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### The "New New Wave" as a Limited, But Illuminating Aesthetic Assessment:
### Examining the 1999 'Transition' Within *The Phantom Menace* and *The Matrix*

In his *Entertainment Weekly* article, Jeff Gordinier proposed that 1999 would be regarded as the "year when all the old, boring rules about cinema started to crumble…the year when the whole concept of "making a movie" got turned on its head" (Gordinier). In a similarly decisive proclamation, Patrick Goldstein wrote about a "New New Wave" of directors, exclaiming that "just as Jean-Luc Goddard and Francois Truffaut of the French New Wave revolutionized cinema in the early 1960s, [Paul Thomas] Anderson and his peers" had begun to shake up the film world in 1999 (Goldstein). These critical opinions form the backbone of an assessment that the year 1999 in particular marked an innovate trend in Hollywood cinema, in which the Movie Brat directors had become out-of-touch, and a 'new guard' of directors were stepping in to take their place by radically transforming the way films were formally made. The nature of this dramatic critical assessment keeps it from reaching total accuracy, since an examination of a single year of supposed innovation or a single pair of films like *The Phantom Menace* and *The Matrix* would be hard-pressed to capture the true long-term picture of how momentary perceived aesthetic shifts could instantly spell out absolute industry change. However, the idea of a 1999 "New New Wave", regardless of its somewhat radical proposal, does hold some truth, in that critics' rather muddled reactions to comparable films like *The Phantom Menace* and *The Matrix* illuminates *why* they likely coalesced toward the idea of an opposition between 'old' and 'new' Hollywood. By comparing the formal qualities of *The Phantom Menace* and *The Matrix*, then, in addition to the ways in which they were critically received, the differences in aesthetics and critical interpretation of these films can be analyzed to interpret the "New New Wave" assessment as a theorized reaction and result of the particular melting pot of technical innovation, cyclical stylistic reactionism, and cultural shifts unique to the transitional checkpoint of 1999 and epitomized within these two films.

It is difficult to argue for a particular explanation of critics' "New New Wave" assessment through the comparison of only *The Phantom Menace* and *The Matrix*, since the genre, expectations, authorship, and audience reception of each film serve as extraneous factors that cannot be guaranteed to paint the same picture of the 1999 critical reception as the other films of that year would. However, these 'extraneous factors' can also be examined through critics' reviews as representatives of the very trends that critics are reacting to, like the franchising legacy of the Movie Brats compared to the 'new' presence of original, homage-laden concepts by new directors. In order to analyze these

trends within *The Phantom Menace* and *The Matrix,* it is necessary to deconstruct the language of Gordinier and Goldstein's arguments for this division between the 'old' and 'new'. Both articles, which paint the 'new guard' as dynamic, attuned to the new movie-going audience, and innovative, establish a divide between these young directors and the "esteemed vets like Stanley Kubrick and Martin Scorsese" who were depicted as "running on empty now" (Gordinier). Despite their certainty that a dynamic change was taking place in that year, the so-called opposition between the 'old guard' and 'new guard' is discussed in somewhat contradictory citations, as if the division exists in certainty but ineffably. Gordinier, for example, cites Michael Stipe's assertion that "Hollywood narrative film is in its death throes right now and people are looking for something else" and James Toback's idea of the "old-fashioned way of seeing [the world]…the sluggish, sedate way of seeing it," but also includes the point that "Hollywood's never going to abandon the three-act structure" and ends with the moment in which 'new guard' director Darren Aronofsky "suddenly [sounds] more than a bit like one of those old-guard masters who came of age in the postwar boom…" (Gordinier). In a similar vein, Goldstein's article unwittingly emphasizes the evanescent nature of the "New New Wave" assessment with the relatively vague descriptions of "restless young moviegoers", older directors becoming "out of touch", the new guard's "youth, ambition and media savvy", and New Line President Mike De Luca's term "all the young dudes" (Goldstein). Did *The Matrix* completely abandon the 3-act structure, however? Or did *The Phantom Menace* – supposedly a product of the "sluggish" old guard – fail to reap box office success from the 1999 audience?

The language in these articles evidently contradicts between a certainty that the formal conventions of Hollywood filmmaking are being discarded and replaced, and the lingering idea that this 1999 aesthetic change is part of the lasting Hollywood cycle in which the 'new guard' will eventually be the 'unhip', dissociated film veterans of the next 'revolution'. Even though the language that critics like Gordinier and Goldstein use hints that the vague youth and innovation they focus on is vaguer than they propose, these contradictions and nebulous generalizations between Movie Brats and new directors actually serve to indicate that there *were* distinctly noticeable aesthetic shifts between films like *The Phantom Menace* and *The Matrix*, that these shifts and the reactions to them are indicative of the broader cultural transition at the turn of the century, and that this transition – hinted at but not yet solidified in 1999 critical writings – acted less as a strict opposition between old and new directors, and more as a combination of Bordwell's retrospective Hollywood-style intensification and the reintroduction of a cooperative auteurist-mainstream mode of filmmaking utilizing the advances in digital and CGI technology unique to 1999. Goldstein came closest to perceiving this explanation for the so-called rift of the New New Wave when he wrote that, in contrast to either the studio-entrenched

'old guard' or the studio-opposed 90's indie cinema, the 'new guard' brings "a desire to accomplish what Howard Hawks or Alfred Hitchcock did decades ago – make commercial movies with a personal sensibility" (Goldstein).

The critical reaction to how visual effects were used in both *The Phantom Menace* and *The Matrix* is one facet of the formal comparison between these films and their reception that supports the idea of the "New New Wave" assessment as indicative of the combination of technological, cultural, and thematic shifts occurring in mainstream Hollywood cinema at the turn of the century. Daniel Wood's article, for example, supports the idea of a generational and aesthetic shift toward the "PlayStation Generation" who had increasingly turned to the technological advances in digital images and "Internet-age experimentation" to bring continuously "newer, edgier – many say weirder – aesthetics" (Wood). *The Phantom Menace* and *The Matrix*, which both employed a significant amount of CGI work in support of their narratives (environments, characters, and action in particular), were most often only directly compared by critics in terms of this specific formal quality – usually to laud the innovative use of CGI combat camerawork and virtual environments in *The Matrix* at the expense of downgrading the unfulfilled possibilities of *The Phantom Menace*'s CGI. In his article, Jonathan Romney says that *The Matrix* succeeds in its use of CGI because it "exploit[s] the plasticity and unreality of the images", using our knowledge "that Keanu Reeves's character Neo is just imagining that he's fighting, while he reclines in a dentist's chair" (Romney). Romney claims that failure of *The Phantom Menace* in terms of CGI is that it is "too concerned with denying its own construction, with appearing seamless, which is why its castles seem built of air…but *The Matrix* [wants] us to know precisely what sort of air [it uses]" (Romney). Critic Steve Biodrowski puts forth a similar review in that *The Matrix'*s unreality "is justified, because it takes place in an unreal world", as well as "enhancing the impact of the action…with impossible 3-D camera moves amidst ultra-slow-motion" (Biodrowski). "It's probably unfair," critic Rita Kempley writes, "but when it comes to movie magic, we expect perfection from Lucas and his gifted team. Perhaps the wizard is out of practice" (Kempley). This method of critical interpretation emphasizes both the focus that critics in 1999 had towards technical innovation – which works in tandem with the idea of new technology opening up Hollywood filmmaking to both new directorial voices and previously 'un-tellable' visual stories – as well as the lasting need to cater this technical innovation toward the motivation of the film's narrative as well as the capabilities of the technology itself. Therefore, the cross-examination of CGI as a significant comparison between the sci-fi films *The Phantom Menace* and *The Matrix* supports the idea that critics' assessment of the aesthetic breakthrough of 1999 was slightly overstated but did contain some truth. While the emphasis on CGI needing to serve and support a film's narrative downplays the difference between 'old guard' films like *The Phantom Menace* and 'new guard' films like *The Matrix*, the collective criticisms of *The Phantom Menace* trying to 'hide' its

special effects (just as the original Star Wars films hid their matte paintings, models, and compositing work by necessity) does lend credence to critics' idea of Lucas' relative inadaptability as representative of the 70's/80's directors being somewhat 'out of touch', at least in regards to innovative technology.

In addition to the comparison between special effects aesthetics, the formal and intertextual differences between the two films illuminates the director-focused aspect of why critics of 1999/2000 believed in such a stark division between the old and new filmmakers. Goldstein explains that the "New New Wave directors" are less identifiable than those of the French New Wave, less "chummy" than the Movie Brat directors in their time, and "don't seem to have the enormous flamboyant personalities that you saw in the '70s" (Goldstein). This sentiment is echoed by several critical reviews of the two films, and helps to explain why so much of the criticism of films like *The Phantom Menace* relates to its status as a 'Lucas' film and part of a franchise – since franchising became such a significant marker of the Movie Brat era – and why criticism of films like *The Matrix* focuses on the innovation and 'fresh voice' of directors like the Wachowskis. *The Phantom Menace* in particular helped to portray the 'old guard' directors as out-of-touch for critics because of its status as a *Star Wars* film, and the fact that its franchise serves for many critics as the epitome of the 70s/80s franchising/merchandise marketing mania. Almost all critical writings on *The Phantom Menace* discuss the 'hype' that surrounded the film, and concluded that the "light sabers hum and the heavens glitter, but the movie misses the ingenuity, humor and simplicity of the original rocket ride" (Kempley). The huge personalities that critics perceived from the Movie Brat directors have, by 1999, turned out to be something like a disadvantage, since the inevitable, inseparable comparison between these directors' newer films and their older ones results either in the new film falling short of the reconstructed nostalgia of 'the originals'/'the old works' ("I liked it better when Han Solo was there to complain about things" a viewer said (Sterritt).), or alternately igniting a harsher retrospective upon the Movie Brats in their heyday. The 'franchising-fever' that is thus more heavily criticized by *The Phantom Menace*'s attempted callbacks to its predecessors fails to land well with critics in 1999 who are situated in an economic and cultural environment that inevitably differs from the merchandise-focused one of the 80's. Writing about the character Darth Maul, Christopher Sharrett comments that he "tells us a good deal about Lucas…A character with almost nothing to do is a principal tool in selling the picture" (Sharrett). Rather than releasing films under the burden of nitpicky comparison to the auteur persona itself and to directorial works 20+ years in the past, criticism surrounding new directors like the Wachowskis – though referencing their film *Bound* – emphasizes the idea of the 'new voice' and what to expect from it. "When you read the script, you knew it was a new and different kind of movie," Mr. di Bonaventura says in Bernard Weinraub's article, "you got a sense of how important these filmmakers would become" (Weinraub). Therefore the

critical response not only to formal similarities/differences of these two films, but also to the external standards of authorship and expectation, supports the critics idea of a marked difference between the 'old guard' and 'new guard' simply for the process of cyclical self-comparison. While the critical focus on these films as representatives of their respective hosts (Lucas of the 70's/80's and the Wachowskis of the then-present) does not necessitate a dramatic change in Hollywood filmmaking around 1999, it does support the idea of an aesthetic shift supported by the changing idea of the director as self-comparative auteur.

The formal comparisons between *The Phantom Menace* and *The Matrix* in support of a melting pot of transitional influences instead of a completely definitive "New New Wave" come to a head with the thematic and narrative construction of the films, and how these were received by critics. Gordinier explains that 'new guard' films "reflect the cut-and-paste sensibility of videogames, the Internet, and hip-hop," and take a more liberal approach to 'messing' with narrative (Gordinier). Although the narratives of *The Phantom Menace* and *The Matrix* receive polarized reviews in terms of the apparent simplicity/complexity of both their constructions and the effectiveness/cliché of assembling homages, critics nonetheless tout *The Matrix* as innovative. On critic writes that "in contrast to the old-style Warner Brothers action genre fare, *The Matrix*…is a compelling but not altogether coherent blend of mythology, religious mysticism, martial arts, virtual reality and time travel" (Weinraub). Dennis Fischer quotes actor Joe Pantoliano of *The Matrix* in writing that "there's something about [the Wachowskis] with the millennium approaching…what they're doing has not been done, taking different genres and mixing them all together" (Fischer). Although these reviews overstate the newness of combining genres, they do illuminate the combination of formal technique and contemporary culture in the apparent innovation of films like *The Matrix*. On the other hand, critics write that *The Phantom Menace*, though it plays on the stock characters and narrative of the *"Star Wars* formula", "has a script so thin and implausible as to turn off even some of the juvenile audience" (Sharrett). David Sterritt writes that the film "delivers huge quantities of spectacle while coming up short as psychology, philosophy, or anything deeper than quick-cutting action and eye-filling computer effects" (Sterritt). Therefore, *The Phantom Menace* quotes mainly itself (the *Star Wars* franchise) and so it misses the opportunity to engage with the "PlayStation Generation" that makes up the late 90's audience, while *The Matrix* – though quoting pre-existing genres and conventions – filters its collage style through the direct appeal of CGI-exploiting, intensified aesthetics and Internet-age references to its temporal audience. As evidenced by the narrative and formal reception, although much of the criticism between these two films is mixed (ex. the direction of action scenes is praised in *The Matrix* and criticized in *The Phantom Menace* by some critics, and the reverse by others), this muddled reception can be taken in the context of external factors to paint a picture of how

critic's idea of a dramatic shift in 1999 Hollywood cinema is not entirely accurate, but does reflect a mix of transitions occurring at the time. *The Phantom Menace* and *The Matrix* share certain narrative and sci-fi generic elements, the use of new CGI special effects, the inescapable presence of their directors, and a certain amount of homage/attempted thematic depth. However, the circumstances surrounding these films shed light on why they represent the perception of a "New New Wave". The critical reception of 'old guard' films like *The Phantom Menace* emphasizes how the presence of the Movie Brats' franchising/merchandising and larger-than-life auteurist traditions falls under harsh criticism from the disadvantage of their own pre-established reputation, while the reception of 'new guard' films like *The Matrix* illustrates both the naturally-cyclical generation trend in Hollywood cinema as well as the timeliness of young directors introducing narrative and aesthetically-experimental films that reference the same underlying generic themes as their 'old guard' contemporaries but do so without the burden of excess retrospective hype, and through the translucent focus on what new CGI technology can and cannot do.

These two films alone cannot account for the factors that others bring in 1999, and their isolation within a single year supports the idea that even critics at the time were overstated in their often dramatic proclamations that the old rules of cinema were dead (since that isolated viewpoint is precluded from viewing the year within a longer trend in cinema). However, the aesthetic comparison and critical reactions to both *The Phantom Menace* and *The Matrix* serve as indicators of wider trends, in that the critics' reactions themselves to the formal qualities of the films indicate the jaded perspective toward the Movie Brat era as perceived by 1999 critics comparing the 'old guard's' new films to their filmography, the idea of a generational 'new guard' as participating ironically in the reactionary cycle of the film industry against that perceived to be the 'old tradition', and the interwoven technological and cultural innovations at the turn of the century that enabled increasingly visually-unfamiliar stories to be told while maintaining ties to familiar narratives tropes. This melting pot of interfilmic and extrafilmic influences, then, as analyzed through the aesthetics of and reactions to *The Phantom Menace* and *The Matrix*, reveals the "New New Wave" not as a radical opposition within Hollywood cinema, but a multi-faceted shift.

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