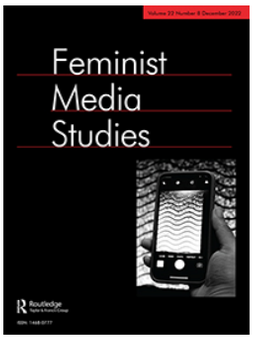

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'An indie voice for a generation of women'?: Greta Gerwig, and female authorship post #Metoo

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ABSTRACT

Greta Gerwig's solo directorial debut *Lady Bird* (2017) hit screens during an extraordinary cultural moment in which stories of the abuse women suffer at the hands of powerful men were receiving unparalleled visibility. The #MeToo movement prompted the entertainment industry to reflect upon issues of diversity, equality, and women's roles on and off screen. As a woman filmmaker on the press circuit at the time, Gerwig was symbolically recruited and operationalised as part of the #MeToo/Times Up project. This article examines the dominant discourses circulating around women filmmakers in a post #metoo landscape, using Gerwig as a case study. In so doing, it seeks to revaluate feminist theories of authorship during a supposed watershed moment for the industry. It argues that the spectre of the (masculine) auteur not only endures in post #MeToo film culture but has actually been emboldened by the movement to further ghettoise women in the film industry.

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Introduction

Greta Gerwig's solo directorial debut, *Lady Bird* (2017) was released during one of the most significant moments for contemporary feminism: the #MeToo movement.[1] Built upon the sharing of women's personal testimonies, the movement ignited a global conversation in which the theft of consent, and the rampant sexism within the entertainment industries were brought into sharp focus. While other female actors and industry professionals explicitly engaged with #MeToo either as survivors, activists or allies (Rose McGowan, Ashley Judd, Jessica Chastain, Lupita N'Yongo), Gerwig seemed somewhat removed from the epicentre of the movement, but as a visible female filmmaker, promoting her solo directorial debut, she was regularly invited by the press to respond to various allegations, and to talk about the experience as a woman filmmaker.

As part of its pledge to tackle sexism within the entertainment industry, the so-called "practical wing" of #MeToo, Time's Up set out to address issues of diversity, equality, and women's roles on and off screen. With women making up only 11% of the directors in the top 250 grossing films in 2017 (Martha Lauzen 2018a), Gerwig's hyper-visible media

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presence provides an opportunity to reassess discourses surrounding women filmmakers during a supposed watershed moment for the industry.

This article thus has two related aims. First, it examines the representation of Gerwig as a filmmaker in order to understand the ways in which the #MeToo movement may shape the discourses surrounding women filmmakers. Second, it situates this discussion within feminist debates surrounding women and authorship, as these debates are not static and require reassessment, taking into account the socio-political and cultural contexts within which women filmmakers operate.

Literature review: feminist interventions in Auteur theory

Women's relative absence from key production/creative roles has long since driven feminist film scholarship. Recovering the contribution of those women who did manage to establish careers either in experimental film or mainstream Hollywood, particularly in the male-dominated area of film direction, has provided an important corrective to androcentric film histories, which idolise the great white men of cinema. Following in the tradition of feminist literary studies, early feminist film scholars sought to establish a "female canon" of texts that can be said to reveal a "female tradition" (Judith Mayne 1990, 89). Inherent in this assumption is the notion that the gender of a filmmaker will have some impact upon the contents of a text. It is therefore no surprise that attempts to develop a gendered theory of authorship/auteurism emerged as a framework for understanding the work of women filmmakers.

Broadly speaking, auteur theory assumes that a textual signature of the director can be detected across a body of their films. Despite internal debates by auteur theorists regarding the "intentionality" of the director (see Andrew Sarris 1962; Peter Wollen 1972), it was for many feminist critics considered to be an important political tool in elevating the status of women filmmakers (see Carrie Tarr 1999). In her canonical pamphlet *Notes on Women's Cinema*, Claire Johnston (1973) makes a case for the use of auteur theory with feminist film criticism. Championing the model put forth by Wollen—that close textual analysis can reveal the "unconscious" preoccupations as opposed to revealing known biographies of its author—Johnston argues that auteur theory serves as evidence that Hollywood cinema is/was more heterogeneous than previously assumed. From this position, it is possible to argue, in contrast to the likes of Laura Mulvey (1975) and Haskell (1973), that women filmmakers *could* operate within the male-dominated sphere to subvert and disturb sexist ideology. In adopting Wollen's position on auteur theory, Johnston argues for the necessity of understanding the cultural context that informs, and is informed by, the text. To do so, guards against inadvertently reproducing the elitism of early auteur polemics that "deify the personality of the (male) director" (Johnston 1973, 26) as the sole creative genius responsible for a film's contents.

Her short examination of Dorothy Arzner's *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940) and Ida Lupino's *Not Wanted* (1949) begin to establish strategies through which a woman filmmaker might subvert classical narrative structures to reveal a female experience of oppression. In so doing, she provides a template for what might be identified as the "female voice." Johnston's work, however, has been subject to similar criticisms of early auteur theory. First, how can we be certain that the unconscious preoccupations textual analysis might reveal are those of the director, as opposed to other contributors? And second, is it useful

for feminist critics to apply Wollen's contention that textual signatures are often "unconscious" and "unintentional" lest it deny women filmmakers agency?

Despite these criticisms, the concept was not abandoned in its entirety and other attempts were made to theorise women's contribution to cinema. In *The Acoustic Mirror*, Kaja Silverman continues the project of developing a gendered understanding of authorship. Silverman's essay can be understood as both a continuation and also a departure from Johnston's work insofar as she also assumes that there is a female voice to be discovered within the filmic text, but significantly, sidesteps the issue of women filmmakers' agency by arguing for an understanding of authors as "constructed in and through" discourse' (Kaja Silverman 1988, 209).

In her reassessment of Barthes Roland (1977) "Death of the Author," Silverman concludes that his concept of the author altered between the 1968 essay and *Pleasures of the Text* (Barthes and Howard 1975). It is not so much that the concept of the author has "died" but rather shifted from "an individual person" to a "body of the text" (Silverman 1988, 192). In so doing, the assumed relationship between the two—i.e., that there is an author "inside" the text that bears some resemblance to the author "outside" the text—is severed. For Silverman, once a focus on the author as "body of the text" is established, it is possible for a "voice" to speak/be heard. The voice, she writes, operates as the "authorial organ" (190) and thus understands the challenge for feminist scholars operating within this new paradigm as follows: "Once the author-as-individual-person has given way to the author-as-body-of-the-text, the crucial project with respect to the female voice is to find a place from which it can speak and be heard, not to strip it of discursive rights" (192).

Silverman acknowledges that while the author "inside the text" is her main focus, unlike Barthes, she is not entirely comfortable bracketing off the "biographical author" all together; presumably because to do so would negate the need to examine the lived gender of the author and identify the ways in which this subjectivity might inform practice. Indeed, she writes: "it is clearly not the same thing, socially or politically, for a woman to speak with a female voice as it is for a man to do so, and vice versa" (217). However, as Mayne (1990, 97) acknowledges in relation to both the work of Johnston and Silverman, these "categories of authorship are undoubtedly much more useful in analysing the configurations of 'woman' on screen than in coming to terms with the ways in which women directors inflect cinematic practice in new and challenging ways."

Judith Mayne's (2018) contribution to the debate includes a book-length re-reading of the films of Dorothy Arzner. Within this portfolio of work, Mayne re-instates the importance of the "biographical" author and looks to extra textual discourses for support of her queer reading of Arzner's films. That being said, Mayne continues to look mainly to the text to identify the ways in which Arzner's films do not contain those (masculine) "signatures" associated with traditional (male) auteurs: "there is little of the flourish of mise-en-scène that auteurists attributed to other directors, for instance, and the preoccupations visible from film to film that might identify a particular signature do not reflect the life-and-death, civilization-versus-the-wilderness struggles that tended to define the range of more 'properly' auteurist themes" (1990, 99).

Feminist interventions in auteur theory and authorship have no doubt served as an important critique and expansion of earlier models. However, this body of work continues to grapple with a series of seemingly unresolvable dilemmas that have prevented the development of a wholly accepted gendered theory of authorship. First, the body of

evidence was not as substantial, as many silent films made by women filmmakers had been lost, and the lack of opportunity for women in directorial positions in the studio era is well documented. Second, there was a lack of consensus around whether it is/was possible for a distinctly female/feminist voice to speak/be heard within the patriarchal cinematic apparatus. Finally, there were concerns that to claim a distinctly "female" voice would provide support for essentialist arguments that justify women's "naturally inferior" position.

More recent endeavours to theorise the work of women filmmakers have attempted to refocus their efforts by incorporating a critical reflexivity when it comes to authorship/auteurism and the challenges facing feminist film scholars. Often this requires a move away from formal text-based approaches. In her article "Of Cabbages and Authors," self-described "anti-auterist," Jane Gaines (2002, 93) proposes "that we might sidestep, all the while critiquing authorship," by expanding our understanding of the "analysable subject." She suggests that we acknowledge the industrial practices that bring films into being: "instead of looking exclusively for and to (psycho)analysable subjects, we need to figure in the machines, the industrial practices, and the materiality of the mise-en-scène." Similarly, Catherine Grant (2001, 125), in her reassessment of feminist theories of authorship advocates for broadening our "notion of what constitutes a 'primary text' in film studies, and adopt[ing] more rigorous methods for 'interactional' and 'inter-subjective' analysis."

Recent examinations of women filmmakers such as Martha Lauzen's (2018a) discussion of Kathryn Bigelow move beyond the textual to foreground press discourses surrounding women filmmakers, while Shelley Cobb's (2015) reassessment of women filmmakers post 1990 and Deborah Jermyn's (2017) book-length study of popular filmmaker Nancy Meyers, adopt a critical reflexivity in their application of auteur theory. Cobb chooses to abandon the concept of auteur in favour of authorship, and specifically argues for an understanding of authorship as a collective endeavour. Jermyn argues that it is possible to situate Meyers as an "auteur" by applying traditional frameworks, despite critics' insistence that she is neither a "gifted" director or "talented" writer. In doing so, both Shelley and Jermyn, respectively, expose the sexism inherent within traditional auteur theory and its problematic preoccupation with (masculine) "creativity" and "artistic genius."

Building on this more recent work, the following also seeks to circumvent and critique auteur theory, while acknowledging its enduring (and potentially damaging) presence in film culture. The following examines the ways in which the theories of auteurism pervade extratextual discourses surrounding filmmakers and in so doing create a set of expectations within which women in creative roles must conform to in order to be read as successful. The question that underpins this research then, is not, *is* Gerwig an auteur, but rather under what conditions is the status conferred upon women within contemporary (post #MeToo) film culture and what are the possible consequences for their advancement in the industry? Therefore, it has been necessary to sketch out these debates, despite adopting a more "anti-auteurist" position, in order to expose the ways in which the spectre of the auteur not only endures in film culture but has actually been emboldened by the #MeToo movement to further ghettoise women in the film industry.

Method

Seeking to advance the discussion above, this article concerns itself with the discursive representation of authorship, but does not do so in order to enrich a reading of the textual

outputs of the filmmaker. Rather, to use Silverman's terms, my focus is on the author "outside" of the *film* text. It *is,* however, concerned with the author "inside" *inter-texts* such as reviews, interviews, and behind-the-scenes materials. I do not assume that these texts provide direct access to an "authentic" authorial self but rather expose the complex relationship between women filmmakers and the (in)availability of auteur status. Consequently, I seek to identify the authorial discourses surrounding women filmmakers, in this case Greta Gerwig, that dictate the ways in which women behind the camera must operate, at a specific moment of supposed cultural change, in order to achieve critical and cultural legitimacy.

What follows then is a part critical reception study of *Lady Bird* and part "cultural-industrial analysis" (John Thornton Caldwell 2008). Examining the critical reception of *Lady Bird* provides insight into, to borrow Barbara Klinger's (1994, 70) terms, "the cultural hierarchies of aesthetic value reigning at particular times." In *Melodrama and Meaning*, Klinger explains that reviews "offer a program of perception to the public, comprising a set of coordinates that map out and judge the significant features of a film. These coordinates, whether moviegoers agree or disagree, help to establish the terms of discussion and debate" (70). Moreover, she also notes that, in the 1970s, popular critics "assimilated auteurism" and increasingly discussed films within these terms (70). Consequently, examining the critical reception of *Lady Bird* reveals not only the aesthetic judgements made against the film but also its director, within a specific cultural context (#MeToo). I trace the English-speaking reviews of *Lady Bird* at the time of release across the US, the UK, Canada, and Australia (1st September, 2017 on the festival circuit, 23rd February, 2018 following general release in the UK and Australia). This time frame also captures the award season in the US, the publication of the Harvey Weinstein allegations in the *New York Times* (9th October, 2017) and the related launch of the #MeToo movement (15th October, 2017).

This article supplements the analysis of 73 English-speaking film reviews, with a series of extended print interviews (10), podcasts (8), the director's commentary, and behind the scenes DVD extras. In contrast to the reviews, these intertexts allow Gerwig to chronicle and reflect upon her creative process. In *Production Cultures*, Caldwell (2008, 5) reminds that these "self-ethnographic" account do not reveal an "'authentic' reality 'behind-the-scenes' . . . [but instead provide insight into] the industry's own self-representation, self-critique and self-reflection." Production communities, he argues, operate as "local cultures and social communities in their own right," and the stories they tell have the same social functions: "to gain and reinforce identity, to forge consensus and order, to perpetuate themselves and their interests" (2). Stories told by and about Gerwig therefore reveal the industry's assumptions about the relationship between women, professional identity, and potential inequalities within the industry. They are therefore central to a project examining the ways in which (gendered) authorship is constructed within the (post #MeToo) industry.

The use of "self-ethnographic" accounts has a particular place of importance within feminist film history. Hastie (2002), for example, has made extensive use of the memoirs of early silent filmmaker, Alice Guy-Blaché because they provide an opportunity for women filmmakers to "re-place herself back in this history" (31). Like memoirs, these texts rely on recollections that have been curated to tell a particular story about the self. Their value for feminist interventions in auteur theory is that they, to use Hastie's terms, operate "as one

authorial mode that seeks to recover another form of authorship" (33). In so doing, they provide a space for women filmmakers to negotiate the in/exclusivity of authorship/auteur status. Thus, in examining not only the critical reception but also these wider intertexts, the article seeks to capture the complexity of the discourses circulating around the figure of Gerwig, taking into account the larger political/cultural context of a post #MeToo landscape.

Lady Bird, #Metoo, and popular feminism

Prior to *Lady Bird*, Gerwig was most known for her acting career, her associations with the "Mumblecore" genre, and her collaborations with romantic partner, director Noah Baumbach, with whom she had co-written *Frances Ha* and *Mistress America*. An established actor, with experience of both big budget and indie film, Gerwig had previously spoken out about the lack of women in positions of power, and also commented on the limited roles for women actors in Hollywood, contributing to her construction as a "voice" for women on and offscreen (Isabel Stevens 2018).[2] Consequently, there was fertile ground that facilitated an association between Gerwig and a kind of feminism associated with the #MeToo movement. That is to say that Gerwig's public persona lends itself to the goals of a "popular" feminist agenda as defined by Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018). According to Banet-Weiser popular feminism owes a debt to liberal feminism insofar as it is preoccupied with the exclusion of women from public life (seeking to remedy this inequality by "adding more women") and does so using hyper visible, "media friendly" methods. Banet-Weiser explains: "In a capitalist, corporate economy of visibility, those feminisms that are most easily commodified and branded are those that become most visible" (13). Consequently, the popular feminism that is most visible is that which is often fronted by white, middle-class, cis-gendered, and heterosexual women. Gerwig certainly fits this profile and unlike other women filmmakers has appeared on the covers of *Vogue*, *Time, Elle*, *Bust,* and *Vanity Fair*. Following her Oscar nomination for *Lady Bird*, Gerwig featured in *Stylist* as part of their "Visible women" series (Helen Bownass 2018).

The "Visible women" series profiles "inspiring women from the Suffragettes to now." For the photo shoot, Gerwig was styled in a "Girls on Tops" t-shirt featuring the name of French New Wave director Agnes Varda. The "Girls on Tops" t-shirts represent the kind of "easily commodified and branded feminism" described by Banet-Weiser, and thus, the interview, the photoshoot, and Gerwig's participation shore up a kind of feminism that is preoccupied with identifying individual examples of "inspiring women," often to the detriment of fostering a movement concerned with long-term structural change.

An unfortunate and mutually reinforcing consequence of this individualising of feminism is that it sidelines structural oppression to such an extent that our inverse focus is directed toward individual perpetrators of harms against women as opposed to the structures that facilitate and reinforce behaviours on a cultural level. As has been argued by Alison Phipps (2018) this has also become the case with the #MeToo movement. What began as a solidarity movement was co-opted by a popular/white feminism and as such, the focus shifted to name and shame "bad apples" rather than challenge all other structures of domination that oppress marginalised peoples. This mutually reinforcing relationship between "celebrating" individual women and holding individual perpetrators

to account can be demonstrated perfectly in the coverage of the 2018 Golden Globes in which *Lady Bird* was nominated for four awards (winning two).

The ceremony took place 2 weeks after the Times Up initiative was launched, and many of the attendees planned to wear black in solidarity with the movement. On the day of the ceremony, Dylan Farrow (2018), posted a series of tweets regarding the decision in 2014 to honour her adoptive father, Woody Allen, with the Cecil B. De Mille lifetime achievement award. This decision prompted her to publish an open letter detailing the alleged abuse she suffered at his hands. Following *Lady Bird*'s win for best picture and best screenplay, Gerwig was asked during a backstage press interview, if she regretted working with Allen on the 2012 film *To Rome with Love*. Gerwig's response was as follows:

> Well, you know, I'm so thrilled to be here tonight as a writer, and director, and creator, and to be making my own movies and to be putting that forward. You know, it's something that I've thought deeply about, and I care deeply about, and I haven't had an opportunity to, um, have an in-depth discussion where I come down on one side or another. It's something that I've definitely taken to heart, and honestly, my job right now, I think, is to occupy the position of writer and director, and to be that person, and to tell these stories.[3]

Gerwig's comments therefore allude to the broader structures that facilitate abuse. By acknowledging that her position as a (female) writer and director is politically important, there is an implicit suggestion that the "boys club" of filmmaking provides fertile ground for the abuses of marginalised persons. And that an appropriate corrective is to centre the stories of women and minoritized people. However, this was not how the response was framed in the mainstream presses. Press responses to Gerwig's statement were that she evaded the question and failed to perform an appropriate allyship. She was not viewed as an active agent changing the narrative to foreground her success as a female writer and director and diminish the visibility of Allen, but as someone who was not willing to hold a perpetrator to account. Two days later, she published a statement in the press that she "would not work with him again" and was consequently criticised for the length of time it took her to respond.

This line of questioning and the subsequent press analysis of Gerwig's position serves as an example of the kind of performative outrage, described by Phipps (2018, 84), that disrupts and derails meaningful action. The press outrage at Gerwig for her perceived failure to condemn Allen in a timely manner emerges not from a position of solidarity with survivors, but from a desire to capitalise on a climate in which #MeToo stories and personal traumas were extremely lucrative for media outlets. It also serves as a disciplinary/disciplining process by which white feminism serves to limit its own capacity. The individualised focus on perpetrators actually creates more individualised transgressors—which in this instance includes Gerwig for failing to tell the right story. Consequently, what begins as a method of "speaking out" actually places limits on ways in which one can speak.

The #MeToo movement, like the consciousness-raising projects that came before it, emphasised the importance of personal stories. In sharing these stories, it is possible to understand the ways in which the personal is political through exposing shared harmful experiences. The #MeToo movement placed a new premium on a particular kind of women's story—one steeped in violence—but also fixes the storyteller into a particular

narrative position. One in which she is (only) authorised to tell stories that come from personal, domestic, and private experiences.

The sustained scrutiny of Gerwig's speech extends beyond this particular example, and I argue here that, for women filmmakers, there are scripts that they themselves must follow if they are to achieve recognition.

Constructions of authorship in the critical reception of *Lady Bird*

Since 2007, The Center for the Study of Women in Television & Film has published regular reports detailing gender bias and discrimination in film journalism. The 2018 *Thumbs Down* report, which covers the period in which the majority of reviews for *Lady Bird* were published, revealed that 68% of the reviews were written by men and 32% by women (Martha Lauzen 2018b). Despite this significant disparity, the report also reveals that women reviewers are more likely to review films made by women than their male counterparts, and also more likely to review films with female protagonists. Such was the case in the material surveyed for this article. Of the 73 reviews collected and analysed here, 58% were written by men and 42% by women. According to a later report, which finds that these trends persist, it is suggested that, "because male critics outnumber female critics, and men are more likely to review films with male directors, these films achieve greater visibility in the marketplace" (Martha M Lauzen 2020).

Critics overwhelmingly celebrated Gerwig's directorial debut, which for a brief time held the position of most well-reviewed film on Rotten Tomatoes. In the context of the *Thumbs Down* report, this is remarkable for several reasons. First, it is a film with a female protagonist (and the main relationship within the film is that of a mother and daughter). Second, it was written and directed by a woman, and finally, belongs to a genre coded as feminine: "a coming-of-age melodrama" (which the *Thumbs Down* report finds are reviewed less, and often less valued).

So exceptional was the response to *Lady Bird* that a number of critics commented upon it within their reviews. Often this discussion explicitly foregrounded the #MeToo/Times Up movement and led reviewers to reflect on whether their celebration of Gerwig emerged from a sense of pressure/obligation to tip the scales, and restore decades of imbalance. Writing for the *Independent*, Geoffrey McNab (2018) opens his review as follows:

> *Lady Bird* arrives at a very timely moment, one reason why it has been received with such enthusiasm and has secured all those Oscar nominations. At a time of a huge outcry in Hollywood about gender imbalance and sexual harassment in the film industry, this is a debut feature written and directed by a woman, and with a female protagonist. (That alone makes it unique in this year's awards race.)

For some critics, there was an acknowledgment of the burden that Gerwig bears as a one of very few visible women filmmakers and an acknowledgement that her visibility will be operationalised as part of an effort by the industry (specifically, the academy) to "rid themselves of the aroma of Weinstein" (John Anderson 2017).

For those seeking to justify their unusual level of praise for a "green" director, the focus was on Gerwig's track record. Such is the case in F R Jones (2017) review for the *Chicago Reader,* which asks if Gerwig is "a new voice of cinema or an old voice just speaking up?." After revisiting Gerwig's back catalogue of *Hannah Takes the Stairs* (2007), *Mistress America*

(2015) and *Frances Ha* (2012), Jones concludes that "one can isolate her voice, but often there seems to be someone else talking over her." Gerwig's "signature" within these collaborations appears to be a "lively imagination" and an "offbeat sense of humour," while a "gentleness" and "warmth" is present within *Lady Bird* and presumably absent in her earlier collaborations with male co-creators. Despite attempts to argue for an authentic individual voice, Jones undermines Gerwig's credibility somewhat by referring to Baumbach and Swanberg as mentors as opposed to peers or collaborators. Moreover, his description of Gerwig as "tall and blond with enormous hazel eyes and a megawatt grin" serves as a stark reminder of the different criteria by which men and women are judged in the entertainment industry.

Differences in the kinds of language used to describe Gerwig as a director can be observed across a number of reviews. Frequent descriptors include "sensitive," "affectionate," 'graceful, "endearing," "empathetic," and "tender," and are used as evidence of Gerwig's particular "feminine" style of filmmaking. Further attempts to identify her "signature" within the film are made by a number of critics who observe a particular kind of female character unique to Gerwig's writing. In his review for the *Chicago Tribune*, Michael Phillips (2017) remarks, "[i]t's a tonic to see any movie, especially in this late-Harvey Weinstein era, that does right by its female characters, that explores what it means to be a young woman on the cusp of adulthood, and that speaks the languages of sincerity and wit." Similarly, Hall (2017), for *Sydney Morning Herald* writes:

> The typical Gerwig woman is a mass – and frequently, a mess – of contradictions. She's well-meaning and naive yet so self-assured that she's often caught way out of her depth. She's also very funny, thanks to Gerwig's impressive command of the deadpan double-take, the ingeniously designed non-sequitur and the highly awkward moment. Now, in Lady Bird, we can see where she's sprung from.

Hall's assertion thus not only celebrates Gerwig's writing when it comes to creating female characters but also suggests that her creations are drawn from her own life experience, as she goes onto detail parallels between *Lady Bird* and Gerwig's upbringing in Sacramento.

In her essay "Refocusing Authorship in Women's Filmmaking," Angela Martin (2003) explains that "female or feminist authorship tends to be sought in what can be identifiably linked to the filmmaker (as woman): a film's autobiographical reference, the filmmaker's actual presences in the film, the evidence of a female voice within the narrative (however located)." While the term auteur is never explicitly assigned to Gerwig, Nick Pinkerton (2017) for *Sight and Sound* observes "authorial intelligence," and it is clear that *Lady Bird* is discussed in exactly these terms. As such, responses to *Lady Bird* collectively construct what might be understood as a "feminine" authorial voice within this specific post #MeToo moment.

For the majority of critics, *Lady Bird* was recognised as an autobiographical film and applauded for its fidelity to Gerwig's life story. Despite the fact that Gerwig strenuously denies any similarity to her own life (with the exception being that it is set in her hometown) over 60 separate reviews referred to it as "semi-autobiographical." One critic remarked that "Greta Gerwig's directorial debut is like re-reading an old journal entry" (Roxana Hadadi 2017), while another claimed "[w]atching 'Lady Bird' is like flipping through a high school yearbook with an old friend, with each page leading to another

anecdote, another sweet-and-sour memory" (Phillips 2017). Even those which acknowledged Gerwig's dismissal of claims that the film drew from personal experience, were at lengths to identify parallels between Gerwig's life and that of its titular character (i.e., that she grew up in Sacremento, that Gerwig's mother was also a nurse—and that it was set in 2002—when Gerwig would be a similar age to Lady Bird). Though Gerwig does not feature onscreen, Saoirse Ronan is described as her "proxy" or "surrogate" in numerous reviews; a point laboured by the number that featured accompanying behind-the-scene shots aimed to demonstrate their physical similarity, i.e., images of Gerwig and Ronan on set side by side adopting a similar pose.

Gerwig is therefore celebrated for her ability to tell personal stories, which is perhaps unsurprising given that the personal is often coded as feminine. The assumption that women are better placed to direct "feminine" genres is not new, but it has particular resonance in a post #MeToo era when personal testimonies have additional currency. In a review for *Refinery29*, Anne Cohen (2017) commends *Lady Bird* for its "realistic"/"awkward" depiction of a first-time sexual encounter. For Cohen, the scene in which Lady Bird loses her virginity marks a departure from glamourised and hyper-sexualised Hollywood sex scenes. She accounts for this difference as a direct consequence of Gerwig's gender. She writes: "[t]o see that very relatable experience represented onscreen is a testament to the need for female filmmakers."

Such a position may reflect the cultural climate within which *Lady Bird* was released, as debates regarding sexual norms and behaviours (particularly around consent) attempted to centre women's experiences. And while of course these personal testimonies have a greater political importance, there is a danger here both for film criticism and for the #MeToo movement, to inadvertently reinforce a kind of essentialism that assumes a universal feminine experience, and thereby places limits on the kinds of stories that are appropriate for women to tell both on and off screen.

Self-ethnography & industrial authorship

The stories that circulate *off*screen are equally policed/policing insofar as they construct subject positions for women filmmakers to adopt. The stories examined within this section reveal the ways in which gender is assumed to inform working practices behind the scenes. A preoccupation with the supposed "natural" capacity of women to care, love, and nurture is discussed in relation to the way in which Gerwig runs a set. The affective labour of Gerwig serves as evidence of a more "feminine" directorial style. One which emerges, first, out of her experience as an actor turned director, and her desire to "take care" of her actors, but second, out of an ethics of care to tell a story faithfully and represent her hometown of Sacramento with a respect she feels it warrants.

In an interview recorded by SAG-AFTRA, Gerwig is invited to reflect on her experiences as both an actor and director following numerous remarks from the cast that they felt "looked after" on set.[4] Gerwig first acknowledges the practices she replicated from collaborators Noah Baumbach ("no raised voices") and Mike Mills (the use of name tags) but goes on to explain how her familiarity with an actor's schedule on set informed various decisions when putting a crew together. For example, she acknowledges the importance of below-the-line workers such as hair and make-up, wardrobe and sound, given the intimate nature of these processes: these are the crew who will inhabit the

personal space of the actor as they are dressed, styled, and wired for sound. She explains that she thought very carefully about making these trailers a positive and safe space for the actors and also hired Amanda Beggs (one of the few women sound mixers). While it is Gerwig's experience on set as an actor that has shaped these priorities, the consideration given to the actors' wellbeing and safety is coded as a feminine, if not maternal, preoccupation, given the young age of the majority of the cast. In addition, the attentiveness to care and safety seems particularly charged in the context of a post-Weinstein industry, and perhaps serves as a political tool, in making the case for more women to take up creative roles.

The impact of Gerwig's feminine identity and her assumed related emotional literacy on her filmmaking practices is further bolstered by continual references to her tendency to cry during filming—images of which were posted to social media and captured for "behind the scenes" special features for the DVD release. Gerwig explains that she used her ability to emote as a "compass," allowing her to "feel along" with the actors to see if/when scenes had hit the required emotional beat. Gerwig again explains that this is something she also inherited from working with Mike Mills, who she claims would often cry on set; a claim he denies in an interview for *Little White Lies* (Jenkins 2017). Drawing comparison with Mills here may be an attempt to head off essentialising claims regarding idealised feminine identity and the "female" approach to directing. However, the significant difference here between Mills' alleged emotional response and Gerwig's is the currency of her tears. Images of Gerwig crying were captured and circulated widely within various mediascapes, shoring up longstanding assumptions regarding women and their emotionality, which are often used to justify their exclusion from "serious" professions.

These feminine attributes and their impact on the filmmaking process, however, also construct an image of Gerwig as particularly attentive to detail and a very "hands on" director with near-complete ownership of the project. She refers to it several times as her baby, claiming that once she had finished the script she felt it important to direct the film herself despite her inexperience: "Even if I was an imperfect director it felt like my baby to take care of." Not wishing to overextend the maternal metaphor here, but as writer/director, Gerwig is assumed to have conceived of the project, and while it may "take a village" to raise a child/shoot a film, it is Gerwig's role that is considered the most influential. Gerwig's dual position of writer and director arguably allows her to assume the position of the film's author a little more easily than if she had been one or the other. As discussed above, challenges to auteur theory have typically asked why the director assumes the mantle and not the writer. As the writer *and* director of the film, Gerwig somewhat sidesteps this issue. Moreover, when reflecting on the writing process in a podcast with scriptwriter John August, Gerwig stresses how close the shooting script is to the final cut of the film, suggesting that her position as writer and director afforded her significant creative control:

> I like everything said exactly how I wrote it. Because I have strange rhythm things that if you change a word it sounds wrong to me. And it makes it so that you need to have the lines memorized in a muscle memory. You can't be reaching for the lines ever. And I like that kind of memorization. And I like that kind of ability because it allows me to – especially with the group scenes – treat all the actors like an orchestra.[5]

Gerwig styles herself as both composer and conductor here—which perhaps indicates her feelings regarding her dual identity as writer and director.

Gerwig's reflections on the creative control she has over the project are the subject of a special feature on the *Lady Bird* DVD release. In the short behind-the-scenes documentary *Realizing Lady Bird*, Gerwig explains her reservations about the term director, favouring the French term "realisateur." For Gerwig, the term director, implies a passivity and a lack of creative control, suggesting the labour involved is purely administrative:

> A director almost seems to indicate to me like all the stuff exists and you're just telling it where to go. And the "realizer" seems to be a much closer description of what it is because the stuff doesn't exist, you're sort of making it all appear out of thin air. It really only exists because you and all these people that you've gathered are gonna realize it.'[6]

Here, Gerwig is comfortable taking ownership of the authorial role – *she* is responsible for "making it all appear out of thin air," and while some credit is given to other technical and creative crew, *she* is the one who selected them with a particular vision in mind and "gathered" them together. Indeed, her ability to "gather" the right people contributes to the construction of her authorial voice in multiple interviews. Gerwig routinely explains precisely how she selected her crew and the lengthy conversations she had with them, particularly those charged with contributing to the visual and aural signatures of the film.[7] With cinematographer Sam Levy, the first crew member Gerwig recruited, she explained that she wanted everything to look like a photograph, and used paintings of Wayne Thiebaud and Andrew Wyatt to explain the colour palette and how to capture the landscapes the film should have. For costume designer April Napier, Gerwig shared "a treasure trove" of personal photographs, journals, and yearbooks from her high school—perhaps informing critics' responses that the film feels like "re-reading a journal" or "reminiscing over an old yearbook." In interviews, Napier remarks on how useful it was to have access to these resources because "it's not like stuff from magazines and stuff. You have real people, in their real situations in their real clothes. The whole thing was important to be really real because of her voice, the whole story was very authentic." (Napier in Aubrey Page 2018).

Much of the press remarked upon the personal letters Gerwig wrote to various musicians for whom she wished to include as part of the soundtrack. The content of the letters included anecdotes from her own childhood that construct an image of a "hyper-feminine" adolescence: i.e., listening to songs in her room with the lights of and at sleepovers. Within her letters to artists to musicians, affective language was routinely underlined or italicised for emphasis, which is commonly (pejoratively) associated with "fangirling." When requesting permission to use Cry Me A River, she writes of Justin Timberlake:

> you were the soundtrack to my adolescence. Your rise corresponded exactly with my very awkward puberty. Between *NSYNC and your solo work every year of my growing up was defined by your sound. I pretty much wouldn't be an adult without you.' (Gerwig in Zack Sharf 2017).

Such stories in the behind-the-scenes material lay the foundation for the mainstream press reviews to draw parallels between the film and Gerwig's life, and while identifying biographical elements of a director within a text serves as evidence of auteur status in traditional auteur theory, Gerwig's occupies a more difficult position as a woman director, for whom their authority rests only on their ability to tell personal and private stories.

Conclusion

The long-term consequences of the #MeToo movement are yet to be fully realised; however, there seems to be an understanding among many feminist critics that its momentum is at best waning (see Shelley Cobb and Tanya Horeck 2017) and at worse prompting a backlash (Martha Gill 2022). For many, the movement failed to capitalise on its visibility and create meaningful structural change. While the initial movement was informed by the feminist assumption that the personal is political, the preoccupation with the personal fell victim to a kind of white narcissism whereby the voices of white women were centred and their stories universalised. This amplification of white voices not only silences other minoritized peoples but also creates a script that all must follow and therefore places limits on everyone.

The material examined here suggests that the movement's activation within the film industry has produced similar results. It provided an opportunity to reassess, critique, and change those structures (of which auteurism is one) that have worked to exclude women filmmakers. However, an analysis of the discourses surrounding Gerwig and *Lady Bird* ultimately reveals the ways in which exclusionary practices are so entrenched within film culture, that the movement has been simultaneously acknowledged and ultimately neutralised. Gerwig's critical acclaim was so conditional on the telling of stories relegated to the personal and private that reviews consistently ignored her rebukes that the characters and situations bore no resemblance to her life, and instead celebrated the "semi-autobiographical" film for its assumed verisimilitude. This not only creates parameters within which women filmmakers must operate in order to achieve success but can also implicitly suggest a lack of imagination and creative vision. Moreover, the construction of Gerwig within "self-ethnographic" accounts served to emphasise aspects of her creative practice that are typically coded as feminine. Taken together, the construction of Gerwig as a woman filmmaker shores up problematic essentialist assumptions that have long since troubled feminist film critics. Gerwig's success as a filmmaker benefited from the kind of popular/white feminism associated with #MeToo, which afforded her visibility and acclaim, but has equally reduced her to a commodifiable "brand" of popular feminist filmmaker, who can now also be purchased on a "Girls on Top" t-shirt.

Notes

1. This article refers specifically to the digital movement as opposed to Tarana Burke's portfolio of work 10 years earlier. More information on Burke's grassroots movement can be found here: https://metoomvmt.org/the-work/ Accessed November 17, 2022.
2. See for example, "Greta Gerwig, 'Frances Ha,'"*Meet the Filmmaker*, podcast, November 11, 2013.
3. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7G0GXyTT0I0 Accessed June 29, 2022.
4. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ri9_RnpaMYU Accessed June 30, 2022.
5. "The One with Greta Gerwig," *Scriptnotes, Ep 433*, podcast, January 14, 2020.
6. *Lady Bird*, Directed by Greta Gerwig (2017; UK: Warner Home Video, 2018), DVD.
7. See for example, "'Lady Bird' Feat. Greta Gerwig," *The Curzon Film Podcast*, February 15, 2018.

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