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Intermedialities

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Paratracks in the Digital Age: Bonus Material as Bogus Material in *Blood Simple* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 1984/2001)

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*Introducing the Paratrack: The DVD Audio Commentary*

In the past few years, the DVD has wreaked havoc in the cinema. Just like the video cassette and the laser disc, it serves the movie industry as an ancillary market for theatrical releases – but worries about illegal copying abound. Consumers are as likely to encounter movies in the cinema and on television as in the comfort of their home on Digital Versatile Disk (DVD), which has virtually replaced the VCR tape. The appearance of the DVD has re-structured the apparatus of film/video and has generated an increasing number of varied paratextual traces that bring film closer to Gérard Genette’s model of the paratext – the printed codex or book. The practice of attaching audio commentaries to movies had already begun with the laser disc. In 1984, the first audio commentary can be found on the Criterion laser disc release of the original *King Kong* movie: “Hello ladies and gentlemen, I’m Ronald Haver, and I’m here to do something which we feel is rather unique. I’m going to take you on a lecture tour of *King Kong* while we watch the film.”

Even this very first sentence spoken in an audio commentary exhibits the standard features of these narratives such as deictic references (“I’m here,” “while we watch the film”). Where exactly is he? Haver establishes an imaginary community with the viewer, who seems to share a suppositional filmic space with the commentator.

Currently, movies come in a variety of proliferating textual versions, which may serve as an incentive to buy rather than copy the DVD: bonus features tend to be sacrificed in the process of ‘ripping’ and ‘burning.’ Box sets, special or collector’s editions, director’s cuts, and cinephilic series such as the pioneering Criterion Collection supplement and, in part, replace theatrical releases with a plethora of textual variants, from differing aspect ratios and digital transfers of varying quality to the most diverse supplementary materials. On the Criterion Collection website, the supplements are discussed in the context of an auteurist mission:

> Our supplements enable viewers to appreciate Criterion films in context, through audio commentaries by filmmakers and scholars, restored director’s cuts, deleted scenes, documentaries, shooting scripts, early shorts, and storyboards. To date, more than 35 filmmakers have made our Director Approved library of laserdiscs and DVDs the most

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1 "Audio commentary," Wikipedia. This is one of the more informative Wikipedia articles, providing many up-to-date leads for this analysis.
significant archive of contemporary filmmaking available to the home viewer. ("About Criterion")

The Criterion Collection is clearly modeled on prestigious print publishing such as the Arden edition of Shakespeare. It is interesting to note that its website refers to out-of-stock titles as "out of print" — thus aligning itself with literary authorship. This auteur approach to filmmaking is clearly a far cry from the adolescent Multiplex experience of taking the popcorn-munching girl- or boyfriend to the blockbuster movies. A typical example, the 2005 two-disc Criterion Collection set of Orson Welles's *F for Fake* (1972) includes:

- enhanced visual quality: a new, restored high-definition transfer,
- an audio commentary by star and co-writer Oja Kodar and director of photography Gary Graver,
- an introduction by director Peter Bogdanovich,
- an extended 9-minute trailer,
- subtitles,
- an 88-minute documentary about Welles's unfinished projects (*Orson Welles: One-Man Band*, 1995),
- a 52-minute documentary about art forger Elmyr de Hory (*Almost True: The Noble Art of Forgery*, 1997),
- a 60 Minutes interview with Clifford Irving,
- audio files of a 1972 press conference with Howard Hughes,
- an essay by film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum.2

The textual variants of DVD movies have even generated a small ancillary market for further epitexts and epitracks — a reviewing circuit that assesses DVD merits according to technical quality and the quality and scope of the DVD bonus materials, paratracks or supplements. Therefore, we can speak of an alternative movie canon generated from the quality and nature of bonus materials and audio commentaries.3

**Conceptualizing the Paratrack: Narrating the Audio Commentary**

Film narratology has so far tended to ignore the bonus material on DVDs, although the DVD commentary in particular raises interesting issues in narrative analysis.4 This paper addresses various ways in which DVD commentaries render the Ge-

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2 Another random example, the German DVD release of *Shadow of the Vampire* includes biographies, interviews, featurettes, trailers and TV ads, b-roll 'safety' footage, storyboards, and the director's audio commentary. Outtakes (i.e., scenes that failed during the shooting) should not be confused with scenes deleted in the final edit. Both kinds of paratracks may be subsequently added to the DVD package.

3 See the site at <http://www.ratethatcommentary.com>.

4 In Germany, research into the paratexts of film has only recently been inaugurated by a volume edited by Kreimeser and Stanitzek (2004), which discusses endings, credit rolls and logos, trailers on television (Joan Kristin Bleicher), TV and print (Rolf Parr, Matthias Thiele) and on the Internet (Vinzenz Hediger). Joachim Paech provides an analysis of the programming of movies in the vein of apparatus theories.
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nettian categories (extradiegetic, paratextual, epi- or peritextual) heuristically useful. Genette provides apt questions about paratexts: Where, how and when do they appear? Who makes them and to whom are they addressed? What's their function?

A transfer of Genette's notoriously arcane terminology has its problems, particularly as Genette makes a point of being concerned with books only. Picking up terminology suggested by Werner Wolf, it may be more useful and less intimidating to address audio commentaries as framings or (on the analogy of Wolf's metatexts) metatracks, in the sense that these higher-level commentaries are clearly 'about' the movies (see Wolf 1999, Wolf 2004).

According to Genette, one should address these ancillary texts either as peritexts (i.e., internal texts that appear with the text or, in our case, film) or as epitexts (i.e., texts that appear independently of the text or movie – Genette's phrase is "anywhere out of the book," Genette 316). Genette's examples of peritexts include titles, chapter headings, annotations. Epitexts include commentaries, reviews, interviews, letters and, again, annotations. Genette furthermore subdivides, for instance, epitexts into editorial epitexts (ads, posters and promotional texts), official and private, authorial or allographic epitexts (i.e., epitexts not written by the author). Unlike peritexts, Genette argues, epitexts also tend to wander off topic – their paratextual value oscillates. In this way, an application of Genette's categories to the analysis of DVD audio commentary establishes a fascinating set of criteria according to proximity and distance: how close is the audio commentary to the visual content, how close is the paratrack to the author? Other dimensions may address the following questions:

- How and when is it generated by whom for what purpose?
- How private or official does it appear?
- What kind of relationship does it presuppose or establish with the audience?
- In what way does it change or determine the audience's readings?

It is quite clear that external epitexts/epitracks can turn into internal peritexts/peritracks and vice versa. For instance, in the case of F for Fake the documentaries and the press conference material were never produced with a view to including them in the DVD package. As a rule, however, audio commentaries are produced with the subsequent DVD publication in mind.

In this paper, I will look at a particular type of supplement, paratext, metatext, textual frame or paratext that regularly appears with the DVD versions of movies. The paratextual packaging of movies on laserdisc and since the mid-1990s also on DVD has crucially altered the way we can watch films. For example, DVD commentaries serve to intensify viewer attention on the discourse level and, to some extent, disintegrate the visual narration of movies with overlaid, secondary and, in some cases, divergent audio narratives or commentaries. When one watches a film with the audio commentary track on, there are two distinct narrative processes going on.
Audio commentaries tend to focus viewer attention on the presentational process. After listening to the DVD paratrack, it is much harder for the viewer to take the presented world for granted. As Barbara Klinger and Alexander Boehnke have argued, multiple viewings with a variety of audio tracks may in this way demystify the industry and its processes, but they may also reinforce a sense of auteurist authorial control (Boehnke 229-30). The final section of this paper provides a short study of the fake commentary in the director's cut of Blood Simple (Joel and Ethan Coen, 1984, released on DVD in 2001). It will become clear that the audio commentary on the Blood Simple DVD attacks precisely this mystification of authorial control in its recurrent, but ironic invocation of "movie magic."

The typical audio commentary tends to be devoted to the processes involved in creating the movie, from camera movements to casting choices, from scripting and storyboarding to lighting and editing. In other words, the discourse levels of movie narratives and the cinematic apparatus become obvious (or rather: audible) at the expense of the transparency of the story. Formalist film critics such as Laura Mulvey have welcomed this tendency (Mulvey 147). It seems clear that plot-based narrative elements such as the build-up of suspense and closure-orientated readings may be supplemented and even replaced in multiple viewings, in which the cinematic apparatus and the form of narration become much more important (Boehnke 219-20). A DVD commentary, one might hypothesize, renders a movie less transparently storied, synchronously and holistically mimetic and more fractured, authored and discoursed. To the extent that the narrative apparatus emerges in the commentary and in other bonus materials (such as outtakes or on-set documentaries), movie narration becomes more anthropomorphic, too. Whether or not there is an embedded narrator, therefore, a movie with supplementary audio tracks ceases to be narrated, as it were, automatically.

One of the most fascinating aspects of audio commentaries is the fact that they do not merely supplement a text, but in interesting ways become part of it. Unlike the additional 'Making of the commentary occurs parallel to discourse time. In fact, according to the model of the sports event, it often appears to be a running commentary in which discourse time equals story time. The commentary itself, however, is clearly non-diegetic: it opens up a verbal narrative of its own. The almost automatic viewer expectation is: "I am going to hear the director speak."

To sum up this application of Genette's terminology to audio commentaries, we may conclude that audio commentaries are verbal 'intra-compositional' paratracks, peri-tracks, melatracks or narrative framings. The main effect of such commentaries is the edited collapsing of production, enunciation and reception processes in the commentary: at the very same time that the enunciation of the narrative occurs visually (fictional narrative 1), the filmmakers comment on the production process while they re-view the film as a kind of ideal viewer (non-fictional narrative 2). Even while reading the Arden edition of Shakespeare your eyes will move from the dialogue to
the annotations and critical apparatus in a temporal sequence—the DVD movie, on the contrary, integrates and synchronizes audio annotations into the visual narrative. From the perspective of the audio commentary audience, one witnesses the vicarious a posteriori reception of a director or writer of his or her own narrative: the author becomes his or her own viewer, experiencing his or her 'own' narrative on behalf of the silent audience. The commentary is radically deictic, that is, as a rule it is wholly dependent on the visual context in which it occurs. The paradigmatic sentence of an audio commentary is of course, "here, we see...", in which 'here' refers to the visual narrative and "we" collapses the author-viewer speaking and the DVD audience listening. Interestingly, at various crucial narrative points the commentator is edited out of the movie, whereas diegesis fully intact takes over on the sound track before the commentary resumes: narrative 1 is fully restored, while narrative 2 ceases.

Audio commentaries appear in various guises, and I will briefly look at subcategories of audio commentaries that have appeared so far:

- Feature-length vs. partial commentaries.
- Single-track vs. separate, multiple-track commentaries. For instance, Hurlyburly has a director/writer track, an actor track, and a film critic track. The Ultimate Matrix Collection features supportive as well as critical audio commentaries. Some movies, such as the extended edition of The Lord of The Rings, feature up to four separate commentary tracks.
- Audio-only vs. 'illustrated' or 'visual' commentaries (i.e., when the visual track is halted or additional visual material is superimposed while the audio commentary occurs). Occasionally, commentators are represented on screen or arrows and circles link the commentary to material visible on screen. Examples include the The Simpsons, Ghostbusters or Men in Black DVDs.
- Edited vs. live commentaries. The 'liveness' may be indicated by inebriated commentators (Trey Parker) or commentators leaving for the bathroom (Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back) or making a phone call.
- Single-person vs. multi-person commentaries (which are particularly interesting whenever conflicts emerge as in the case of director Steven Soderbergh vs. writer Len Dobbs in The Limey). Multi-person commentaries of ten assume a dialogic mode or a 'Q & A' mode that eases and naturalizes the way information is passed on to the audience.
- Director vs. screenwriter vs. actor vs. director of photography vs. further crew commentaries (for instance, the researchers and interns who provide the commentary on Bowling for Columbine). Often the closer and more central a commentator is perceived to be, the more reliable and authentic he will appear to the listener.
- Within-cast commentaries: in-character vs. out-of-character commentaries. The most famous example of this is the movie This is Spinal Tap. The audio commentary is by definition a posteriori and can never be part of the spatio-temporal world of the

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6 The following list has been adapted from the Wikipedia article on "Audio Commentary."
narrative. This is an interesting case, however, because both the initial narrative 1 and the subsequent audio narrative 2 are fictional. In this way *This Is Spinal Tap* extends the narrative space into the paratrack.

- Authorial (e.g., director's or screenwriter's commentary) vs. allographic (e.g., scholarly) commentary. For instance, the drug pusher movie *Blow* features an audio commentary by George Jung, the real-life model for the protagonist, speaking from inside a prison. You can, of course, also listen to Laura Mulvey on *Peeping Tom* or David Bordwell on *Alexander Nevsky*. Criterion refers to these commentaries as "audio essays." More recently, fan cultures have taken to providing commentary tracks of their own (so-called alternate commentaries, moviecasts or CROWS), which they synchronize to the movie by running them parallel on their MP3 players.

**Parodying the Paratrack: "Movie Magic" and the Deconstructed Audio Commentary of *Blood Simple***

Questions of reliability, authority and authenticity figure prominently in the third part of this paper, which provides a functional and structural analysis of one very particular paratrack, *Blood Simple* by the Coen Brothers. It is well-known that the Coen Brothers have become icons of postmodernist filmmaking, owing to their consistent use of playful narrative complexity, genre pastiche, meta-fictional and anti-realist effects and their over-abundant supply of intertextual references to both high and low culture. The Coens turned bonus material into bogus material and probably provided a cue for the subsequent short-lived TV series *Director's Commentary* by the Welsh comedian Rob Brydon (ITV, 2004).

The 2001 DVD release features an audio commentary delivered by the film historian Kenneth Loring, who turns out to be a fictional character scripted by the Coen Brothers and voiced by British actor Jim Piddock. It is, in fact, significant that his English accent carries the authority and highbrow connotations that may further 'authorize' a film historian – the analysis of the sound of the voice in audio commentaries would merit further attention, but cannot be provided in this short essay.

The director's cut of the movie is remarkable in that it runs shorter than the theatrical version (96 minutes) – an unusual kind of pruning that may be regarded as an ironic comment on the inflated excess of the various extended Director's Cuts. Instead, the movie is preceded by an introductory comment by one Mortimer Young (played by actor George Ives), supposedly of the film restoration company Forever Young. This metatextual spoof intro by an affable elderly gentleman in a library set-up with an hour-glass placed prominently in front of him is clearly reminiscent of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and recurs in the DVD release of *The Big Lebowski*. It illustrates the gentle parody of audio commentaries that seek to elevate individual movies, the processes of their making, the achievements of the filmmakers, and the attitude towards film as an art form rather than as popular entertainment.
Piddock, the British voice talent for Kenneth Loring, veers from the most outrageous claims about the making of the movie to a completely inadequate ekphrasis—in other words, from misreporting to underreporting. Both kinds of commentary act as parody markers that signal the irony on the part of the Coen Brothers' script. One might be forgiven for missing the first indicator—when Loring explains the stationary plate shot which starts the film, but is surprised a couple of shots later when the titles are, in fact, superimposed, thus turning this later shot into the real plate shot.

The very first story is one of the tallest tales Loring tells. Simultaneously with the characters Abby and Ray in a car driving through a rainy night, he claims that actors Frances McDormand and John Getz were strapped in their seats and turned upside down, their hair securely fastened by enormous doses of hair-glue. He further informs the viewer that this was done because the film running had to be reversed in order to synchronize the dialogue with the oncoming headlights, while the illusion of movement with the stationary car was maintained. Further outrageous claims are to follow:

- A telephone conversation was achieved by a man just off camera, who was speaking into a Dixie paper cup while pinching his larynx.
- The make-up girl fainted when actor John Getz stood up, revealing his nether region to her.
- A German Shepherd dog that appears in the film was actually an animatronics dog.
- Digital flies were pasted onto actor M. Emmet Walsh's face—the digital production process being so extensive that it resulted in a prolonged power cut in Silicon Valley.
- A flock of birds that is seen flying up, on the other hand, were not digitally created but real, trained birds.
- A farm house is in fact a miniature model pasted into the film at a later stage.
- Sweat on the characters' faces is not their own, but was provided by Palomino horses, whose sweat looks particularly effective on screen.
- Actors only mouthed their lines but did not actually speak them.
- The entire dialogue was lip-synched in post-production.

The most extensive piece of bogus commentary occurs, however, when Loring insists that the movie was butchered by the studio and relates the story of the movie the way it was originally devised by the filmmakers. The movie starts with a voice-over by M. Emmet Walsh, later revealed as the detective and hired murderer Visser: "Now in Russia, they got it mapped out so that everyone pulls for everyone else—that's the theory, anyway. But what I know about is Texas."

The commentary insists that in the original voice-over narration the line was "Now in Bulgaria, Dad's got it mapped out so everyone pulls for everyone else." The original "Bulgaria" was replaced by "Russia," the private detective character was not called Visser, but was in fact a Bulgarian called Rodopi Zhivkov—and Rosemary Clooney was originally cast (together with Fred Astaire). He continues with a wild account of cut story lines set in Berlin and Bulgaria, which would restore lost meaning to initials on a lighter and a ceramic walrus piggybank, which is used as an instrument of
murder in the movie. Further cut scenes taking place in a fairground would have provided a back story but were cut because Emmet Walsh was unavailable, as he was set to appear at a Missouri automobile show in St. Louis. In passing, Loring embarks on lengthy digressions that are completely disconnected from the diegesis of the vision track. First, he talks in detail about an episode in his film restoration business which involves an eight-year-old boy in Tijuana who set fire to film material attached to dogs' tails. Furthermore, he holds a film executive named Adrian Butts responsible for the butchered re-cut of *Blood Simple* and embarks on a lengthy story of an encounter with Butts and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala in the Merchant Ivory studios which resulted in his being beaten up by an indignant Nick Nolte.

By default, listeners construct audio commentaries as non-fictional. By the time this story ends, however, the fictional parody has been firmly established through clear signposts that lead even the most gullible viewer towards the ironies of the scripted commentary. The entire narrative switches in status from a non-fictional commentary to fiction, occasionally unrelated to the audio-visual world of the characters or even the extradiegetic comment on its making. The traditional audio commentary is exposed as a piece of narcissistic navel-gazing and yet another promotional paratext.

Interestingly, one recurrent reference of Loring's script is the praise of the filmmaking process as "movie magic" – and this is precisely at stake, for instance, in the *Lord of the Rings* commentaries that come across mainly as a celebration of the various achievements of the cinematic machinery. Almost all of the DVD paratexts seek to highlight the enhanced pleasures generated by the miraculous workings of the movie business.

The Coen Brothers deflate this narcissistic mode in the ironically inadequate ekphrasis of Loring's commentary. Loring insists that the great achievement of the filmmakers is keeping the camera out of shot:

> Keeping the movie camera out of the shot at all costs, something these filmmakers knew so well, even though this was their first film! They were already so confident – so aware – that you must keep the movie camera out of the film itself. It must be there, of course, to record the scene, but here's the paradox: you mustn't see it in the scene, even if you're shooting a scene with a mirror! It can be rather a chore to conceal it – and not just the camera, but the crew and the snacks table for the crew. 6

The humorous effect emerges, of course, from the incongruent marginal element of the snacks table. Loring never mentions any names of actors or characters – instead, his underreporting resorts to statements of the obvious. This underreporting is one of the most interesting features of the parody, because it renders the movie nameless and anonymous, whereas the traditional audio commentary is most anxious to name names and provide signatures for whatever you see – authorized by actors, make-up artists, directors of photography etc. The Coens are invariably referred to as "the filmmakers," on facial shots Loring comments "words – lip – faces – eyebrows." Charac-

6 "Loring." Extracts from "Loring" are also available in a fake interview from *DVD Talk.*
acters are described as "just humans, walking and talking," they become "first feller" and "second feller," "pleasant character" and "unpleasant character." Loring adds equally meaningless and commonplace adjectives when he mentions "two marvelous faces" or speaks about a "remarkably glum character." In this way, the Coens expose the audio commentary as tautological. Whatever meaning or effect occurs in the cinematic storytelling is lost in the missing audiotrack and replaced by Loring's belittling ekphrasis. Instead, the Coens offer a de-narrated deixis of their movie — and neither their actors nor their characters remain more than a fleeting visual impression on a screen: "first feller," "second feller." Occasionally, Lorning complains about the ponderous languor of the filmmaking "not much going on here — the scene should have been cut." Indeed, whenever pieces of filmmaking occur that have been praised by Coen connoisseurs, such as the long, traveling track shots, the atmospheric Texas landscapes or the pastiche of film noir, he passes them over without comment.

Loring also contributes a number of clichéd and condescending views on American filmmaking as well as a priggish rejection of sexuality and gore. He is heard saying:

"This is my argument with the filmmaker who'll show you all the squishy body bits, be it a death scene or a love scene. I'm quite well acquainted with my own squishy body bits, thank you very much, don't need to see this fellow's." (Loring)

He also miraculously distinguishes between naked female bodies in American film ("adolescent, just for titillation") and in European film ("perfectly natural").

All in all, the Coens provide a satire on the snobbery of the art-house approach to filmmaking — at the same time serving as an example of art-house filmmaking which is able to look at itself in a self-reflexive manner. The more Loring insists on celebrating "movie magic," the more one becomes aware of the 'dis-contents' of his appended audio commentary. It must be said, however, that the Coens' script in itself serves as a statement of what one can achieve by dealing creatively with the DVD audio commentary. Their critique notwithstanding, DVD audio commentaries contribute towards an artistic framing of movies: DVD audio commentaries are created by the industry for ancillary markets of movie buffs. They provide new framings and offer incentives to second or third viewings. They metatextually discuss the filmmaking, thus highlighting in a self-reflexive way their own artificiality and textuality. In doing so, they differ from most literary paratexts that do not address the medial processes of book-making. They become, in the words of Joachim Paech, "intermedial reflections" (223, my translation). It is clear that in this they reflect the more complex, more industrialized and technologically advanced processes of making a film. Audio commentaries generate and improve a viewer's knowledge about filmmaking, thus generating ancillary markets of aficionado cultures for whom cinephilia is technophilia (Klinger 136).
Works Cited


Paratracks in the Digital Age


