Star Wars and the History of Transmedia Storytelling

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Part I

“First Steps Into A Larger World”: Establishing the Star Wars Storyworld
1. “Thank the Maker!”

George Lucas, Lucasfilm, and the Legends of Transtextual Authorship across the Star Wars Franchise

_Tara Lomax_

The history of the Star Wars franchise is strongly intertwined with the creative and industrial legacy of its creator George Lucas. Beyond establishing the Star Wars mythos, Lucas has had a transformative impact on contemporary Hollywood entertainment through the foundation and management of his production company, Lucasfilm, which includes multiple subsidiaries that have innovated filmmaking and cinema technologies, such as Industrial Light & Magic, Skywalker Sound, THX, LucasArts, and Lucasfilm Animation. His significant role in the creative vision of each of these ventures demonstrates that the nature of Lucas’s authorship cannot be contained by one creative practice or role: over his career, Lucas has been director, screenwriter, story developer, producer, editor, and post-production supervisor. This multifaceted creative influence worked toward his “legendary” insistence on authorial control.1 As a creative and proprietary pursuit, the desire for control has often worked in tension with the transmedial expression and reception of the Star Wars franchise across its long and rich history. For this reason, my objective here is to examine the function of Lucas’s singular authorship in the context of the Star Wars franchise’s history of transmedia storytelling. I conceptualize his presence as transtextual authorship, in which the singular author is both in control of and subject to the multifarious and dynamic textual relations of transmedia storytelling.

Working in tandem with Lucas’s creative goals are the multiple creative media, personae, and practices that constitute an expansive and long-running transmedia franchise such as Star Wars. This includes various directors, screenwriters, and producers, as well as practical and visual effects creators, technological innovators in sound and exhibition, corporate owners and licensees, alongside fan creators and cultural commentators. While this attests to the collaborative and collective potential of authorship in transmedia storytelling, Henry Jenkins draws on Star Wars and George

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Lucas to acknowledge that “the most successful transmedia franchises have emerged when a single creator or creative unit maintains control.” Similarly, Toby Miller recognizes that, in the production of transmedia storytelling, “intertextuality is everywhere and paratextuality a norm, even as intellectual property [IP] is constantly seeking to secure territory.” Transmedia storytelling, therefore, facilitates a relationship between authorship and textuality that is continually variable and shifting in line with industrial priorities, such as IP and licensing. For these reasons, understanding authorship across the history of the Star Wars franchise necessitates a nuanced view of authorship and textuality, which accounts for the dialogical relations that occur between singular authorship and creative collaboration in the context of a transmedia franchise.

In examining the relationship between Lucas’s authorship and the Star Wars franchise’s transmediality, this chapter consolidates two distinct critical frameworks: first, poststructuralist understandings of the text as multiple, subjective, and decentered, and second, auteur criticism, which has typically been concerned with the subjective control and consistent creative vision of a singular director. This critical convergence provides a means to address the presence of the singular author in the context of a complex transtextual structure like transmedia storytelling. Gérard Genette conceptualizes “transtextuality” and its various typologies, such as para-, inter-, and metatextuality, as a textual system that addresses the “across-ness” of textuality: that is, the “relations between texts, [and] the ways they reread and rewrite one another.” This view endows the transtextual system with the subjective agency that would traditionally be afforded to the singular auteur.

Revisionist understandings of auteur criticism, however, dismiss the auteur-as-subject approach in favor of a text-as-subject perspective to singular authorship. In the 1972 postscript to his seminal treatise on the semiotics of auteur theory, Peter Wollen revised his earlier thoughts to account for the poststructuralist dynamics of textuality: he contends that the text “is open rather than closed; multiple rather than single; productive rather than exhaustive. Although [a text] is produced by an individual, the

4 Gerald Prince, foreword to *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, by Gérard Genette (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 1997), ix.
author, it does not simply represent or express the author’s ideas, but exists in its own right.\textsuperscript{5} The premise of Wollen’s revision is supported by more recent interrogations of auteurism, like Dudley Andrew’s argument that “an auteur may be surrounded by the images for which it is claimed he is responsible, while not directing their reading.”\textsuperscript{6} Singular authorship, according to this framework, is not a super-presence that controls from above, but a transtextual presence that is propelled into a dynamic relationship with multiple texts and other authors. Following this approach, Lucas’s transtextual singular authorship has functioned in dialogical relationship with the creative, industrial, and textual forces that have constituted the Star Wars franchise over the last four decades.

“Thank the Maker!”: Lucas as Maker

I invoke C-3PO’s rhapsodic cry “Thank the Maker!” from \textit{A New Hope} to frame this chapter, because it functions as a metatextual expression that recognizes the congruity between droid-maker and filmmaker. In Star Wars, the notion of the Maker is analogical to the role of creator in droid vernacular. This association resonates with Star Wars fans, who extended similar adulations to Lucas himself as ultimate Maker of the franchise mythos. Moreover, in echoing the everyday idiom “thank God,” C-3PO’s expression incidentally recalls romanticized conceptions of the author as divine presence. This is another status previously granted to Lucas himself, who for the first two decades in the history of Star Wars was elevated to the position of “latter-day god”\textsuperscript{7} by fans. Both these understandings of the Maker draw on notions of authorship that privilege the vision of a single creator. In consequence, this also places expectations on Lucas that have often put him at odds with Star Wars fans.

Indeed, such praise for Lucas was rescinded by many fans in 1997 with the special edition re-release of the original trilogy and with more intensity in 1999 with the release of \textit{The Phantom Menace}. The special edition, released for the franchise’s twentieth anniversary, not only remastered the image

\textsuperscript{5} Peter Wollen, \textit{Signs and Meaning in the Cinema} (London: Secker & Warburg; London: BFI, 1972), 163.


quality and visual effects, but it added and altered key scenes in ways that changed character traits and plot elements that were deemed sacred by long-time fans. Furthermore, many found the prequel trilogy’s focus on digital innovation and computer-generated imagery to have diverged from the aesthetic, technological, and thematic principles of the original trilogy. Will Brooker explains that, for this reason, fans expressed a “harsh voice of criticism directed personally at George Lucas as director, and a general sense of distrust about his ability to handle the mythos.” This was most clearly expressed in the documentary *The People vs. George Lucas* (2010), which highlights the tensions that can result between creators and fans of a long-running transmedia franchise. Moreover, the relationship between Lucas and the fans has in many ways provoked, measured, and contended with Lucas’s creative journey through authorial control, then disruption, and finally redemption.

“I don’t remember ever owning a droid”: The Peculiar Case of “George Lucas,” Property of Lucasfilm

The nature of Lucas’s authorial control is most officially and intriguingly inscribed in his legal dealings with Twentieth Century Fox, during the initial development of what was then, in the early 1970s, titled *The Star Wars*. Most accounts of Lucas’s early legal and economic negotiations with Fox refer to his control-oriented decision to refuse an increase in his salary as writer and director in favor of retaining the rights to sequels and merchandise. However, a lesser-known circumstance is how Lucas secured ownership of his IP through a legal dissociation of self. In *The Making of Star Wars*, J.W. Rinzler reveals that “On January 10, 1974, Lucas signed a necessary if somewhat surreal legal agreement with himself, whereby Lucasfilm loaned out ‘George Lucas’ as director to ‘The Star Wars Corporation,’ a subsidiary formed to facilitate the upcoming budget and legal dealings with Fox.”

This peculiar legal procedure constructs Lucas as an authorial double—as George Lucas, owner of Lucasfilm, and as “George Lucas,” employee of The Star Wars Corporation. This renders him both owner and property of

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Lucasfilm, thus inscribing his authorial presence with a dialogical dynamic between his role as creator and proprietor.

As a production company, Lucasfilm occupies a position between these two authorial articulations: Lucas and “Lucas.” This duality corresponds with Wollen's nominal separation of the auteur identity—distinguishing between with and without inverted commas—in which he argues that “Fuller or Hawks or Hitchcock, the directors, are quite separate from 'Fuller' or ‘Hawks’ or ‘Hitchcock,’ the structures named after them.”11 Therefore, “Lucas” is a legal-industrial structure that represents Lucas's commitment to securing control of his IP and creative license. This legal agreement might not have immediate transtextual substance. For Genette, however, the practice of naming the author has paratextual significance, whereby “the author's name fulfills a contractual function” between audience, reader, and text.12 In Lucas's case, part of what makes the legal expression of his name so significant is that the Lucasfilm trademark simultaneously represents multiple Lucas-oriented roles: Lucas the creator, “George Lucas” the legal entity, and Lucasfilm the corporate brand. Jonathan Gray considers how the author as brand becomes “an inter- or paratextual framing device,” thereby rendering the author's name “a paratext that manages a broader textual system.”13 If the idiosyncrasy of this legal procedure comes out of the doubling of Lucas's authorial identity, as argued above, it also relates to the practice of attaching a nominal signature to the text because, as Gray explains, “we can only approach texts through paratexts.”14 Therefore, the glistening green Lucasfilm trademark15 that precedes each Star Wars text represents the paratextual function of Lucas’s name, marking the entry point through which one approaches the text while also serving as a mediating device between author, text, and audience.

15 It should be noted that, although the Lucasfilm trademark has, until recently, been a variant of green in each Star Wars appearance, it did not glisten until it was remastered for the 1997 special edition.
“Join me and together we will rule the galaxy!”: Lucas as Vader and the Empire of Irony

Lucas’s long-lasting aversion to the structures and conventions of the Hollywood establishment is critical to any understanding of the industrial lore that surrounds the Star Wars franchise. Since graduating from film school, Lucas has openly expressed distrust and cynicism towards the unchecked authority of the Hollywood studio system, especially due to the way it unjustly controlled the creative process. The experiences with his first two studio productions, *THX-1138* (1971) and *American Graffiti* (1973), “turned Lucas’s mistrust of corporate Hollywood into resentment”16 and heightened his determination to secure creative control of Star Wars. This provoked his progression from a young experimental filmmaker, who valued the communal environment of Francis Ford Coppola’s independent studio American Zoetrope at the end of the 1960s into the early 1970s, to a producer of blockbuster movies, who independently owned and managed Lucasfilm from 1971 until 2012. Moreover, extending from this unrelenting commitment to securing creative control is his tendency towards thematic contradiction. Brooker characterizes Lucas’s autobiographical and auteurist sensibilities as “dealing with his own conflicting desires for human community and solitude, order and creativity, discipline and play.”17 This creative exploration of the paradoxes of humanity parallels Lucas’s progression from an independent-minded young filmmaker to a corporate Hollywood mogul.

The irony of Lucas’s movement from being against the Hollywood establishment to reinventing the contemporary entertainment industry has been acknowledged by Lucas himself. In the documentary *Empire of Dreams*, he reveals:

> What I was trying to do was stay independent so I could make the movies I wanted to make, but at the same time I was fighting the corporate system. [...] But now I’ve found myself being the head of a corporation, so there’s a certain irony there, that I’ve become the very thing that I was trying to avoid. Which basically is what part of *Star Wars* is about—that is, Darth Vader.18

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This expresses many of the concerns that shaped Lucas’s journey as auteur, including the resistance against industrial structures and the irony of becoming the very thing he fought against. It also highlights Lucas’s continuing commitment to securing creative independence and control. What is most significant about this confession is how Lucas self-reflexively identifies with Vader, as they both must manage the consequences, implications, and resistances to their galactic creations.

Lucas’s inadvertent association with Vader has also not been lost on scholars and critics. As Karina Longworth suggests, “Lucas’s experimental filmmaking ambitions may have remained unrealized, but a more sympathetic read suggests that for Lucas, as for Vader, this was not a choice at all: instead, he has become trapped by his own creation, a rebel whose phenomenal success turned him, unwillingly, into an impenetrable power.”

This notion of being trapped by his own creation expresses how the Star Wars franchise has taken on a transtextual momentum of its own, one that unconsciously inscribes its author into its textual system and which Lucas could neither have predicted nor controlled. Similarly, Wollen considers how “a text can produce spaces within meaning, within the otherwise rigid straitjacket of the message, to produce a meaning of a new kind, generated within the text itself.” Privileging the subjective agency of the text, Wollen argues, is therefore essential to a revisionist approach to auteur criticism.

“I am C-3PO, Human-Cyborg Relations”: Intertextualizing C-3PO

C-3PO and his counterpart R2-D2 are the most consistent characters across the Star Wars franchise, appearing in every canonical film and television series to date, as well as multiple comic books, novels, and video games. C-3PO and R2-D2 are the first characters to be introduced, driving the plot forward in the first act of A New Hope. Therefore, the two droids are important figures for representing and maintaining textual cohesion and stability (as well as humor) across the transmedia franchise. More specifically, as a protocol droid who is programmed for “human-cyborg relations” and is “fluent in over six million forms of communication,” C-3PO frequently functions as mediator between characters. As oral narrator by the campfire in Return of the Jedi, C-3PO’s role even extends to playing the part of storyteller, where he uses diegetic sound recordings to reenact a

20 Wollen, Signs and Meaning, 162.
truncated version of the original trilogy to the Ewoks. Like Lucas's autho-
rial presence, therefore, C-3PO and R2-D2 are, to draw on Julia Kristeva's
explication of intertextuality, an “inescapable link between texts.”21 This
not only makes C-3PO a diegetic mediator, but also an intertextual anchor
across the franchise’s multiple texts and media forms.

Intertextuality conceptualizes the relationship across and between
texts as a relational dialogism. For Kristeva, this dynamic is instrumental
in propelling the author from a position that operates and controls from
outside of the text, to one where the author is “transformed by his having
included himself within the narrative system.”22 Wollen conveys a similar
idea when he describes the auteur as “an unconscious catalyst” of a dynamic
textual system,23 while Timothy Corrigan also considers how the auteur
becomes “absorbed as a phantom presence” within the text.24 C-3PO can
therefore be read as a presence that unwittingly mirrors some of the ways
in which Lucas exists as an “unconscious catalyst” and “phantom presence”
across the transtextual system of the Star Wars franchise. In The Phantom
Menace, the revelation that Anakin Skywalker—and therefore Vader—is
C-3PO’s Maker further affirms a connection between C-3PO and Lucas.
Indeed, when C-3PO exclaims “Thank the Maker!” in A New Hope, he inad-
vertently invokes both Lucas and Anakin, thus conveniently establishing
a dialogism not only between author and text, but also between multiple
texts. In this way, C-3PO becomes an intertextual anchor reflecting Lucas’s
contradictory authorial presence: his consistent presence throughout the
franchise projecting coherence even as his transformations betray Lucas’s
own contested and ambiguous authorial role.

“My parts are showing!”: When the Maker Comes Undone

Across the history of the Star Wars franchise, C-3PO experiences many
instances of physical dismemberment, instability, and incompleteness,
thereby illustrating how the character also functions as a phantom pres-
ence of Lucas’s contradictory role as author figure. On one hand, C-3PO
represents consistence, cohesion, and communication across the Star Wars

21 Gray, Show Sold Separately, 31.
22 Julia Kristeva, Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art (Oxford: Basil
23 Wollen, Signs and Meaning, 168.
franchise’s transmedia articulations—as an interpreter, but also as an intertextual anchor. However, on the other hand—well, the other hand, like his other parts, has unfortunately been dismembered. I contend that C-3PO’s dismemberment playfully expresses how Lucas’s attempt to achieve complete authorial control has been shaped, regulated, and undermined by various surrounding forces, like other executives and creators, technological limitations, fans and commentators, and the inevitable contradictions and transformations that arise across any author’s career.

In *A New Hope*, C-3PO is attacked by Tusken Raiders and his arm is shot off. In *The Empire Strikes Back* his entire body is disassembled into parts. In *Return of the Jedi*, his eye is gouged out by the Kowakian monkey-lizard Salacious B. Crumb at Jabba the Hutt’s palace. Then, in the prequel *The Phantom Menace*, he appears as a mechanical skeleton, his cables and gears markedly exposed. By *Attack of the Clones* he has been provided with make-shift silver coverings, but finds himself on a factory conveyer belt where his head and body are pulled apart and switched with a battle droid. Finally, at the end of *Revenge of the Sith*, C-3PO’s memory is completely erased. These constant disruptions to C-3PO’s body and mind intersect with his function as an “unconscious catalyst” of Lucas’s unstable authorial presence. C-3PO’s susceptibility to physical dismemberment and his ongoing need for repair and reconditioning can be read as an inadvertent expression of Lucas’s continuous process of authorial revision.

Of special significance in this reading of Lucas’s authorial disruption and reconditioning is C-3PO’s stripped-down and exposed form in *The Phantom Menace*, which signifies the attempt to reformulate (that is to say, re-“make”) Lucas’s authorial presence, but also to expose its inherent vulnerability. First, as discussed above, the revelation that Vader is C-3PO’s Maker conveniently affirms a potential authorial connection between Lucas and C-3PO via Anakin/Vader. Second, this revelation is accompanied by C-3PO’s humiliation when R2-D2 teases him for being naked, thus suggesting a subtext for realizing that achieving ultimate creative control can also make one vulnerable.25 As Longworth recognizes, “the prequels are, for better and for worse, pure Lucas. They were built so independently that there was no one to tell him ‘no.’”26 In this way, C-3PO’s incomplete body symbolizes how the prequel trilogy was an opportunity for Lucas to

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25 In making the prequel trilogy, Lucas took on the roles of director, screenwriter, editing supervisor, and executive producer, despite his repeatedly expressed distaste for directing and writing.

complete his unfinished work without restriction, because the “difference between Star Wars and other franchises ... is that Lucas cannot seem to leave his ostensibly completed series alone.” However, the prequel logic through which C-3PO’s “origin” is realized further characterizes Lucas’s authorial control of the franchise as something that can never be truly completed. When C-3PO bids farewell to Anakin in *The Phantom Menace*, he admits that “you are my Maker and I wish you well; however, I should prefer I were a little more completed.” C-3PO’s incomplete body, therefore, might be thought of as visualizing authorial anxieties about how to maintain authorship over a franchise that will perpetually remain unfinished.

While Vader never acknowledges that he is C-3PO’s Maker in the films, the licensed comic-book series *Star Wars Tales* provides a “What if?” scenario with the short story aptly titled “Thank the Maker.” In this story, set during the events on Cloud City in *The Empire Strikes Back*, Vader shares a moment with a disassembled C-3PO, decades after their last parting in *Revenge of the Sith*. As Vader grasps C-3PO’s head, the reader is transported to Vader’s childhood memory of finding discarded droid parts in Watto’s junkyard on Tatooine. The comic book juxtaposes two panels (figure 1.1) that are similar in framing, composition, and layout, but which present a spatiotemporal crossover between young Anakin and Vader, both holding C-3PO’s head in the same pose. Then, in a later panel (figure 1.2), Vader holds C-3PO’s head up for an iconic meeting between Maker and creation. Therefore, this story (intra)textually intervenes into the plot of *The Empire Strikes Back* during the events in Cloud City, and recalls memories inspired by *The Phantom Menace* that harken back to a young Anakin on Tatooine.

As a licensed comic now classified under the Legends banner, “Thank the Maker” explores the relationship between Lucas’s storyworld and licensed content. In one way, it participates in the transtextual disruption of Lucas’s authorial presence, because it intervenes in the plot involving C-3PO’s dismembered body. Furthermore, C-3PO is deactivated during this encounter with Vader and therefore has no capacity to engage with his Maker. Similarly, Lucas claims to have intentionally divorced himself from

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28 “Thank the Maker,” written by Ryder Windham, penciled by Killian Plunkett, lettered by Steve Dutro, and colored by Dave McCaig, in *Star Wars Tales*, no. 6 (Milwaukee, OR: Dark Horse Comics, December 2000).
29 In 2014, all licensed Star Wars content across multiple media platforms and outside the official films and television series, was retroactively classified under a new continuity banner, *Star Wars Legends*. This content was previously organized using the multi-tiered system of the EU.
licensed texts. Although he had a varied degree of involvement, he admitted, “I don’t read that stuff... That’s a different world than my world.” In another way, this comic-book story works to resolve this division through a meta-textual dialogue across media and authors. Published after *The Phantom Menace*, it is creatively inspired by canonical plot, imagery, and character development as it responds to the retroactive revelation that Anakin is C-3PO’s Maker. In this way, the integration of multiple texts—both Lucas's

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own and the licensed content of the transmedia franchise—complicates Lucas's deliberate separation of his own world from the licensed works he perceives as ancillary.

“You probably don’t recognize me because of the red arm”:
Introducing New Makers

In 2012, The Walt Disney Company acquired Lucasfilm, its subsidiaries, and its IP, initiating a new era for the Star Wars franchise. For Lucas, this signaled his retirement from Star Wars and a departure from the empire he created; for Lucasfilm, this introduced a new authorial dynamic with new Makers: including Kathleen Kennedy as president, the Lucasfilm Story Group as development team, new directors for each film, and many diverse creative roles across multiple media. Therefore, in the current era of the Star Wars franchise’s transmedia history, “the auteur gives way to the team player.” This suggests an authorial structure that ostensibly supersedes the singular author role. However, a more practical critical account should recognize that this new authorial structure still facilitates the authorial presence of a singular auteur brand. This is demonstrated by the appointment of J.J. Abrams as director of *The Force Awakens*, the first installment released under this new ownership and authorial structure, and the strategic assigning of auteur-type figures who have a background in independent filmmaking, like Gareth Edwards, Rian Johnson, and Colin Trevorrow.

For C-3PO, this new authorial structure is represented by yet another physical transformation: a new dismemberment and a red limb replacement. When C-3PO appears in *The Force Awakens*, he interrupts Han and Leia’s reunion and declares, “It is I, C-3PO—you probably don’t recognize me because of the red arm.” The comically exaggerated risk of misrecognition causes C-3PO anxiety as his function as protocol droid now extends to the mediation of multiple authors: Lucas and Abrams, but also other authorial roles held at Lucasfilm. Regarding C-3PO’s discernible red arm, Abrams unequivocally concedes that he “wanted to mark him.”

who has performed the role of C-3PO in every episode to date, also reveals that “the one thing that J.J. and I argued about was the fact that ... C-3PO doesn’t like the red arm!” Nonetheless, Abrams unwaveringly insisted on this new physical transformation, which emphasizes his influence as a new Maker in the Star Wars franchise by explicitly harnessing C-3PO as a catalyst for aural presence.

*The Force Awakens* never explains C-3PO’s obtrusive limb replacement, but the Marvel Comics one-shot “The Phantom Limb” reveals how C-3PO loses it on a mission for the Resistance, adopting the red replacement as a tribute to a fallen droid comrade. In usual C-3PO fashion, however, he worries that the red limb will tarnish his personal style: “this arm offends my aesthetic sensibilities.” Continuing the interpretation of C-3PO developed in this chapter, this offense to his aesthetic sensibilities can be construed as a metatextual disapproval of being continually harnessed as a symbolic representation of transtextual authorship.

"You are my Maker and I wish you well": Recognizing the Legend(s)

As Lucasfilm continues to shape the future of its transmedia franchise, Lucas has once again returned to his long-held intention to continue the experimental work of his earlier filmmaking days, before the Star Wars franchise and the entertainment empire he inadvertently created. Nonetheless, Lucas’s authorial significance remains in perpetual dialogue with the shifting creative contributions across the past, present, and future of the Star War franchise. While team-structured collaborative authorship is an important aspect of transmedia storytelling, this does not preclude the potential to identify a transtextual presence of singular authorship. Therefore, the expansive transmedia history of the Star Wars franchise demonstrates the need and potential to conceive of transmedia texts not

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as either entirely auteur-driven or team-based, but as a site of dialogical relations between singular notions of authorship and collaborative creative practices. And so, despite the transmedial shifts and mutations that take place across Star Wars, Lucas will forever be “imagined to stand at the threshold between creativity, innovation, wonder, and magic, and us” as multiple authors continue to shape the Star Wars franchise.