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DVD Supplements: A Commentary on Commentaries

Jacqueline Reich

Fordham University, jreich8@fordham.edu

Giorgio Bertellini

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feminist politics of all these organizations are sustained in and by the personal relationships that constitute them. (Not to say that contradictions—personnel disputes, communication styles—don't arise, ones that temper any expectation of a kinder, gentler female organizational style.)

Feminist dynamics inform academic contexts, though they need to be balanced alongside the “feminine” politics of service in the profession generally. There is still the pressure for a junior woman or person of color to be, as my colleague Nora Johnson quipped, a combination of Michel Foucault and Mary Richards. I worked with these organizations before I had tenure. I teach at a liberal arts college, and I trusted that the complement to my teaching and the institutional ethic of service would make such activities count. Without a Film Studies department, I found these associations vital. It is crucial to nurture and advise our junior colleagues' ongoing commitments to the cultures of media production and critique that complement academic ones, even if they never converge in a developmental narrative. *

DVD Supplements: A Commentary on Commentaries

by GIORGIO BERTELLINI AND JACQUELINE REICH

In the last few decades, as graduate seminars have explored the postmodern heuristics of the “death of the author,” DVD editions have popularized a range of audio and print supplements that have, directly or indirectly, expanded films' authorial halo. The notion of the commentary is, of course, nothing new to the academy: consider the multiple annotated editions of literary classics. But its material extension to the home theater “experience” has had peculiar cultural and economic consequences. As value-adding paratexts, audio and printed commentaries can turn film texts into critical or luxury editions, to be marketed to different levels of cinephilic and commercial consumption.¹

Introduced in 1984 by Criterion Collection (then part of the Voyager Company) for a niche market of laser disc buyers, Ronald Haver's audio commentary on *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper, 1933) ultimately

1 Aaron Barlow, *The DVD Revolution: Movies, Culture, and Technology* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005); Deborah Parker and Mark Parker, “Director and DVD Commentary: The Specifics of Intention,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62, no.1 (Winter 2004): 13–22.

inaugurated this trend. Since the late 1990s, most DVD editions of classic, critically rediscovered, and new films have made the audio commentary a key component of an ever-growing menu of special features—including entire director’s cuts, deleted scenes, making-of documentaries, exclusive or vintage interviews with the film’s makers or celebrated critics, video essays, professional biographies, and photographic essays. Criterion’s success in this area is widely acknowledged, and their releases with commentaries are not limited to art or classic films: the company’s best-selling DVD is the hyper-commented *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (Terry Gilliam, 1998; Criterion DVD, 2003).²

Specially written essays (often referred to as liner notes and derived from recording industry practices) have also become a familiar fixture in the marketing of authorially ambitious DVD releases. They are particularly common as inserts with box sets or special two-disc editions, when they may even take the form of elegant booklets that share the size, cover, and layout of the box set and of its DVD cases. Even though materially extrinsic to the DVD content, accompanying essays affect the appeal of many DVD editions as they too, when accessed, mediate consumers’ overall experiences—as film instructors (and their students) know all too well.³ Because they are cheaper to produce, written materials are sometimes added *in place of* audio commentaries. As Jason Viteritti, Director of DVD Production at Koch Lorber, a division of E1 Entertainment, recounted in an interview with the authors, this was the rationale in the production of the eight-disc box set, *The Marco Ferreri Collection* (2008), which includes a documentary on Ferreri’s films, a vintage filmed interview with the director, and a booklet—but no audio commentary.⁴

Two types of commentaries dominate the market: those made by directors and individuals variously involved in the making of the film (cinematographers, screenwriters, actors, producers, and even sound designers); and those made by critics and scholars solicited if filmmakers are foreign (Wong Kar-Wai), permanently unwilling or unavailable (Godard), excessively loquacious (Tarantino), or deceased (Lang, Truffaut, Fellini). There are also sub-scenarios or exceptions: when the critic-scholar in question was actually present during the filming, as in the case of British critic-photographer Gideon Bachmann who comments on Federico Fellini’s *8 1/2* (1963; Criterion DVD, 2001); or when filmmakers express their opinions as critics of a film made by someone else, as director Steven Soderbergh and writer/director Tony Gilroy did for the Criterion edition of *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949; Criterion DVD, 2007).

When soliciting an audio commentary or an essay, DVD production companies take several factors into consideration. The identification of the contributor generally reveals the desire for an established authorial or a balanced critical competence capable of attracting an audience of cinephiles, or an added “plus” for the average consumer, which in turn leads to multiple film viewings. Commentaries vary a great deal in quality,

2 Bradley Schauer, “The Criterion Collection in the New Home Video Market: An Interview with Susan Arosteguy,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 56 (Fall 2005): 32–35.

3 Our personal experience in this area of professional development arose both deliberately and serendipitously. For the booklet of Koch Lorber’s Marco Ferreri DVD collection, Reich was solicited by a former student who is now head of Vice President of Marketing and Product Development for E1 Entertainment. David Shepard of Preservation Film Associates asked Bertellini for an audio commentary on *The Italian* (Reginald Barker, 1915) after locating him through a search of scholarly contributions on the film’s star, George Beban.

4 Jason Viteritti, interview with the authors, July 20, 2009.

as every viewer knows. They can paraphrase the obvious in an all-too-close analysis or get lost in the vagaries of anecdotes or historical contextualizations. Although audio commentaries (as well as written essays) tend to provide “suggested readings” that often crystallize established critical interpretations, for teaching purposes we particularly appreciate those that, rather than sealing a film’s meaning, allow viewers room for personal interpretation. They do so by grounding current critical urgencies and historical discussions firmly in the text.⁵ The opposite of that may be narcissistic, but also visionary. Consider Godard’s *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* (1988), Scorsese’s *My Voyage to Italy* (2001), and Zizek in *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* (Sophie Fiennes, 2006). Here, rather than a critical voice commenting on a single film, dozens of film clips become the “essay on cinema” by a star filmmaker or scholar—the DVD’s ultimate author.

The critical value of audio commentaries may be indisputable, but their future is linked to the commercial viability of DVD supplemental materials, which looks simultaneously grim and bright. In 2008, DVD sales fell 9 percent from the previous year, as did the sale of DVD players (from 33.5 million in 2007 to 25.3 million in 2008), while Blu-ray spending rose threefold.⁶ Threatened by instant downloads (both legal and illegal) and various on-demand services, DVDs and their supplementary materials will have to find a way to make their products relevant through further innovation or, as is already being implemented, with restrictions on the ever-growing rental by mail market. Studios such as Fox, in fact, have removed all supplemental materials from DVDs destined for the rental market, thus creating the market niche for these extras solely through consumer purchase.⁷ According to Koch Lorber and E1 Entertainment Vice President of Marketing and DVD Production Walter Schmidt, the focus has now shifted to digital, with films in their catalog available for instant download on Netflix, iTunes, and Hulu (Criterion.com offers select films in their catalog for immediate viewing as well), and to fewer but more “loaded” releases that attempt to attract institutions and individuals lured by commodities with high cultural capital.⁸ Thus for general consumers, the audio and written commentary will continue to provide both useful and useless (if highly marketable) information—for a price. As an avenue of professional development, providing DVD commentaries remains an interesting option, but one, unfortunately, whose future is in doubt. *

5 In our view, admirable models of audio commentary are Martin Scorsese and Thelma Schoonmaker on *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980; Criterion DVD, 2005), Robert Altman and Michael Tolkin on *The Player* (Robert Altman, 1992; New Line Platinum Series DVD Special Edition, 1997), Robert Stam on *Contempt (Le mépris; Jean-Luc Godard, 1963; Criterion DVD, 2002)*, and Yuri Tsivian on *The Man with the Movie Camera (Chelovek s kino-apparatom; Dziga Vertov, 1929; Image Entertainment DVD, 2002)*. Peter Jackson’s commentaries for the various installments of *The Lord of the Rings* series would require a category of their own. See Craig Hight, “Making-of Documentaries on DVD: *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy and Special Editions,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 56 (Fall 2005): 4–17. On the cottage industry of audio commentary, see Barlow, *The DVD Revolution*, 121–126.

6 Diane Garrett, “DVD Sales Down by 5.5% in ‘08,” *Daily Variety Online*, January 7, 2009, <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117998174.html> (accessed October 2, 2009); and Press Release, Digital Entertainment Group Year-end 2008 Home Entertainment Sales Figures, January 8, 2009, <http://www.dvdinformation.com/News/press/CES2009yearEnd.htm> (accessed July 27, 2009).

7 Susanne Ault, “Fox DVD Creates Two Classes of Discs,” *Daily Variety Online*, March 4, 2009, <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1118000857.html> (accessed October 2, 2009); and Mark Graser, “DVD Rentals Re-energized,” *Daily Variety Online*, March 13, 2009, <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1118001206.html> (accessed October 2, 2009).

8 Walter Schmidt, interview with the authors, July 20, 2009.