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### “Trust Joss”: Authorship and the Narrative Franchise

What follows in this paper is less a “position” than a pose, a set of incompletely answered questions about contemporary critical practices with respect to narrative franchises, designed to think less about how those franchises function than about how we approach them, and in particular how we deal with the question of the creator or author with respect to such franchises.

The status of the author has been very much in question for the last four decades, troubled not just by theoretical claims of the “death” of the author beginning with Barthes and Foucault, but also by the obviously collective and corporate processes of authorship dominant in film and television production. If, as Barthes claims, every text is a tissue of quotations, the televisual text is fractally so, replicating at the level of its production the inevitable intertextuality of its composition. Despite these apparent complexities in thinking about the figure of the author in contemporary media studies, however, there seems to be a relatively recent turn in both popular and scholarly television criticism toward an increasing attribution of authorial voice to the showrunner. The recent prominence of the showrunner is, not at all incidentally, aided by a number of recent series — most notably, *Studio 60* — that explicitly valorize the work of the executive producer as the creative center of television programming.

Foucault, of course, argued that the function of the author is focused around his or her name, which serves as a kind of handle by which certain discourses circulating throughout a culture can be picked up and carried around. This notion of the “author function,” as applied to television, raises a key question about the work that the showrunner’s name does in discourse about a given series. There are times when authorship seems wholly attributed to the showrunner, in a surprisingly untroubled fashion — think about the relationship between Joss Whedon and the *Buffyverse* (often, more tellingly, referred to post-*Firefly* as the *Whedonverse*). At other times, though, the relationship between showrunner and series seems a bit more complicated: to what extent do discourses about *Alias* or *Lost* genuinely attribute authorship to J.J. Abrams? (A tentative answer: mostly in the breach; Abrams’s departure from *Alias* in the early stages of *Lost* was often blamed for the former series’s decline.) Under what circumstances is the showrunner transformed in the public discourse into the rebirth of the *auteur*, and when is the showrunner merely the fall guy?

A further, and perhaps most significant, question to be raised about the localization of authorship in the figure of the showrunner has to do with the relationship between the narrative franchise and fan communities, which seem simultaneously to reinforce and undermine the notion of the showrunner as *auteur*. On the one hand, the discussion within such communities is often focused upon and at times even in communication with the showrunner; on the other hand, many of these same fans are themselves participating in the authorship process, both through the discussion boards and through fanfic, vidding, and other remix practices. The coexistence of these two different modes of fan reception with respect to authorship practices in the narrative franchise —

on the one hand, attributing “canon” to the showrunner; on the other hand, intervening in and extending canon through more distributed practices — suggests a productive tension between a centered, focused notion of authorship and one more diffused and dispersed.

By contrast, the television industry seems to be countering the notion of fan production by showcasing the work of the showrunner-as-auteur, both in the marketing of its franchises and in the content of some of those franchises themselves. Looking closely at the networks’ and production companies’ uses of the figure of the showrunner in relation to the discourses about and appropriations of authorship in fan communities might indicate that authorship itself may serve as a point of contestation between mainstream producers and fans over ownership of a narrative franchise’s various texts, usefully complicating our ideas about authorship in the remix era.