

## Book Review:

# *Authorship as Promotional Discourse in the Screen Industries: Selling Genius*

**Hadas, Leora**

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## **AUTHORSHIP AS PROMOTIONAL DISCOURSE IN THE SCREEN INDUSTRIES**

**SELLING GENIUS**

Leora Hadas



The concept of authorship in the media industries has undergone significant changes since its inception in film criticism. Far from concerning itself solely with the auteur-as-genius paradigm formulated by critics like André Bazin in *Cahiers* and Andrew Sarris in “Notes on the Auteur Theory,” more recent scholarship foregrounds the crucial roles that media workers, paratexts, and fans play in authoring media objects. Such scholarly interventions, driven by concerns arising from feminist, queer, and critical race perspectives, pry open the sealed black box of authorship and envision new ways for conceptualizing authorial function.

Along similar lines, the practice of branding has received significant academic attention in recent years. Books like *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* by Sarah Banet-Weiser examine the seemingly antithetical ideas of individuality and serialization invoked by the concept of the “brand.” This tension between branding and authorship is a rich site for exploration, and media studies scholar Leora Hadas

takes it as her starting point for *Authorship as Promotional Discourse in the Screen Industries: Selling Genius*. Synthesizing concepts of identity, networked authorship, and branding, Hadas seeks to understand evolving models of transmedia authorship by using a site of analysis crucial to the media industries: promotion in mainstream media franchises.

The book, comprising five body chapters and a conclusion, moves from theoretical considerations to case studies of film, television, and video games. Hadas uses the first chapter to establish a theoretical spine for a concept she describes throughout her book as promotional authorship. At the outset, she notes that her study “departs from questions of whether the auteur exists, and who is the true auteur, towards questions of what the auteur is for, [and] how the auteur is constructed within a complex system of publicity and promotion.”<sup>2</sup> The idea of a “constructed” author, Hadas notes, originates with poststructuralist and Foucauldian notions of networked identity and builds momentum through engagement with industry and audience-facing paratexts. Hadas maintains that the figure of the author—which has particular origins, traits, and dispositions that elicit individuality—must now be managed as a brand across diverse media texts.

Processes of branding the author, moreover, contribute to cohesion, consistency, and elimination of repetition and artificiality across media sites. As a result, authorship gains currency as a tool for brand promotion and value. The continuing use of Ryan Murphy’s name to promote anthology series like *American Crime Story* and *American Horror Story*, which involve different writers, directors, producers, and actors, is one example. Hadas’ treatment of promotion as a “function” of authorship marks a major intervention made by this book: she uses nontraditional texts like trailers, trade press, corporate blogs, conventions, and fan spaces to indicate the discursive flow of authorial value between industries and audiences.<sup>3</sup>

The choice to theorize unconventional texts points to Hadas’ challenge of the longstanding art/commerce binary. To further this aim, Hadas wisely uses case studies of mainstream American media objects like franchise blockbuster films, scripted network TV shows, and “triple-A” video games. This focus gives her the latitude to theorize authorship in a manner resistant to the prevailing taste for independent fare rooted in auteur-*contra*-system lore. Rather than simply examining the franchises themselves, however, she analyzes how authorship is produced via a range of audience-facing paratextual and industrial sites.<sup>4</sup> Time also plays a critical role in *Authorship*, as Hadas uses a ten-year period between 2006 and 2016 to frame her argument. This period witnessed enormous changes in media-making practices due to the rise of streaming services, splintering audiences, and the heightened prioritization of intellectual properties by media corporations. The book’s structure, which includes chapters on film, television, and video games, is thematic rather than chronological. By crafting her book in this way, Hadas draws out the media-specific nature of promotional authorship. This is another important point implicit in Hadas’ study: audience-facing authorial paratexts function in accordance with their respective industries. To synthesize this information, she combines discourse analysis and production studies in a move consistent with media industries approaches that emphasize negotiated agency and power.

Hadas devotes her second chapter to an analysis of promotional authorship in blockbuster film franchises, a starting point that effectively underscores the systemic and structural changes media companies faced over the last decade. The industry has responded to these seismic shifts, Hadas notes, with core strategies such as franchise filmmaking, legacy

intellectual properties, and cinematic worldbuilding. It is against this backdrop that Hadas charts the tactical use of authorship to promote evolving “cinematic universe” brand identities and to build value for these properties. Hadas chooses three case studies for this chapter: *Star Trek*, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), and the *Star Wars* Cinematic Universe (SWCU). Each of these franchises gives Hadas the opportunity to illustrate the “narrative positioning [of] creative individuals” across disparate audience-facing paratexts in order to accrue brand value that (hopefully) translates to fiscal value.<sup>5</sup> While J. J. Abrams’s association with the *Star Trek* franchise remains the more traditional authorial study, the book’s examination of Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige and LucasFilm president Kathleen Kennedy within the MCU and SWCU has far-reaching implications. Far from being director-authors, these studio executives oversee the building of entire cinematic worlds or shepherd properties from one generation of makers and audiences to the next. They also build value for their properties through careful use of industrial paratexts. Making the case that these studio executives represent an understudied type of author in filmed entertainment, she astutely observes both the expanding nature of authorship roles in film production and the means by which these figures further collapse the art/commerce binary.

Hadas paints an even more robust portrait of promotional authorship as she turns her attention to television in chapter 3. In this chapter, Hadas elaborates on the blurring of creative production and brand management roles through case studies on Ryan Murphy and the various showrunners of *The Walking Dead*. With each of these cases, Hadas highlights different tensions that arise in the brand-author paradox. She shows how heightened demand for content necessitates a clear authorial signature to maintain brand cohesion. Analyzing trade press and publicity materials, Hadas charts Murphy’s ascension from celebrated auteur of *Nip/Tuck* to “megaproducer” of *American Horror Story* and *American Crime Story*. In contrast to Murphy’s highly visible brand identity, ever-present despite the wide range of content with which he is involved, *The Walking Dead* operates without a clear, stable authorial voice. In the latter case, Hadas discusses how *The Walking Dead* used promotional authorship, highlighting original showrunner Frank Darabont’s vision for the franchise long after his departure and subsequent publicity-generating showrunner changes. In placing these cases next to each other, Hadas reveals the double-edged nature of promotional authorship. A firm signature can create a halo effect, attracting viewers to a show that lacks direct involvement of the author, but challenges arise when an author parts ways with a franchise heavily invested in brand-author promotional discourses. In the following chapter, an analysis of Shonda Rhimes’ engagement with fans on Twitter allows Hadas the opportunity to connect promotional authorship with recent work in intersectional scholarship and fandom. As Hadas illustrates, Rhimes both builds upon and repudiates gendered dynamics in her interactions with fans on social media. Ultimately, however, the position Hadas takes on promotional authorship in television reflects the complicated framework of the medium itself, where authorial “discourses [are] subject to the changing demands of industrial realities and audience expectations.”<sup>6</sup>

The video game industry, the focus of the book’s final chapter, represents a radical departure from cinematic and televisual forms of promotional authorship. As Hadas notes, very little extant research looks to the discourses surrounding the “game developer figure, the terms in which it is coached, and the uses to which it is put.”<sup>7</sup> Immediately clear from Hadas’ examination of triple-A video game authorship is the idea that the video game industry builds questions of creative production around teamwork, dispersed leadership, and iteration. This

theorization of video game authorship as resistant to the dominant auteurist paradigm of traditional film studies reflects both the relatively recent consolidation of gaming as a mainstream “industry” and its strong associations with fandom. It also underscores the medium specificity inherent in promotional authorship.

Hadas complicates her assessment of the gaming industry’s decentralized authorship practices in case studies of developers like Cliff Bleszinski of the *Gears of War* franchise, who more closely resembles cinematic and televisual forms of authorship. In paratextual interactions with fans, journalists, and other audiences, however, these figures speak of video game authorship in collectivist terms. Promotional video game authorship thus works by using paratexts to frame game production as malleable, fluid, and open to audience input. Such a mode of presentation, Hadas argues, strengthens brand value and creates affinity through an emphasis on *how* producers develop, rather than *who* develops.

Hadas’ decision to filter authorship through brand management strategies and analysis of industry and audience-facing paratexts expands our ideas of the authorial figure and its function. The contradictions and similarities between brand and author are indeed rich sites for analysis, and while earlier academic research has pursued these concepts, it has not looked across such a range of concepts and objects. Seeing these concepts as part of a more cohesive whole—as contributing to promotional authorship—brings earlier work in media industries, fandom, and production studies into productive conversation. This approach also encourages us to consider trade press, publicity materials, and social media platforms as key nodes of value formation for both industries and audiences.

The enfolding of video games into a media studies conception of authorship also challenges film and television-centric formulas of authorship. Hopefully this study opens the door to consideration of authorship in other cultural forms like fashion, sports, and music. In particular, the treatment of identity as it relates to authorship might inspire a host of new research questions, as this area of inquiry has profound implications for both industrial practices and audience–industry relations. While Hadas touches upon this topic most directly in her discussion of Shonda Rhimes, it is worthy of additional analysis and theorization. *Authorship* provides us with an updated transmedia authorship model, and the questions it provokes about art and commerce, singularity and brand, and audience and industry require sustained attention.

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<sup>2</sup> Leora Hadas, *Authorship as Promotional Discourse in the Screen Industries: Selling Genius* (NY: Taylor & Francis, 2020), 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 19–20.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.