‘Gimme the prize’: the author dysfunction

There’s no escape from my authority ... Gimme the prize, just gimme the prize.

Queen, ‘Gimme the Prize’, *A Kind of Magic*, 1986¹

In the last couple of months, Hollywood has been preoccupied with awards season. In a crescendo building ultimately to the Oscars, the prize culture was foremost in many frantic re-tellings on social media. That said, the discourse that unfolded in the first part of this year was not really about prizes and awards, but more about authors. More particularly, it was about the brand as author. Nevertheless, that so much of the story was articulated around prizes and awards is not incidental. Indeed, the very concept of authorship is emboldened by the prestige and recognition of the prize. Culturally, socially and historically the author is a prestigious figure (albeit often a poor one).² And prestige arises through an intentional and purposive existence, through the cultural and popular authority of authorship.

As the authority for the story, an author commands an important historical and social position. In his famous essay, ‘The Death of the Author’, Roland Barthes describes this authority as arising through ‘the prestige of the individual’, and stated that ‘It is thus logical that in literature it should be this positivism, the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the “person” of the author’.³ Barthes goes on to describe the ‘image of literature’ as ‘tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions’.⁴ The prize similarly defines that individual prestige, incorporating the attribution, recognition and esteem that come with authorship: *One dream, one soul, one prize, one goal*.⁵ In many ways, the discussion of prizes also resonates with the discourse of incentives that has a seemingly unassailable resilience in intellectual property policy and scholarship. It is how the law affects a fiction of causality in an otherwise cacophonous array of creative incidents. And that specious causality also resonates with the value of ‘reputation’ that inheres and transforms through authorship and branding and throughout intellectual property. What it really creates is a crisis. And Hollywood is in nothing if not crisis.

Paradoxically, and rather disingenuously, that crisis is none other than a crisis of reputation, the very heart of brand identity. In many ways, we live not in an economy of attention so much as in an economy of prizes, of likes and shares. Arguably, it is a paucity of attention that allows such a diminished incarnation of reputation to prevail.

1. The album, *A Kind of Magic*, also provided much of the soundtrack for *Highlander* (1986), where the action is also articulated around a ‘prize’. *Highlander* has also garnered considerable cult status as well as generating a large industry of fan fiction, generated through the life of the work rather than the myth of the author.

2. The average professional author in the UK earns less than the minimum wage: J Gibson et al., *The Business of Being an Author: A Survey of Author’s Earnings and Contracts* (ALCS Project Report, Queen Mary University of London 2015): <https://orca.cf.ac.uk/72431/1/Final%20Report%20-%20For%20Web%20Publication.pdf>.

3. Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, in *Image, Music, Text*, Stephen Heath (trans) (Harper Collins, London 1977) 143.

4. Ibid 143.

5. Queen, ‘A Kind of Magic’, *A Kind of Magic*, 1986.

Reputation also circulates and transforms through a work, operating as an anchor to which the authority and identity of a work is attached. Recent events in Hollywood have shown the way in which a work might be freed of the reputation of one ‘author’ through anchoring itself to the reputation of another. Reputations can be replaced – from director, to ‘directors’, to character, to actor, to brand.⁶ But is this the death of the author, or the birth of the censor?⁷ In an age of so-called ‘cancel culture’, the dilemma is whether a work truly speaks for itself, or whether the brand speaks for all.

The discourse around reputation and prize giving has been especially compelling during this awards season in Hollywood. The industry has been attempting to redefine itself in the wake of the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, and the very epicentre of that reimagining has been through awards ceremonies. The American Academy even contemplated introducing a ‘popular film’ award, but that was soon dismissed as a problematic return to a low and high art distinction. Instead, popular films began to take over the traditional awards ceremonies, *Bohemian Rhapsody* (the Queen biopic) being a particularly significant example of that shift. Largely negative reviews from critics were no obstacle to its garnering of all the top awards nominations at the BAFTAs, Academy Awards and Golden Globes.

The story began to get very interesting in January at the Golden Globes awards ceremony. *Bohemian Rhapsody* won best picture and Rami Malek won best actor for his portrayal of majestic frontman, Freddie Mercury. Curiously absent, both in body and in spirit, was the director of the film, Bryan Singer. Not only did Bryan Singer not attend the ceremony, but also he was not mentioned or thanked in either speech. The director was ‘the invisible man’.

Singer, however, took to social media to post a still of himself on set, in the director’s chair, expressing thanks to the Hollywood Foreign Press Association – ‘What an honor. Thank you #HollywoodForeignPress’⁸ – a post which has since been removed. *Just gimme the prize.*

The disgrace that led to this social and professional erasure was that Fox Studios fired Singer in December 2017, just weeks before the conclusion of filming.⁹ The reasons for the dismissal were described officially as ‘unreliability and unprofessionalism’ on set.

6. Indeed, even the recipient of the 2018 Palm Dog for best performance by a dog in a motion picture was in fact a lookalike. See further the report in *EuroNews* 18 May 2018: <https://www.euronews.com/2018/05/18/a-chihuahua-from-an-italian-movie-dogman-won-palm-dog-award-at-cannes>.

7. In the recent PEN America annual town hall meeting, novelist Francine Prose remarked, ‘I’ve really come to despise the phrase *call out*. Because I think we live in a culture that’s based on bullying and based on intimidation and based on incivility. In a way, we’re living in a time of plague’. Quoted in Matthew Silver, ‘Wesley Morris Debates Cancel Culture at Panel that Includes Cancelled Editor Ian Buruma’, *Vulture*, 7 March 2019: <https://www.vulture.com/2019/03/wesley-morris-debates-cancel-culture-with-ian-buruma.html>. Coincidentally, cancel culture also erased the ‘author’ of the awards ceremony itself. That is, this year’s Oscars went forth without a host, after Kevin Hart was dismissed from the role for past homophobic jokes. Notably, cancellation leaves no space for debate, it is as tribal as contemporary politics.

8. Matt McGloin, ‘Bryan Singer Controversy at Golden Globes for *Bohemian Rhapsody*’, *Cosmic Book News*, 7 January 2019: <https://cosmicbook.news/bryan-singer-golden-globes>.

9. Kim Masters, ‘“How Many At-Bats Do You Get?”: Why Fox Hired (Then Fired) Bryan Singer on *Bohemian Rhapsody*’, 31 October 2018: <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/why-fox-hired-fired-bryan-singer-bohemian-rhapsody-1156527>; Borys Kit and Kim Masters, ‘Bryan Singer Fired From Directing Queen Biopic After On-Set Chaos’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 4 December 2017: <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/bryan-singer-fired-directing-queen-biopic-set-chaos-1063977>.

However, just a few days later, Cesar Sanchez-Guzman filed a complaint for damages arising from childhood sexual abuse in the Superior Court of the State of Washington for King County, alleging that in 2003 he was sexually assaulted by Singer on a yacht. Although Fox Studios claimed no knowledge of the impending Sanchez-Guzman suit when they dismissed Singer, the firing has been reported widely in the industry media as linked to this as well as in response to a notorious history of sexual impropriety and misconduct (going back some two decades in fact, long before the reports arising during the filming of *Bohemian Rhapsody*). The behaviour on the set of *Bohemian Rhapsody*¹⁰ has been described simply as the 'final straw'.¹¹ In January 2019, *The Atlantic* published a story on the history of the allegations, which Singer dismissed as a 'homophobic smear piece ... conveniently timed to take advantage of [*Bohemian Rhapsody*'s] success'.¹²

But there is another invisible man in this story – Dexter Fletcher. Dexter Fletcher was brought in to take over as director just over two weeks before the end of filming. In the credits he appears not as director, but as executive producer: *Incredible how you can see right through me*.¹³ Bryan Singer continues to be credited as director, albeit at the very end of the main credits rather than the earlier prominence customarily awarded to the director of a film, and continues to be listed as director by the Director's Guild of America. Nevertheless, he is credited long after Dexter Fletcher. And further, he is also no longer credited as a producer. He is an author, but not an owner. Two weeks can be a very long time in film-making ...

Backstage, when asked about the deafening absence of Bryan Singer in any of the speeches, the producer of the film, Graham King, first said: 'Not something I really should talk about tonight'. Brian May quickly joked, 'It's a good question though'. And then he just as quickly stepped back. In fact, just a couple of weeks earlier at the BAFTAs, which had suspended Singer's nomination for best director,¹⁴ May said in a red carpet interview with the BBC: 'He hasn't been the director for a long time ... The only reason he's on the movie is his guild forced Fox to do this ... technically, really, he's not the director of the movie'.¹⁵ The film remained nominated for best British film.¹⁶

After May's interjection at the Golden Globes backstage interview, Rami Malek responded at the same interview, first by punching the palm of one hand and then quickly walking forward saying, 'We ... we wanted to ... I will take this one ... there's

10. Masters (n 9).

11. Kit and Masters (n 9).

12. 'Bryan Singer: *Bohemian Rhapsody* Director Reportedly Facing Sex Allegations', *BBC News*, 23 January 2019: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-46978911>.

13. Queen, 'The Invisible Man', *The Miracle*, 1989.

14. 'Bafta: Queen Director Singer Suspended from Nomination', *BBC News*, 9 February 2019: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-47147570>. The best film award ultimately went to Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma*.

15. 'Baftas 2019', *BBC News*, 10 February 2019: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-47157927>. See further 'Brian May: Bryan Singer is Technically "Not the Director" of *Bohemian Rhapsody*', *Radio X*, 13 February 2019: <https://www.radiox.co.uk/artists/queen/brian-may-bryan-singer-not-director-bo-rhap-film/>. Extracts of the interview are also available here <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/video/brian-may-interview-on-the-bafta-red-carpet-about-the-news-footage/1129121429>.

16. 'Bafta: Queen Director Singer Suspended from Nomination', *BBC News*, 9 February 2019: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-47147570>. The best film award ultimately went to Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma*.

only one thing we needed to do and that was to celebrate Freddie Mercury in this film. He is a marvel, there is only one Freddie Mercury, and nothing was going to compromise us giving him the love, celebration and adulation he deserves'. Graham King then stepped forward, 'I'm just going to add, every single person that worked on this film, collaborated and did it out of the passion of making this story. That was everybody'. No compromise. The award? The prestige? That was everybody.

And perhaps it was. In celebrating the film, the absence of the author was filled by an emphasis on the collaboration of the various and varied contributions. Is it possible for author dysfunction to be addressed by the character as 'author', or by the actor as 'author,' or by everybody as author?

The film's win of the Golden Globe for Best Drama was also not without controversy. Notwithstanding its author dysfunction, the film simply was not received well by critics.¹⁷ Notably, however, the performance of its lead, Rami Malek, was praised. All at once the actor as character, the actor as author of the story, steps in to 'take this one'.

This circulation of reputation and replacement of 'authors' in this age of so-called cancel culture,¹⁸ where works risk being erased from cultural memory in an effort to find the accountability of the author, sustains the tyranny of the prestige of the individual and the peculiar explanation of works through the author that Barthes railed against. Is the work in time to author itself? Cancel the author, but do not cancel the work. Cancel the brand, but do not cancel the work. Indeed, this is where the relationship between the prize and the work becomes even more important. In this case, the industry awarded the film,¹⁹ awarded the cinematographer,²⁰ awarded the editor,²¹ but not the director; awarded the sound,²² but not the director; celebrated the actor,²³ but not the auteur. All these authors stepped forward. It was everybody and nobody.

In fact, it was the imprint of the editor, not authorial for the entrepreneurial purposes of the law, but frequently 'creative' for the wider understanding of co-authorship of the dramatic work, that was recognized at the Oscars. Headlines such as 'Did John Ottman

17. Elizabeth MacLeod, 'Bohemian Rhapsody Reviews Roundup: What Did the Critics Think?' *The Telegraph*, 24 October 2018: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/2018/10/24/bohemian-rhapsodyreviews-round-up-did-critics-think/>.

18. Jonah Engel Bromwich, 'Everyone Is Canceled', *The New York Times*, 28 June 2018: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/28/style/is-it-canceled.html>; Joshua Joda, 'How "Cancel Culture" Risks Eliminating Nuance From Public Conversation', *Huffington Post UK*, 19 March 2019: https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/cancel-culture-is-eliminating-nuance-from-the-conversation_uk_5c66a778e4b02e9fbf178e59.

19. BAFTA for Best British Film; Golden Globe for Best Drama Motion Picture; Academy Award nominee for Best Picture.

20. BAFTA nomination for Best Cinematography for Newton Thomas Sigel, the director of photography – Sigel reportedly would take over frequently when Singer would claim to be too exhausted to film: see further Yohana Desta, 'Bryan Singer Was Reportedly "Up to His Old Tricks" on *Bohemian Rhapsody* Set', *Vanity Fair*, 31 October 2018: <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/10/bryan-singer-bohemian-rhapsody-behavior-report>.

21. BAFTA nomination for Best Editing; Academy Award for Best Achievement in Film Editing. See further some of the criticism of the Film Editing Oscar in 'Bohemian Rhapsody Film Editor Responds to Criticism', *BBC News*, 19 March 2019: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-47623796>.

22. Academy Awards for Best Achievement in Sound Mixing and Best Achievement in Sound Editing; BAFTA for Best Sound.

23. Best Actor Screen Actors Guild Award, BAFTA, Golden Globe and Academy Award wins for Rami Malek (who portrayed Freddie Mercury). The cast was also nominated for Outstanding Performance by a Cast in a Motion Picture at the Screen Actors Guild Awards.

save *Bohemian Rhapsody*?²⁴ appear to endorse a cultural shift towards a wider notion of the author with respect to the cinematographic work, one which may become more relevant in interpreting the film as a dramatic work, pushing the law into a greater account of the creativity in filmmaking.²⁵ Indeed, Ottman made a declaration of creative input while responding to criticism of his editing (in a backlash following the Oscar) in which he explained the need to account for the change in director and reorder some scenes. He described the result as 'not my aesthetic'.²⁶ The author's signature is pronounced.²⁷ And the Oscar, controversial or not, under the wider circumstances surrounding this film seems to endorse this perspective. Nevertheless, the result was criticized and the awarding of an Oscar widely mocked as undeserved. Did the anxiety of an increasingly unsettled industry, trying to find an author through the cultural institution of an award, overwhelm considerations of the merit? Who really is the author of *Bohemian Rhapsody*?

Roland Barthes said that we must dismantle the myth of the author: 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author'.²⁸ How might this work within the context of copyright, or at least within the business models premised upon copyright? The responses to the scandal surrounding *Bohemian Rhapsody* appear almost a performance of the life of the work through the erasure and professional 'death' of the author. Even if the prize culture continued to endorse the authors' authorities, the way in which the events engaged a rethinking of the question of authorship in film as a dramatic work is compelling.

But there is more to this erasure than a simple 'death of the author'. Copyright desires an author, a work in search of an author, a story in search of its reputation. How might this translate to other challenges to authorship that currently entice scholars of copyright? Is the audience to be recovered through the erasure of the director and the birth of the franchise? Can the work of AI be celebrated despite the shifting spectre of the author? By all means cancel the author, hold the individual to account, but engage with the work. But can the work account for itself?

Cancel culture regularly calls for the censoring of work when cancelling an individual, the kind of biographical approach to interpretation that has been challenged

24. Tim Greiving, 'Did John Ottman save *Bohemian Rhapsody*?' *The Washington Post*, 4 March 2019: https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/did-john-ottman-save-bohemian-rhapsody-the-oscar-winning-editor-is-being-praised-by-colleagues-and-mocked-online/2019/03/04/89aed896-3e8e-11e9-922c-64d6b7840b82_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.34f86e430844.

25. In fact, when Singer was removed from the film, Ottman, who had been Singer's editor for 30 years, was at risk of being fired himself. However, the creativity and originality of his work on its own merit arguably secured his place: 'When Singer was fired, Ottman feared he might be collateral damage. But the brass at Fox saw the two-hour assembly he had cut together and "had this huge sense of relief"' (Greiving (n 24)). Ottman is described in the same article as working 'autonomously and in solitude'.

26. Quoted in Greiving (n 24). See further, Filiz Mehmedova, 'Bohemian Rhapsody Editor Responds to Oscar Backlash Over Widely Mocked Scene', *Digital Spy*, 18 March 2019: <https://www.digitalspy.com/movies/a26854118/bohemian-rhapsody-editing-scene-oscar-backlash/>.

27. In relation to one scene in particular, Ottman is quoted as saying, 'Whenever I see it, I want to put a bag over my head', making clear the link between artist/author and the work, at least in terms of his proclamation of his own aesthetic and reputation as demonstrated in that scene (quoted in Greiving (n 24)).

28. Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in *Image, Music, Text*, Stephen Heath (trans) (Harper Collins, London 1977) 148.

throughout literary and film scholarship. To what extent can or should the work be held accountable for the author? Arguably, the machinery of cancel culture is fuelled by the same tyrannical reign of the author to which Barthes referred. The Golden Globes wins certainly generated a lot of discussion on Twitter in anticipation of a similar sweep at the Oscars.²⁹ Many Twitter users called for the film to be held accountable for the actions of the disgraced director and that accountability was seen to be manifest in the award. They called for it to be ignored by awards as a punitive measure against the director. The result of this kind of cancellation of the work, however, is censorship and scandalous notoriety, not accountability and reform of the creative industries. Infamy can be just as lucrative as fame in an economy of attention and shares. Indeed, many of the most ‘famous’ brands around can attribute their success to scandal.

Recent news of Bryan Singer’s dismissal from the *Red Sonja* remake is similarly linked to the director’s alleged misconduct, but is reported to be in response to problems securing a domestic distributor.³⁰ Of course, this distribution dilemma is arguably entirely to do with the director’s reputation. Has Hollywood learned anything? What has been more interesting in the *Red Sonja* episode, however, is the search for a replacement director. How does one replace the reputation of the author? How does one shift the prestige from the author to an other? Onto whom should that prestige be conferred? Barthes is a possible guide here. That prestige arguably shifts to the reader, the audience, the fan. And it is in this context that the ‘qualifications’ for director in recent press are especially noteworthy. Amber Tamblyn has argued her case on the very basis of her ‘superfan’ status.³¹ What better example of the death of the author as site of privilege and prestige, than the imitation of the fan? The audience is indeed to eclipse the director in *Red Sonja*.

Nevertheless, to interpret this kind of social intervention in the industry as a democratic achievement in the wider environment of memes and fan fiction is all too simplistic and prematurely optimistic. While Hollywood may transform from the old school inheritance of white male storytellers,³² born into privilege as it were, erasing the author is not a democratization of participation. It simply democratizes the erasure. We need storytellers. In fact, we need more of them. What is important to take from this series of events is how we recognize that storyteller and how we might look to the work to admit a whole range of new storytellers, of new authors – humans, machines, non-human animals.

29. For example, from user @Ceilidhann, 6 January 2019: ‘That and a whole lot of complicit people have managed to craft a narrative wherein they pretend Bryan Singer doesn’t exist & won’t be rewarded for the film’s success’. And then followed with, ‘When it gets that nomination – and it will – it’ll be up to the press & people in my field to hold this shit accountable. Ask about Bryan Singer at every turn. Don’t let Rami Malek & co sweep that under the carpet because the Oscar matters more’.

30. Andrew Pulver, ‘Bryan Singer Reportedly Fired from *Red Sonja* Remake’, *The Guardian*, 15 March 2019: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/mar/15/bryan-singer-reportedly-fired-from-red-sonja-remake>.

31. Jax Motes, ‘*Red Sonja* Superfan Amber Tamblyn Would Like to Replace Bryan Singer as Director’, *Science Fiction*, 18 March 2019: <https://sciencefiction.com/2019/03/18/319945/>.

32. There was considerable criticism of the awarding of the Best Picture Oscar to *Green Book*, noting the white saviour narrative and lack of diversity in the crew, with one commentator writing, ‘if your movie is about race relations, maybe don’t have your trophy-room pictures be only of white filmmakers?’ Brian Truitt, ‘*Green Book* Should Never Have Won the Best Picture Oscar’, *USA Today*, 3 March 2019: <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/academy-awards/2019/02/25/oscars-2019-green-book-wasnt-best-choice-best-picture/2977060002/>.

And what about the reputation of the work? Are the reputations of the work and the author so inextricably intertwined that we must replace the author with character, actor, in order to save 'the passion of the story'? Surely not. The work? That was everybody. Just like Queen songs themselves,³³ that was everybody.

Finally, or perhaps 'a perfect way to start',³⁴ what of the story itself? There are now sensitivity readings and other forms of quasi-censorship mediating the opportunity for debate, even before such work enters the realm of social media. Op-Ed columnist in *The New York Times*, Jennifer Senior, recently described cancel culture as a quest for power: 'Purity tests are the tools of fanatics, and the quest for purity ultimately becomes indistinguishable from the quest for power. In the Twitterverse, ideologues have far more power than moderates'.³⁵ We need more and varied storytellers to enter the discussions, not more censors to facilitate and embed the division.

In many respects, the challenges that are presented to copyright, reputation and brand through the transformations in use and incremental innovation in the relentless immediacy and 'presence' of social media are very similar to the fundamental characteristics of an oral culture. But beyond that generality is where the similarities begin to strain. So much of social media is premised upon a kind of self-contradictory gift structure, in the authorless, customary environment or ever-present memes. It is an 'oral' culture that is relentlessly present but never forgets: *Forever is our today*.³⁶ This gift society is resistant to authorship yet proliferates opinion, censorious of privacy yet is premised upon brand, resistant to dogma and yet has been instrumental in the embedding of positions and the creation of seemingly unassailable division in current world politics. Everything has become a contest of storytelling, where reputation is an artefact and a commodity. Politics too has become a competition for an individual's 'intellectual purity',³⁷ not the well-being of the polis. The focus is on the reputation and goodwill of a personal brand, and lost is the integrity and independence of the work. In an economy of attention where the currency is likes, we are dealing in a world of stories. And yet, paradoxically, in some circumstances, those stories can become even harder to tell. *The show must go on*.³⁸

But who ultimately claims the prize when the show must go on?

The author is dead. Long live the work.

Johanna Gibson
January 2019

33. From the album *The Miracle* onwards, all song writing credits went to the group as Queen, rather than to individual members: 'no matter who came up with the idea for the song, it would be credited to Queen, and not individuals' (Brian May quoted in Georg Purvis, *Queen: Complete Works* (Reynolds & Hearn 2007) 67).

34. *Highlander*, Russell Mulcahy (dir), Gregory Widen (screenplay), 1986.

35. Jennifer Senior, 'Teen Fiction and the Perils of Cancel Culture', *The New York Times*, 8 March 2019. Meredith Clark, University of Virginia, describes cancel culture as 'ultimately an expression of agency ... like a breakup and a taking back of one's power': quoted in Jonah Engel Bromwich, 'Everyone is Canceled', *The New York Times*, 28 June 2018. In the same article, Lisa Nakamura, University of Michigan, describes it similarly as 'born of a desire for control'.

36. Queen, 'Who Wants to Live Forever?', *A Kind of Magic*, 1986.

37. Polly Mackenzie, Chief Executive of Demos, speaking to BBC TV in *The Papers*, 13 March 2019.

38. Queen, 'The Show Must Go On', *Innuendo*, 1991.