personally discoverable periphery (Rieser and Zapp 273). I believe that there would be much to gain if the filmmakers operating on the fringe of Hollywood and the ones who recognize themselves in the Future Cinema ‘new poetics’ would initiate some form of constructive dialogue, as it should be apparent, the rhetoric used on both sides presents striking similarities and incongruities, especially when it comes to reformulating the roles of the author/*auteur* and the spectator/user.

As it has been pointed out in previous sections, the key concept connected to such reformulations is interactivity and its effects on traditional narrative models of storytelling. Discourses about interactivity have been often polarized “either fetishized as the ultimate pleasure or demonized as a deceptive fiction” (qtd in Shaw and Weibel 351). Peter Lunenfeld in his “The Myths of Interactive Cinema” (2002) argues that such a cinematic form has failed because the driving emphasis has been on interactivity *within* narrative. Lunenfeld proposes that the emphasis should be on hypercontexts in which communities use networked technologies and texts to “curate a series of shifting contexts”. *The Blair Witch Project* is an example, for Lunenfeld, of a successful work of interactive cinema, based in layered and linked contexts rather than notions of non-linear narrative.

For some commentators all the hype about interactivity as the ‘new narrative’ is absurd: “Narrative never was linear, so to proclaim the discovery of non-linear narrative is absurd. In the same vein interactivity has always been a feature of any representational media, from religious rituals to painting, novels and cinema” (Rieser and Zapp, xxvii). Similarly, Manovich in *The Language of New Media* argues that "to call computer media 'interactive' is meaningless - it simply means stating the most basic fact about computers" (55). Manovich moves quickly from this dismissal of interactivity to asking why we would be fascinated by interactivity and ascribes it to an ongoing confusion between mental life and representations. He selectively quotes people like Jaron Lanier to show that psychologists, VR theorists, and cognitive scientists believe that computer media can present mental states - externalize the mind. According to Manovich, instead, a categorical difference exists between mental life and its representation. At best interactivity seems to be an illusion:

Like any other form of representation, interactivity is an illusion. It puts itself in the place of something that is not there. What then might be the absent referent of interactivity? According to both neo-liberals and technopians interactivity promises the spectator *freedom and choice*. It is precisely the absence of such freedom and choice that interactivity would appear to conceal. (Cameron, “Dissimulations: The Illusion of Interactivity” emphasis mine)

The questions of choice and freedom are crucial. Again, Manovich in a piece entitled “On Totalitarian Interactivity” underlines how while “for the West, interactivity is a perfect vehicle for the ideas of democracy and equality. For the East, it is another form of manipulation, in which the artist uses advanced technology to impose his / her totalitarian will on the people”. Concern for the implications of such issues on society at large is to be found in the work of Slavoj Žižek. In his “Cyberspace, or the Unbearable Closure of Being” he argues that since the computer allows the author to abdicate his authority a “decline of the function of the master in contemporary western societies” (Rieser and Zapp 183) has been brought about, hence the need for a new authority, other than the author of a text, has appeared. He suggests that the illusion of open choice in contemporary media corresponds to the disappearance of acknowledged authority, and in fact results in a decrease of freedom. “It is when there is no one to tell you what you really want, when all the burden of the choice is on you, that the big Other dominates you completely, and the choice effectively disappears” (184). Rather more optimistically, Janet Murray sees interactivity as a mix of 'agency' - "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" - and 'transformation' - "Computers offer us countless ways of shape-shifting"- (Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* 126 and 154). Similarly positive is Birk Weinberg’s view of interactive media in his electronic piece “Beyond Interactive Cinema” (2000). He even claims that: “The aesthetic history of media can be described on the basis of a drift towards greater realism for improved immersion of the viewer”. Some contemporary cinematic experiences seem to make the most of such interactive opportunities. With iCinema, Jeffrey Shaw and his team have proposed a complete renewal of the vocabulary of film. The film’s frame, on

the surface of the dome of the iCinema, is synchronized to the particular position of the gazes that the spectators adopt and then displace on that surface, to the point that:

One can no longer speak of ‘interactivity’ but rather, more precisely, of ‘inter-creativity: The spectators do not act on what are the images; rather, the particular sensibility of their gaze established by the film material, along with the choices that the eye effects in the virtual film space of iCinema’s dome, constructs a *certain* film...icinema is inventing an ‘after cinema’ for the cinema (*Future Cinema* 396).

Another example of ‘after cinema’ is ‘neurocinema’, a type of cinema based on the presupposition that the eye is no longer adequate for understanding or interacting with the world [and] it should be replaced by the brain (*Future Cinema* 586). In the enthusiastic words of Peter Weibel (whose essay aptly concludes the *Future Cinema* catalogue), in the VR of the future “hundreds of spectators will act not only in front of the screen, but behind it, too” (600). It will be a collective, mass usage phenomenon “anybody will see any movie in any place at any time....Net-based installations enable the spectator to be the new author, the new cameraman, or camera woman, the new cutter, the new narrator” (601). Personally, I tend to agree with Marsha Kinder when she contends on interactivity that, “the most productive way of avoiding the two extremes is to position the user as a ‘performer’ of the narrative” (351). The spectator, exposed to some types of contemporary cinematic productions embraces a surrogate form of co-

authorship, thus becoming a game player within a set of carefully pre-determined systems. This is a kind of authorship whose script has been prescribed but whose enactment is necessarily varied: the game player performance is one of repetition without duplication, the allure of agency staged on the computer screen. Contrary to Paul Virilio's view that "play is not something that brings pleasure, on the contrary, it expresses a shift in reality, an unaccustomed mobility. To play today, in a certain sense, means to choose between two realities" (541), I would argue that our contemporary fascination with interactivity is understandable precisely in the light of the 'pleasure' we derive from playing and from entering a different reality. New technologies, as Paul Levinson claimed as early as 1977, "begin as playthings" after all. The (computer) game, whose language and narrative modes, I have maintained, are increasingly similar to those of the cinema, is a carnivalesque type of environment in which, for the duration of the game the (real) world is 'upside down'; through our computer screen we participate in a new reality where we are creators and narrators of our own stories, masters of our own (narrative) destiny. Or at least we think we do, forgetful, as we are, that we are just 'performing' the role of *auteurs*/authors, acting out our illusion of authorship, our dreams.

In conclusion, one has to admit that the question of whether the audience prefers interaction in the multiform modes I discussed in this article, or wants stories to be told to them is an open-ended one. I would deem it unlikely that the traditional role and skills of the author/storyteller can become extinct in the new environments offered by digital media. The development of all discourses in 'the anonymity of a murmur', envisaged by Foucault after the 'author function' has disappeared in a changed society, is

but a romantic dream. “Much of cinema’s power over us,” it has been argued, “is our lack of power over it” (*Future Cinema* 262). The allure of displaced, performative authorship might be not enough to dispel once and for all the *aura of the artist*. To quote Benjamin, we are living in a critical epoch “in which a certain art form aspires to effects which could be fully obtained only with a changed technical standard, that is to say, in a new art form” (“The Work of Art” 237). Let’s hope that when a new cinematic experience emerges from the changed technical standards, it will have lost none of the current fascination of the medium.

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