

**Who Told You You Were Special Edition?  
The Commercialization of the Aura**

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## Who Told You You Were Special Edition? The Commercialization of the Aura

At Blu-Con 2010, last year's annual convention held to promote Blu-ray, Sony's high-definition home video format, filmmaker James Cameron delivered the keynote speech, in which he and producer Jon Landau discussed the upcoming three-disc Extended Collector's Edition Blu-ray release of their film *Avatar* (2009)--the highest grossing film of all time with a current worldwide box office haul of over \$2.7 billion.<sup>1</sup> In describing his intentions for the Collector's Edition Blu-ray, Cameron said "We don't want to come back over and over and do further iterations and further special editions...I want this to be definitive, this is going to have everything in it." While the Collector's Edition certainly fulfills Cameron's promise of a Blu-ray release of *Avatar* packed to the gills with deleted footage and behind-the-scenes featurettes, where does that leave the original Blu-ray edition of the film, released seven months prior to the Collector's Edition and containing no 'special features' at all? Interesting to consider is the fact that the impending release of the Extended Edition was known before the release of the original edition, yet the original release still easily became the best-selling Blu-ray title to date. Even more interesting, if the three-disc edition Cameron promoted at Blu-Con is indeed his definitive edition and renders further iterations pointless, what do we make of the fact that it is a 2-D only version of his quintessentially 3-D film, and though a 3-D Blu-ray version exists, it is a separate product available exclusively from Panasonic?

From this example alone, it is clear that with the continued proliferation of media content comes a proliferation of the ways in which we interact with and consume that content. In Walter Benjamin's "the Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", he presents the idea of an art object's "aura", its "...most sensitive

nucleus--namely, its authenticity..."<sup>2</sup> as a quality based in its original ritualistic use, and thus a quality destroyed by mechanical reproduction for a mass audience. Benjamin's theory of the aura, and his recognition that media such as film are dependent upon reaching a mass audience to offset their high production costs, are entirely relevant to the consideration of what it means for a media product to be "special" or "limited" or a "collector's edition" in the contemporary cultural landscape.<sup>3</sup> Using Benjamin's theory as a springboard, I will examine the phenomenon of the special/limited/collector's/extended editions of film titles on home video and how it has fundamentally expanded the ways in which we consume and value media content. The ways in which the idea of a "special" or "limited" product is valued by the contemporary media consumer, and the multitude of effective methods employed by producers to market their art objects as somehow unique proves that Benjamin's conception of the aura as a quality based upon literal singularity may indeed be destroyed by mass reproduction, but it does persist as a tool of cultural and industrial valuation. Essential to this examination of the role of special editions is their function as 'paratexts'<sup>4</sup>, elements outside the traditional textual boundaries of a film or television show but nonetheless increasingly vital to textual experience. In his book *Show Sold Separately*, Jonathan Gray concludes that "...paratexts help to make texts,"<sup>5</sup> and this idea is prerequisite to the recognition of the commercialization of the aura in contemporary media culture through special edition products. Evolutions in mode of media delivery, such as high-definition television, Blu-ray, and even 3-D theatrical exhibition, are also related to the idea of aura or of an "authentic" textual experience in the way that they complicate an audience's ability to determine what the technical, aesthetic, or artistic specifications of that ideal experience are. The relationship between

uniqueness and replication exists even *within* media texts, for example in the obligatory credit sequence outtakes of a Jackie Chan action film--a feature that serves as Chan's stamp of approval that what you have seen is something singular and authentic. By examining these myriad ways in which the idea of the aura is constructed and invoked on an industrial and cultural level, I will argue that consumers are increasingly presented with an unending and largely manufactured quest for the true textual experience or the correct valuation of media products.

The appeal of the aura in the contemporary media landscape is somewhat dependent on the perception of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's vast and overpowering "culture industry".<sup>6</sup> By this I mean consumer acceptance of such a monolithic industry, one sustaining itself by the fact that it "...perpetually cheats the consumers of what it perpetually promises,"<sup>7</sup> is the very thing which grants that industry its ability to sell to the consumer the idea of certain content being "special". In other words, the special editions of the media marketplace only appeal to the consumer as such when that consumer has been convinced that everything else is *not* special. The paratextual content included with special edition DVD or Blu-ray releases, typically labeled as 'bonus' or 'extra' content, paradoxically characterizes itself as essential. James Cameron's sales pitch regarding his three-disc edition of *Avatar* makes it explicit that if you are in any way a fan of the film, *this* is the release to own. The practice of premeditated tiered releases of content like *Avatar* creates a distinct hierarchy of products, where most fans will feel obligated to buy the initial single-disc release because they cannot wait to own the film, but will also feel obligated to re-buy the three-disc edition because it includes a wealth of extra content and thus represents the "definitive"

product tier. The litany of nomenclature attached to these various home video releases directly reflects this fundamental message: the James Bond Ultimate Edition; Humphrey Bogart: The Essential Collection; *Half Baked*: Fully Baked Edition, just to name a few. Even paratextual characteristics as simple as each edition's specific name can serve the function of "promising value"<sup>8</sup> to a potential audience.

In addition to the Frankfurt School's theory of the culture industry, the consumerist tendency to seek the authentic experience among the endlessly reproducible is dependent upon the basic distinction between 'mass media' and 'fine art', not in the literal sense that consumers believe a standard edition DVD to be mass media and a collector's edition to be high art, but in the sense that this concept of arranging content in a cultural hierarchy often manifests itself in the form of valuation of one mode of delivery over another--e.g. high-definition over standard definition, extras-laden DVD sets over bare-bones single-disc releases, or the director's cut of a film over its theatrical version. As Pop art of the 1950s and '60s utilized "...popular culture and mass media material as sources..."<sup>9</sup> to create fine art, we might say that the proliferation of collector's edition and limited edition releases constitutes a sort of industrial or commercial Pop art--using consumer consciousness of 21st century content ubiquity to create an ironic representation of something singular, or at least special.

A prime example of this practice is Disney's use of the fabled "Disney Vault" in its marketing of home video releases. This strategy involves the release of Disney's canon of classic animated films on home video each for a limited period of time before they are made unavailable and "go back in the vault". Availability is further limited by Disney's habit of releasing only two or three of their most popular titles per year. The

origins of this release strategy can be traced back to Walt Disney's original animated feature *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, which premiered theatrically on December 21, 1937. The film was such a phenomenal success that Walt insisted to his brother and Disney CEO Roy the idea of re-releasing it to theaters, which they did in February of 1944.<sup>10</sup> To Walt's great delight, the re-released *Snow White* "...equaled the gross of the average A feature..."<sup>11</sup> From this experience, The Walt Disney Company learned a lesson it has never forgotten: if an audience will pay for something once, it will most likely pay for it again. We can trace the influence of this precedent and its lesson through Disney's home video releases of the past 20 years. First, there was the Walt Disney Masterpiece Collection of VHS tapes and Laserdiscs, which began in 1994 with the release of (naturally) *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Then, a mixture of Disney classics and more contemporary Pixar films were released on DVD under the Disney Gold Classic Collection label beginning in 2000. The Gold Collection was replaced by a line of Platinum Editions, which in turn was succeeded by the current Diamond Edition Blu-ray releases. Constant throughout this dynamic array of impressively named editions is the imposition of Disney's trademark moratorium. What is most important here to the commercialization of the aura is not only that these releases are deliberately imbued with a specific shelf life, but that this quality is explicitly and aggressively conveyed to potential consumers via television spots, online advertisements, trailers embedded in previous home video releases, and labels on the packaging itself--Disney characterizes the impending presence of the vault as essential information. The textual content itself, and even the copious bonus materials which contribute to each release's special status, is either rendered subordinate or employed in direct service to the "...phony spell of a

commodity."<sup>12</sup> Just as Benjamin argued that the cult of the movie star creates an artificial "personality" outside of the film itself, these extravagant home video releases and the increasing importance placed on mode of delivery can be identified as Hollywood's somewhat paradoxical response to awareness of its own mass reproducibility.

The oft-criticized Disney Company is not alone in its strategies, as there are many other examples of the commercialization of the aura within the realm of home video. The Criterion Collection video distribution company is one such example, a company founded in 1984 with the intention of "...gathering the greatest films from around the world and publishing them in editions that offer the highest technical quality and award-winning, original supplements."<sup>13</sup> Initially focused on Laserdisc releases, and now releasing on both DVD and Blu-ray, Criterion's mission is certainly a noble one, but their products frequently exemplify the conflict between content and medium; the consumer struggle to experience the "authentic" text in a media landscape where nearly endless potential experiences exist. In considering the ways in which medium contributes to textual value, Marshal McLuhan's argument that what matters is *how* we watch rather than *what* we watch is unavoidable.<sup>14</sup> The mark of the Criterion Collection logo, which every one of the company's releases bears, like the distinctive blue-tinted packaging of Blu-ray discs, is proof that not only the content of a film, but also the way we encounter it holds a measure of cultural and commercial value. The degree to which this is true certainly depends upon the individual consumer, but such common instances of leveraging the content/medium conflict for marketing purposes edifies McLuhan's theory that "the medium is the message" as one absolutely relevant to the study of contemporary media.<sup>15</sup> The fundamental question raised by the success of brands such as

Criterion or Disney's Diamond Editions is whether consumers who buy these products value the film text itself, the inclusion of substantive supplementary features, or what Barbara Klinger terms 'hardware aesthetic'<sup>16</sup>, meaning the audiovisual fidelity of a particular release. Does simply watching the recent Criterion release of Nobuhiko Obayashi's horror/comedy/fantasy film *House* (1977) on a television constitute an authentic textual experience, or is the entire package of feature film/behind-the-scenes interviews/restored digital transfer the "full" text? I argue that the current average valuation of media texts, more than ever before, consists of a combination of these various factors.

Paratextual elements such as the critical essays included in many Criterion releases clearly aim to elevate the featured film as important, as something rare and historic and holding especial artistic value. The massive proliferation of content over the past decade has actually increased our desire for unique or authentic iterations of that content--it has augmented the relative value of paratexts, primarily as tools for both producers and consumers to enhance our appreciation of the texts they accompany. In his review of the Criterion Collection Blu-ray release of Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998), Drew Taylor of HighDefDigest.com writes, "The movie has an aura around it, so [when] producing special features, you have to walk the fine line of indulging peoples' curiosity and maintaining the mystery. And they did a fine job."<sup>17</sup> Taylor's review gushes over the flawless video and audio transfer of the film by Criterion, as well as the extensive special features which shed light on Terrence Malick's mysterious production methods, including the supposedly extensive amount of footage featuring several well-known actors that he was forced to cut from the film. In Taylor's estimation,

this combination of text, paratext, and 'hardware aesthetic' amounts to a virtually perfect package, and what seems to be the ideal *Thin Red Line* experience. The availability of such an experience is inarguably beneficial to the general film-viewing population and cinephiles especially, but of course it is not the only *Thin Red Line* experience available. The Criterion Blu-ray only achieves its cultural value in comparison to all previous and subsequent iterations of the film. Consumer awareness of this broader web of textual experiences, and the cloaking of each experience in the guise of the authentic, has proven to be a commercially fruitful coalescence.

Among the inundation of special edition DVD releases over the past several years, perhaps none have been more successful both commercially and culturally than the Platinum Series Special Extended Editions of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, released by New Line from 2002-04. These deluxe DVD sets were each released approximately one year after the theatrical release of their respective featured films: *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), *The Two Towers* (2002), and *The Return of the King* (2003). While far from being the first instances of multiple film iterations appearing on home video, these Extended Editions nonetheless established a new standard for how elaborate home video products could be--and how successful they could be at both providing expanded textual experiences and promoting broader entertainment franchises. By announcing all three Extended Edition DVDs on March 26, 2002, two days after the Academy Awards ceremony at which *Fellowship of the Ring* had been nominated in 13 categories, New Line positioned itself and its products favorably in that it avoided appearing deceptive by surprising fans with multiple home video iterations (an often exploitative practice known as double-dipping), yet the deliberate timing of releasing relatively bare-bones theatrical

edition DVDs, followed by Extended Edition DVDs, followed by the next chapter of the trilogy in theaters created a lucrative arrangement of *Lord of the Rings* products all promoting each other and building hype for the franchise as a whole.<sup>18</sup> This is a prime example of the power of paratexts to build and maintain the "cultural momentum"<sup>19</sup> of a property.

The perception of the *Lord of the Rings* Extended Edition DVDs as prestigious products more authentic than the theatrical edition DVDs was built upon two major features: the near hour of footage added to each film exclusively for the DVDs (hence the 'extended' moniker), and the inclusion of hours of supplemental features detailing every facet of the films' production. New Line commissioned what turned out to be an entire additional production department dedicated to filming the necessary behind-the-scenes material. It was headed by supplemental feature pioneer Michael Pellerin who, along with Jeff Kurtti, had previously produced special edition Laserdiscs and DVDs for Disney and Pixar.<sup>20</sup> The behind-the-scenes material included with the Extended Editions was crafted as one cohesive documentary, telling the story of the filmmakers' quest across three releases just as the films themselves told the story of Frodo's quest. Jonathan Gray provides an excellent analysis of the Extended Editions' behind-the-scenes materials in *Show Sold Separately*, recognizing that "...they actively construct an aura of supreme artistry around the films that hearkens back to a mythical pre-culture industries vision of art..."<sup>21</sup> Not only do they tie this nostalgic aura to director Peter Jackson, canonizing him as a genuine old-style auteur, but also to his native New Zealand, the location of nearly all of the production on *The Lord of the Rings*. In this way, the supplemental content of the Extended Edition DVDs attempts an ambitious bit of cinematic nation building.

What this extravagant paratextual treatment amounts to is the creation of an alternate authentic *Lord of the Rings* experience--not only in a strict textual sense by way of the longer cuts of each film, but also in a broader cultural sense by the elevation of the text through hindsight after having experienced the extensive behind-the-scenes content. Is it really possible to see the theatrical cuts of *Lord of the Rings* in the same way after having seen the extended cuts, or either cut after having seen the deliberately constructed bonus material? Not for the average consumer, whether they realize this dilemma or not. When the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy was announced for release on Blu-ray in 2009, one might have expected uproarious excitement from the franchise's massive fanbase. However, despite being one of the most requested Blu-ray releases since the inception of the format, the actual release of the trilogy was met with overwhelming ire from its most fervent fans. Why? Because the Blu-ray release included only the theatrical versions of the films, not the extended cuts which had circulated since 2002 and become the preferred versions for those seeking the full, authentic *Lord of the Rings* experience. Protests and calls to boycott the release sprouted up on message boards across the internet, and reviews from angry fans flooded the set's Amazon.com page, where the product currently bears a paltry 1.5 out of 5 average customer rating. Presumably, the very same consumers who bought multiple iterations of the films on DVD, and helped make the strategy of releasing titles in both basic and special editions on home video successful, are those now complaining about New Line's expectation that they will do the same on Blu-ray. Such frustration on the part of the consumer anticipating an unnecessary double-dip is understandable, as is the studio's desire to sell more products. What is important to recognize from this case is how it exemplifies the very real effect

that the commercialization of the aura has on contemporary media, both commercially and culturally. The industrial practice of actively fostering an ever-expanding constellation of textual experiences, and consumer belief in the quest for the authentic has never been as pervasive as it is now.

The impact of the *Lord of the Rings* extended cuts relates to the broader case of "director's cut" film releases in general, and their ability to obfuscate the identification of the authentic. Examples of films being tinkered with after their initial theatrical release are numerous, and increasingly so due to the viability of home video. Most such examples today are of formulaic studio comedy, action, or horror films recut as "unrated" versions, typically meaning a few extraneous minutes not submitted to the MPAA (and therefore unrated) are dumped back into the film for the DVD and/or Blu-ray release. These reedits are obviously an attempt to either manufacture interest around films few consumers had interest in when they were in theaters, or offer something supposedly extra outrageous for hardcore fans. As such, these releases typically represent an openly superficial alteration of the film text, and though the "unrated" label does imply a restoration of the definitive experience for a certain type of viewer, it rarely has significant bearing on the widespread perception of a given film's authentic version.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are cases such as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* (1958), and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), among others. These are all films which received extensive reedits, significantly altering their textual makeup and therefore compounding their perception by viewers, as well as their cultural standing. In the case of *Blade Runner*, we have a film that was fairly well received

critically but flopped commercially upon its initial theatrical release, altered from director Scott's intended vision by nervous studio executives reacting to poor test screenings. The film later began to gain a cult following, and Warner Bros. saw an opportunity to allow Scott to rework his sci-fi noir for a theatrically re-released "Director's Cut" in 1992. This first reedit did not completely change the structure of *Blade Runner*, but it did significantly improve the overall textual experience, most notably by removing star Harrison Ford's unnecessary voice-over narration and a forced, unconvincing happy ending. The Director's Cut also restored the now infamous "unicorn dream" sequence, which raises unanswered but provocative questions about the nature of the film's main character, Deckard. As if one reedit was insufficient, Warner Bros. then granted Ridley Scott permission and resources to craft a third version of *Blade Runner*, which corrected issues that lingered in the preceding Director's Cut--a version Scott now admits was somewhat rushed and incompatible with his full vision for the film. This most recent version, dubbed the "Final Cut", was released in 2007 in select theaters and on DVD, Blu-ray, and HD-DVD. The cut itself was praised by Deckard devotees and newcomers alike as the definitive edition of what has become a truly revered masterpiece of science-fiction cinema. A long and complex endeavor to be sure, the quest for the ultimate *Blade Runner* iteration is wonderfully emblematic of how messy, frustrating, and yet ultimately rewarding the struggle for the authentic cinematic text can be. Contemporary consumers may often feel like Blade Runners themselves, tracking down 'replicant' texts and performing a series of tests to discern which film experiences are authentic and which are merely convincing imitations. The cultural value attributed to hard-won filmic gems such as the *Blade Runner* Final Cut is plainly evident in every facet of that film's

Ultimate Collector's Edition, a five-disc DVD or Blu-ray set housed in a metal briefcase and complete with unicorn origami and a miniature replica of Deckard's iconic "spinner" vehicle.<sup>22</sup> Like the *Lord of the Rings* Extended Edition sets, this home video release is constructed to give the impression that it contains a holy relic rather than a movie. The packaging, the collectibles, the wealth of behind-the-scenes material all perform the task of "...bathing the text in aura."<sup>23</sup> Perhaps what is most interesting is that all of the various *Blade Runner* cuts are included in this release, creating a perception of the film's entire convoluted history as one massive, comprehensive, yet cohesive textual experience. In other words, one does not know *Blade Runner* unless he or she knows the story of *Blade Runner's* production, re-production, and re-re-production.

This strategy is shared by the more recent *Apocalypse Now* Three-disc Full Disclosure Blu-ray release, a set combining Coppola's original film, the reedited *Apocalypse Now Redux*, and the acclaimed making-of documentary *Hearts of Darkness* into a single mega-text. There have been virtually no complaints from fans or critics regarding these releases (as there were for the *Lord of the Rings* Blu-rays) precisely because they combine so much material and include both theatrical and director's cuts of these films, circumventing the dilemma of textual multiplicity by allowing the individual viewer to determine for themselves what the preferred version is on any given occasion. The reconstruction of Orson Welles' original vision for his classic noir *Touch of Evil* according to his extensive personal notes, and the restoration of a recently discovered uncut print of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* are further evidence of how common the pursuit of crafting definitive versions of classic cinematic texts has become. Moreover, the story of such pursuits of authenticity is one that increasingly ends with special edition home video

releases. Here we see how not only the inclusion of paratextual supplements, but of rare or altered film cuts lend marketable aura to certain DVD or Blu-ray packages, and proliferate the ways in which consumers are able to encounter a specific title. Once an issue concerning only film scholars and cinephiles, the multiplicity of textual experiences now confronts even the general consumer on a regular basis. The *Avatar* Extended Edition already mentioned includes three different cuts of the film, all on the same disc, and accessible via seamless branching technology. Which is the viewer to choose, and with what effect on the perception of the excluded cuts as well as the film property as a whole? In addition to comparing differing cuts on home video, it is important to ask how experiencing a film theatrically changes our valuation of experiencing it at home, especially if those two experiences are of textually different products (as they arguably always are).

In a case such as viewing the Director's Cut Special Edition DVD release of Ridley Scott's crusades epic *Kingdom of Heaven*, which incorporates into the text nearly an hour of substantive footage that caused critics to heap retroactive praise on what had been an initially unsuccessful film, there is a significant range of possible effects on the viewer. One who had seen the film during its initial theatrical release and then seen the director's cut on DVD is faced with a specific dilemma: as collecting these different textual and paratextual experiences mutates his or her perception, does he or she simply replace the initial experience with that of the director's cut DVD, or is the newer experience incorporated into a broader, multi-faceted perception of some *Kingdom of Heaven* mega-text? From the range of critical and cultural responses to retroactively altered films released over the past several years, it seems that both of these responses (as

well as others) are possible. Consumers are not only being presented with more choices than ever regarding media consumption, they are coming to *expect* having those choices. An expansive array of possible experiences rooted in a single original text, as exemplified by the *Blade Runner* briefcase and its contents, is both a blessing and a curse. The ability to make genuine cinematic discoveries--such as the complete *Metropolis* or reassembled *Touch of Evil*--available to a wide audience is undoubtedly beneficial. However, the idea of textual authenticity is often reduced to an inane promotion on the front of a DVD case, utilized for the commercial purpose of leading consumers on a scavenger hunt for a "true" textual experience that does not really exist.

As yet another avenue by which the role of the aura in the contemporary media landscape has expanded, we should consider entire exhibition standards, such as high-definition and 3-D. Though it has taken quite a while to be adopted by mainstream American consumers, finally aided by the government-mandated transition from analog to digital broadcasts, high-definition television is an aesthetic standard whose growing cultural and industrial importance is evidence of the tendency to search for the most authentic experience in the age of mass production. Precisely because television content is omnipresent, not only on televisions but on computers, cell phones, and iPods, it has become easier and more important than ever to market the audiovisual fidelity--the authenticity--of the ways in which we might experience that content. Watching *Sportscenter* on ESPN is no longer preceded only by the program's logo and trademark audio cue, but by those signals and the ESPN HD label. Networks such as ESPN serve constant reminders that "you are watching in crystal clear high definition", so that even if you actually are not, you know that you should be. Reminders of fidelity hierarchies

such as this are present in high-definition home video releases as well; releases of Paramount films on the HD-DVD format began with an image of the studio's logo in standard definition, which then sharpened into high-definition before the viewer's eyes. Many Blu-ray releases begin with promotional trailers that quantify the difference in resolution between Blu-ray and DVD, and herald the format as "the best way to watch movies at home...ever". Juxtaposing aesthetic standards in these ways establishes an unmistakable hierarchy, and effectively decides for consumers what their uncompromised, authentic media experience should be. In describing the translation of works of art from one medium to another (e.g. painting to engraving) in the 19th century, Estelle Jussim points out that there are "graphic codes" which make translated pieces unique from the originals and thus introduce an inescapable interpretive factor to the consumption of those pieces.<sup>24</sup> Even mechanical recording processes such as photography operate under these codes, and they are what contemporary media producers make explicit when consumer attention is drawn to medium fidelity and hierarchies of aesthetic standard. The twist is that the interpretation has already been conducted for the consumer--one piece of art is prepackaged as superior. Current valuations of Blu-ray versus DVD or high-definition versus standard definition television are direct representations of not only the commercialization of the aura, but the commercialization of graphic codes as well.

3-D films, the latest effort by Hollywood to renew interest in theatrical exhibition and compete with entertainment media such as video games, are another example of technological/aesthetic standards presenting consumers with the dilemma of authentic experience. Films shot specifically for 3-D exhibition, *Avatar* being the best-known and

most successful example, are perhaps the most influential in this respect. As experiences originally intended for the specific 3-D format, directors and cinematographers of these films inevitably allow the technology to influence the aesthetic, most obviously by composing shots in which objects appear to "come at" the audience or recede far into the background. While such melding of filmmaking technology and artistic approach has been present to some extent since the invention of the cinema, current 3-D productions provide what is probably the most widespread and aggressive commercialization of this relationship since the advent of Technicolor. Contemporary 3-D films wrap themselves in the aura by purporting to offer an entertainment experience that is simply irreproducible by any other format, namely 2-D. Even among 3-D releases, however, a hierarchical distinction has been established between films actually shot with 3-D cameras and those shot in 2-D but converted in post-production to the 3-D format. Recent titles *Clash of the Titans* (2010) and *The Last Airbender* (2010) suffered heavy censure from critics and general moviegoers not only because of lazy plotting and derivative action, but because their post-converted 3-D effects were unconvincing, unnecessary, and reduced the films' visuals to nearly unintelligible levels. The mode of delivery, the 'hardware aesthetic', becomes inseparable from the film's content, and even those (or especially those) who enjoy what is characterized as a partial experience may feel obligated to return to theaters to complete the text as it has been marketed. Upon its release in December 2009 and well into 2010, internet discussion among *Avatar* fans centered as often (if not more often) around the differences between experiencing it in 3-D, IMAX 3-D, and 2-D as it did any of the film's narrative or thematic content. Whether one text delivered via marginally different modes, or multiple texts each fundamentally

unique, the array of *Avatar* experiences on tap meant more tickets sold as viewers made the determination for themselves. The aggressive marketing of 3-D and high-definition, and sustained consumer response to that marketing, is evidence that as "...abolishing both space and time..."<sup>25</sup> has made content truly ubiquitous, the specific way in which content is delivered has become more valued than ever. The medium is the message indeed.

As a final point of focus, we must recognize how the value of the aura and the marketability of the authentic among endlessly reproducible products manifests itself *within* cinematic texts. In "The Production of Belief", Pierre Bourdieu characterizes the culture industry as one built upon the basis of "...pretending not to be doing what they are doing."<sup>26</sup> That is to say, the commercial success of art objects largely depends on the generation of what Bourdieu terms "symbolic capital"<sup>27</sup>, but which we might also refer to as cultural capital. This is the resource necessary to imbue a text with true aura and prestige, and the reason why filmmakers of certain artistic value also hold great industrial value--they manufacture "...a capital of consecration implying a power to consecrate objects (with trademark or signature)..."<sup>28</sup> A prime example of such a signature manifesting itself within a consecrated object is the inclusion of outtakes during the credits of nearly all of Jackie Chan's Hong Kong action films. Legendary for his death-defying stunts and relentlessly paced fight sequences, Chan masterfully created a signature brand in the 1980s and '90s that separated his films from the crowds of imitators. The tagline for his 1995 film *Rumble in the Bronx* sums the brand up nicely: "no fear, no stuntman, no equal". The audience is not expected to accept this statement on faith, through behind-the-scenes footage which plays during the closing credits they are explicitly shown that not only did Chan himself perform the amazing physical feats

littered throughout each film, but he endured incredible amounts of pain in the process. Though a self-proclaimed masochist, Chan included this feature first and foremost as his personal guarantee that his cinematic products are authentic, unaltered representations of his unique physical abilities. The deliberate establishment of Chan's action style as something singular and irreproducible, even within the realm of Hong Kong action cinema, is a clear example of the marketability of the aura within the confines of the cinematic text itself. Even before the closing credits and corresponding outtakes roll, Chan often shows his films' most impressive stunts multiple times and in single, unbroken takes as metaphorical underscores selling to the audience the assertion that what they are experiencing is not creatively reproducible except by Chan himself.

Of course, instilling films with the aura of a branded actor or filmmaker is a marketing strategy that has been utilized from very early on in cinema history. Forebears of Jackie Chan such as Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, or directors such as F. W. Murnau and Alfred Hitchcock, established an air of stylistic distinction and singularity that is carried primarily through the textual quality of their films. In contemporary Hollywood, the championing of certain directors for their strict adherence to practical special effects in the age of overwhelming amounts of computer-generated imagery is another example of imbuing cinematic texts with authenticity and symbolic capital. A viewer made aware that for the climactic car chase in his Batman epic *The Dark Knight* (2008), director Christopher Nolan insisted an actual semi-truck be flipped over is likely to have a more engaging experience with the film. Awareness that the norm is to employ extensive CGI effects, yet most of Nolan's films feature little or no CGI, lends those films a measure of authenticity and a perceived uniqueness that, though originating from

knowledge gained outside the texts, ends up being sustained within the texts. Indeed, fans and critics have often praised Nolan and similarly inclined filmmakers such as Guillermo del Toro for their uncommon special effects ideologies. The successful characterization of Jackie Chan action films, Charlie Chaplin comedies, or Christopher Nolan superhero thrillers as textual specialties is proof that--as in the case of extras-laden home video releases or 3-D film spectacles--distinctive physical stunts or practical special effects are only marketable qualities of value in contrast to what is perceived as the endless reproducibility and proliferation of the opposite tendencies.

Media theories such as Walter Benjamin's artistic aura, Adorno and Horkheimer's culture industry, and McLuhan's medium-as-message resurge with new relevancy as the ubiquity of media content and the proliferation of possible means of interacting with that content continues to grow and evolve. From the perspective of the contemporary media landscape, the aura of the art object has not necessarily been destroyed by mechanical reproduction, as Benjamin argued, but it has been commercialized. Most notably through special edition DVD and Blu-ray releases, a market area Hollywood has an enormous vested interest in as revenue from sell-through home video has surpassed box office throughout the past decade,<sup>29</sup> consumers are bombarded with an increasingly wide array of texts, paratexts, and deliberately constructed packages blurring distinctions between the two. Different cuts of a single film, distributed in a variety of ways, further complicates the consumer effort to distinguish how a contemporary media text is defined and what the most authentic experience of its content is. Even confined within the boundaries of a film text itself, preconceived conceptions and filmmaking techniques utilized as stamps of authenticity propagate the cultural and commercial role of the aura.

As an area ripe for possible further exploration of this concept, the video games medium offers many examples of tiered product launches that present regular and special edition iterations of an essentially identical art object; as in-game bonus features are increasingly offered as incentives to purchase titles from specific retailers, and elaborate expansion content is issued post-launch via internet download, what is or is not required for a player to obtain the full textual experience? Is the all-inclusive, lavishly packaged Legendary Edition of *Halo: Reach* a more authentic iteration of the game, or simply a more expensive one? Questions of this nature are shared between cinema and game audiences (increasingly the same audience). Examination of home video releases of television series and mini-series is also necessary to fully explore the impact of the aura upon media content and corresponding consumer experience.

In conclusion, it is easy to demonize contemporary media producers for trivializing art and culture by grooming media properties as brands and knowingly creating consumer confusion over multiple editions of (nearly) identical content.<sup>30</sup> However, we cannot characterize consumers as completely passive or as having no part in the marketability of the aura, nor can we pretend that there have not been many beneficial yields from the daunting web of media experiences currently available. Though ultimately subjective and often abused, the idea of the special or the authentic in the age of mass media and mass reproduction remains arguably worthwhile as often as it is confounding.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Figures from Boxoffice Mojo.com.
- <sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Film Theory and Criticism* (6th ed.), edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 794.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 796.
- <sup>4</sup> Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: The Thresholds of Interpretation*, translated by Jane E. Lewin, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- <sup>5</sup> Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010), 30.
- <sup>6</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 29-43.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.
- <sup>8</sup> Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 30.
- <sup>9</sup> John A. Walker, *Art in the Age of Mass Media*, (London: Pluto Press, 1983).
- <sup>10</sup> Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 411.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 411.
- <sup>12</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 802.
- <sup>13</sup> "Our Mission," Criterion.com, [http://www.criterion.com/about\\_us](http://www.criterion.com/about_us).
- <sup>14</sup> Marshal McLuhan, "The Medium is the Message," in *Media Studies: A Reader*, edited by Paul Marris and Sue Thornham, (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 38-43.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>16</sup> Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 83-84.
- <sup>17</sup> Drew Taylor, "The Thin Red Line (Blu-ray) Review," HighDefDigest.com, September 28, 2010, <http://bluray.highdefdigest.com/3385/thethinredline.html>.
- <sup>18</sup> Kristin Thompson, *The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 204.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.
- <sup>21</sup> Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 92.
- <sup>22</sup> Peter M. Bracke, "Blade Runner Ultimate Collector's Ed. (Blu-ray) Review," HighDefDigest.com, December 18, 2007, <http://bluray.highdefdigest.com/251/bladerunner.html>.
- <sup>23</sup> Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 96.
- <sup>24</sup> Estelle Jussim, *Visual Communication and the Graphic Arts*, (New York: Bowker, 1974).
- <sup>25</sup> Marshal McLuhan, "The Medium is the Message," 43.
- <sup>26</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods," translation by Richard Nice, in *Media, Culture and Society: A Critical Reader*, edited by Richard Collins, James Curran, Nicholas Garnham, Paddy Scannell, Philip Schlesinger, and Colin Sparks, (London: Sage Publications, 1986), 131.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.
- <sup>29</sup> Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History*, (London: British Film Institute, 2005), 219.
- <sup>30</sup> Howard J. Blumenthal, *Branded for Life: How Americans are Brainwashed by the Brands We Love*, (Cincinnati: Emmis Books, 2005), 63.

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