“There’s Just No Point in Doing a Commentary Where Everyone’s Just Going to Sit and Criticize the Movie”: Auteurism and the Creation of Hoax “Unruly” Extra Features in the DVD Era

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Abstract:

Most scholarship on DVD supplements has emphasized how such materials operate in unusually close proximity to the primary text, with these bonuses often characterized as being heavily guided by the interests of the filmmakers and/or the releasing studio. Extras that are “unruly” (in the terminology of John Thornton Caldwell) now tend to be excluded from the final package, to avoid the potential for scandal or legal challenges. This article will consider the DVD editions of the

feature films *Blood Simple* (1984), *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* (2004), and *Incident at Loch Ness* (2004), which contain faked examples of unruly commentary tracks. In these examples, the participants appear incompetent and narcissistic, with little to no overt textual indication elsewhere on the disc that the contents should be interpreted humorously. The material offers insights into the production of "regular" DVD commentaries, highlighting the content restrictions, censorship, and post-production editing often necessary to produce a track that masquerades as an intimate recording, supposedly captured in real time. The question remains, however, whether these faked texts are truly subversive, or whether they are simply designed to reiterate the comic mastery, and validate the auteurist control, of the creators when the hoax is revealed.

Keywords: DVD, hoax, commentary, Coen Brothers, Blood Simple, Dodgeball

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The DVD boxset *The Twilight Zone – The Definitive Edition: Season 5* (2005) has become infamous due to the presence of a particular special feature: an audio commentary for the episode "The Last Night of a Jockey" (originally transmitted October 25, 1963) featuring Mickey Rooney and an unidentified moderator. The actor proves an elusive interviewee throughout, frequently lapsing into silence, randomly shouting a number of his responses, and mostly claiming not to remember anything about the episode. When the moderator explains that a "younger audience" will be listening to the commentary to learn about the production, Rooney disputes this, stating that they are too busy "watching… sexy things" instead (Rooney and Anon.). The bizarre content of this track pushes it into the realm of what John Thornton Caldwell has termed the "unruly bonus." Rather than conforming to the model of the set's other features – which largely reiterate

the notion that *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964) is a classic of early television, and worthy of further critical attention – Rooney's contribution becomes an unintentional, and "disruptive," spectacle in itself (Caldwell 304). This is indicated by several online reviews which give the track a disproportionate amount of coverage, relative to the set as a whole. One critic concludes: "I am glad Image Entertainment had the courage to include it, because it is nothing if not interesting, […] albeit for all the wrong reasons" (Monkey). As this quotation acknowledges, unruly bonuses are a relatively uncommon aspect of DVD culture. The potential for scandal and/or costly legal challenges mean that such material now tends to be "downplayed, laughed away or (likely) cut" from the finished product (Gray, "Bonus Material" 243).

A recurrent claim within home video scholarship has been that the special features generally serve to "reproduce" and "engender" notions of auteurism – even at times being responsible for "creat[ing] "or invent[ing] an auteur" (Badley 56; Grant 103; Gray, *Show Sold Separately* 82; Brookey and Westerfelhaus, "The Digital Auteur" 115). As Jonathan Gray suggests, many discs display an "adherence to a pre-Death of the Author world" ("Bonus Material" 248), frequently endorsing an interpretation of the film which sees a single privileged figure – usually the director – as the "authoritative" creator of meaning (Bennett and Brown 127; Brookey and Westerfelhaus, "Hiding Homoeroticism" 24). The intention of this article, then, is to broaden the analysis of on-disc extra features by considering a number of releases – most notably the DVD editions of the feature films *Blood Simple* (1984), *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* (2004), and *Incident at Loch Ness* (2004) – which contain faked examples of unruly commentary tracks. These complicate the traditional notions of "the rose-colored gauze" that is usually perceived within texts of this type (Doherty 79), and offer a potential challenge to the auteur-focused readings found in existing academic work on this subject.

The concept of the commentary track emerged on an earlier home video format – the laserdisc – as part of the Criterion Collection's 1984 release of the original 1933 version of *King Kong*. Compared to the physical linearity of systems such as Betamax or VHS, laserdiscs allowed multiple audio tracks to be added to the same piece of video (offering the opportunity for an increase in content without significantly impacting the storage capacity of the disc). The *Kong* commentary was provided by film historian Ronald Haver, and was an experiment in crafting a scene-specific lecture to accompany the film. Criterion also pioneered the director's commentary on laserdisc in 1988, recording tracks with Michael Powell for releases of *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943) and *Black Narcissus* (1947) (Fischer 104-105). As Alison Trope notes, these elements were quickly endowed with "cultural value" through their framing of these materials as "educational." Discs laden with extras, such as a commentary track, were "frequently called 'film school in a can' or 'film school in a box'" (153).

The laserdisc nonetheless remained a fairly niche item, supported primarily by a dedicated cinephile community, and thus the selection of films released – and the content of the special features produced – tended toward the interests of this particular demographic. Because of the relatively low print runs, and the "small, intense" insider market that was cultivated, Mark and Deborah Parker note that "few restrictions on [the] content" of bonus features were imposed by studio legal departments (xiii, 42). One of the only reported instances of controversy surrounded Criterion's two-disc laserdisc editions of the first three *James Bond* films. As Tim Lucas elaborates, shortly after the discs were released in April 1991, "Eon Productions, Ltd. (the production company of Bond producer Albert R. 'Cubby' Broccoli) notified [Criterion] of 185 statements in the audio commentaries which they considered to be 'inaccurate, insensitive, inflammatory or potentially libelous'" (26). The tracks, which feature contributions from members

of the original creative teams, do prove surprisingly forthright at times. This includes criticism of the budgets provided for the early films, gossip about Sean Connery's weight gain during the production of *From Russia with Love* (1963), and the insinuation that several female costars were bad actors and had been cast solely for their looks. A number of the interviewees also use offensive language. Terrence Young, director of *From Russia with Love*, recounts a supposedly humorous story in which he had accidentally dyed his hair before his first meeting with actor Pedro Armendáriz, and had to reassure the star (using a homophobic slur) that "I'm not a fag and I don't normally go around like this" (qtd. in Rubin et al.). In a discussion of the *Goldfinger* (1964) character Pussy Galore (presented more overtly in the source novel as a lesbian), director Guy Hamilton casually refers to her as a "dyke" (qtd. in Eder et al.). In response to EON's complaints, Criterion was forced to discontinue their boxsets, and recall unsold stock. The following year, the company reissued the products as single-disc versions, with all extra features removed (Lucas 26). For the most part, however, laserdisc commentaries – while never seemingly *courting* scandal or offense – were permitted some leniency to include candid moments.

Parker and Parker suggest that, when the DVD format was introduced in 1997, it developed a rather conflicted identity. On the one hand, DVDs were positioned as a "mass market" product, primarily aiming to replace VHS rather than laserdisc (xiii). On the other hand, there was an emphasis placed on direct sales of the product rather than rentals, whereas VHS had tended to be more profitable in the latter marketplace (Klinger 52). Mark Bernard, drawing on the work of scholar Paul McDonald, notes that DVD producers quickly capitalized upon the "presence of extra materials" as an enticement to ownership, and looked to "laserdisc releases issued by […Criterion] for models of how to package a film for release on DVD" (57-58). The "special editions," often promising copious bonus features, created in the first few years of DVD production thus

transplanted the culture of the cinephile-focused laserdisc into the mainstream, benefitting from significantly increased production budgets due to the inflated size of the potential consumer base (Parker and Parker 45; Bloom A2). Indeed, such resources were almost necessary for the creation of hoax extras, including permitting the Coen Brothers the opportunity to script an entire commentary and hire an actor to perform it. Although the recorded hoax materials on the *Dodgeball* and *Incident at Loch Ness* DVDs were broadly improvised, these still required careful advance planning, editing, and the participation of a wide range of personnel (including, as will be noted, some figures who are supposedly appearing on the track by accident). All of these elements place additional burdens of time and/or money, even if the hoaxes are initially implying – on face value – that a rather more slipshod approach has been undertaken.[1]

The greater visibility of DVD special features compared to the laserdisc era, and the larger amount of money at stake, nonetheless created new concerns about the legal ramifications of added content. For instance, the *10th Anniversary Edition* (2004) of the feature *Reality Bites* (1994) contains an audio commentary with director Ben Stiller and screenwriter Helen Childress. During the track, Childress makes a throwaway reference to the character of Troy Dyer being based on one of her friends from film school (Stiller and Childress). The following year, the real Troy Dyer "sued Childress and others for defamation and […] invasion of privacy based on the allegedly unflattering representation of Dyer in the movie" (Weiman and Konstadt 21). As Parker and Parker note, the identification of such risks has led "studio lawyers to insist that no material on the disc contain any mention of brand names, personal criticism, or discussion of anyone who worked on a production but was not credited" (42). For instance, in both the hoax commentary and one of the "real" commentaries produced for *Dodgeball* (discussed in more detail below), the participants mention a set of guidelines sent to them by Twentieth Century Fox, the movie's home video

distributor, telling them what *not* to do (Vaughn et al.; Stiller et al.). DVD extras are now much more carefully vetted by legal departments ahead of release, and many discs also feature mandatory disclaimers which reiterate that the views expressed by the participants are not necessarily endorsed by the studio. While unruly moments may still occasionally appear – intentionally or not – the general consensus is that home video supplements mostly privilege a celebratory mode that supports the "agenda of the studio that owns the film" (Hight 7).

The benefit of a *falsified* unruly bonus, then, is that it essentially allows DVD creators to have it both ways: the ability to stir up some controversy and intrigue while also maintaining a degree of control. One of the earliest DVDs to contain an example of the hoax is the director's cut edition of the Coen Brothers' debut feature *Blood Simple*, released by Universal on disc in 2001. The volume features a commentary by "Kenneth Loring," a British man identified as the artistic director of Forever Young Films, the distribution company that supposedly owns the rights to the Coens' movie. Both the box art and the on-disc "Bonus Materials" menu present the feature in a straightforward manner, identifying Kenneth Loring as the speaker and noting his (supposed) credentials. The audio track itself also works to establish a sense of authenticity, reproducing textual signifiers found in previous scholarly commentaries created by companies such as Criterion. Loring begins by welcoming the viewer, adopting an authoritative – yet conversational – tone, and delves straight into a scene-by-scene response to the film.[2] In reality, Loring is played by the actor Jim Piddock**,** and is relaying comments scripted by the Coens themselves (Cheshire and Ashbrook 24). This information is not, however, actually stated within the track, nor revealed elsewhere in the wider DVD package.

As Richard Dyer notes, the hoax is an inherently conflicted form, as it attempts to be "as exact and convincing an imitation as possible [so] that you don't let on it is an imitation" and yet

“a hoax only really comes into fruition when it is exposed as such” (*Pastiche* 29). He suggests, therefore, that such texts often contain “nudges” which teasingly threaten to expose the conceit:

> Such testing and joking are common to hoaxes, part of their generally being on a knife edge between deception and declaration. They both want to dupe but also, then, to display the fact that they have done so. They are drawn towards seeing how far they can push the exaggeration and distortion – the farther they can go and still get away with it, the more they demonstrate the receiver’s gullibility and their own prowess, while also providing themselves with a get-out: “But see how obvious we were being, how many clues we gave you!” (*Pastiche* 30).

As the *Blood Simple* commentary develops, there are numerous “clues” that Loring may not be delivering an entirely straightforward analysis of the film. He fails to explain basic technical terms and frequently misremembers character names. There are also some surprising pieces of production trivia relayed to the viewer: it is claimed, for instance, that most of the fleeting glimpses of animals and insects were achieved using expensive animatronics, and that music was always performed live during filming, which required the actors to mouth their lines and later post-sync the dialogue. Although this is all delivered with apparent sincerity (coupled with Loring reassuring us that everything has been verified by the Coen Brothers), the outlandish nature of these “facts,” as well as his slipshod knowledge elsewhere, certainly hints at an underlying mischievous intent. Loring’s unpleasantness also extends beyond mere professional hubris. He uses the outdated term “negro” in his description of studio politics, and at one point delivers an off-color joke about Jews in Soviet Russia as an attempt to add “levity” to the discussion. Toward the end of the commentary,

he acknowledges a resentment toward one his colleagues, a man named Adrian Butts, and relays the story of a fistfight that erupted between them, which ended up also involving the actor Nick Nolte and the Merchant Ivory scriptwriter Ruth Prawer Jhabvala (Loring). Such moments are not entirely beyond the realm of actual unruly extras: Loring's use of problematic epithets recalls the controversial *James Bond* laserdisc releases from Criterion, for instance. Nonetheless, the presence of so *many* different infractions of commentary "etiquette" within a single track may help to confirm one's skepticism about the wider "truth-claims" surrounding Kenneth Loring.

The decision to produce such an elaborate hoax – requiring much more careful preparation than a "conventional" commentary – is certainly curious. The Coens have developed a reputation as being somewhat reluctant media personalities, lacking interest in the Hollywood publicity machine. Ahead of *Blood Simple*'s DVD release, Joel Coen reflected on the concept of the commentary: "I don't find them very edifying usually. I'm sure there are some good ones, but in our case, I don't think they'd be of much interest" (Mottram 25, 33). As such, the fanciful Loring track serves a practical purpose: allowing the disc to be marketed as a "special edition" – increasingly viewed in the early 2000s as an important determinant in encouraging purchase (Trope 142) – while also permitting the Coens to sidestep the intimacy and prolonged introspection usually demanded by the form.[3]

The creation of the hoax may also have been exacerbated in this instance by the Brothers' reported mixed feelings about *Blood Simple* itself, even in its "director's cut" incarnation. As Joel Coen noted, when he and Ethan were asked to revisit the film, "we […] were a little bit appalled at what it looked like 15 years later. […] A lot of things about the movie were quite clumsy" (qtd. in Mottram 32). The financial restraints placed upon the production in 1984 meant that the Brothers were limited in what they could shoot, and very little beyond the final negative was archived: as a

result, the new version of *Blood Simple* is restricted to remixing the existing footage, and actually ends up deleting certain elements found in the original. In *The New Yorker*, Ethan positioned the work as an antidote to the "commercial jujitsu" of most "director's cuts," in which filmmakers are often indulged in a process of bloating the running time: "adding back scenes once shed to satisfy the market's mindless bias for brevity." At the same time, however, he is drolly self-critical about what he considers to be the limitations of the source material: "We made the movie about five minutes shorter so that a pace that was once glacial is now merely slow, and did some editorial smoothing so that scenes that were once inept are now merely awkward" (Coen 27).

The Coens continued this tongue-in-cheek approach in the theatrical issue of the director's cut, creating a brief introduction featuring Mortimer Young, the founder of the fictional Forever Young company (Mottram 33). Shot in a faux-opulent office full of leather-bound books, Young (played by George Ives) makes bombastic claims about how *Blood Simple*'s original release "garner[ed] universal critical acclaim, shatter[ed] box-office records, and usher[ed] in the era of the independent cinema." He acknowledges, however, that "filmographic techniques were in their infancy" when the film was made, and that this new release has been "digitally swabbed" with the "boring bits taken out." This sequence is also included in the 2001 DVD, and the audio commentary develops the gag even further. Loring implicitly places the film in contrast to the growing reputation of Criterion as a distributor of classic, independent, and international cinema (often drawing upon the resources of the Janus Film Library) (McKenna 38). Although he does not mention this company by name, Loring attempts to argue that his own employer serves a similar "aficionado" market by eschewing big Hollywood releases. It becomes clear, however, that Forever Young's archive consists primarily of public domain texts, movies from countries that do not have a reciprocal copyright agreement with the United States, and prints obtained from studios

that have since gone bust. In spite of this, the host still tries to present these items – including *Blood Simple* – as forgotten gems that are worthy of public attention, rather than the cultural detritus that his comments (unwittingly) reveal them to be (Loring).

Caldwell notes that, on rare occasions, "studios will [use a disc's special features to…] savagely ridicule their own failed film in order to 're-create' it as an 'intentional' camp or cult classic":

> In the DVD production of the critically reviled, disastrous MGM film *Showgirls* [1995], for example, MGM hired the writer David [Schmader, who had already held a number of live screenings of the film celebrating its "badness"] to provide commentary. At one point [Schmader] mocks: "*Showgirls* triumphs in that every single person involved in the making of the film is making the worst possible decision at every possible time" (301).

However, such examples tend to occur without the involvement of the creative team who worked on the film. MGM reportedly made the decision with the *Showgirls* DVD because the movie's director, Paul Verhoven, had refused to participate in the production of its extra features (Caldwell 301). By contrast, the hoax commentaries discussed in this article are instead the result of choices made primarily by the original filmmakers, choosing to offer a skewered take on the format after receiving a request for supplemental content by the studio.

The Coens' professed reticence about *Blood Simple* reflects a particular form of performative authorship, one that is ultimately conducive to developing their wider "brand" as cult moviemakers. The film has enjoyed a growing reputation as a nostalgic mediation upon the tropes of film noir, aided – as R. Barton Palmer suggests – by the Brothers cultivating "a young, cine-

literate viewership eager for the self-congratulatory experience of discovering, identifying, and enjoying references to honored texts of a bygone age" (Palmer 268). The home video package constructed for the film thus appears targeted at the same demographic: a group seemingly trusted to recognize the commentary as a hoax and to appreciate its metahumor (and indeed metacommentary) on the Coens' work as well as wider cinephile traditions. The implication that *Blood Simple* is part of Forever Young's dubious collection gestures toward the actual strained conditions of the film's production and initial release. At the same time, however, the hoax included in the DVD release works to reaffirm the Coens as postmodern auteurs. It constructs a playful mythology which – for all of the surface-level distractions provided by Loring – is arguably much more concerned with rehabilitating *Blood Simple* than in heckling it: an act which benefits the Brothers as well as the studio releasing the film to disc.

The release of the Coens' DVD in the early years of the format leads Parker and Parker to suggest that, "unlike many parodies, [this] send-up of commentary is almost contemporaneous with the inception of the form. It is as if the essential features of commentary exist almost from the beginning, a set of expectations not so much formed in the practice of recording audio commentaries but simply applied to them" (123). As noted above – and indeed elsewhere in Parker and Parker's writing – this is not strictly true: the concept of the audio commentary had existed on laserdisc since 1984, even though this had mostly been confined to the format's dedicated consumer base. To reframe Parker and Parker's argument slightly, then, the *Blood Simple* disc parodies aspects of laserdisc culture *before* such an approach was entirely integrated into (and eventually transformed by) the mainstream DVD marketplace.[4]

By the mid-2000s, it was reported that home video "producers uniformly acknowledge a 'dumbing down' of supplementary features" – with blockbuster studio releases in particular

shifting away from scholarly-focused materials and demonstrating "a preference for puff pieces laden with 'star input'" in an attempt to satisfy as many different demographics as possible (Parker and Parker 42). As such, the lecture format (pioneered by Haver's contribution to the *King Kong* Criterion disc and mocked by *Blood Simple*), began to concede ground to a greater number of tracks that traded upon the appeal of the direct participation of major industry figures. As Craig Hight elaborates, "it is as if we have been invited into the homes of the cast and crew to view the film with them, listening as they tell stories of their production experience with the sound of the film turned down. […] What we gain in intimacy, however, we lose in terms of breadth and depth of perspective" (12). In one DVD marketing guidebook, the authors encourage distributors to get "creative" with the provision of extras to ensure effective product differentiation. Suggestions include "drunk" and/or "stoned" commentary, a track recorded "in the nude," as well as the possible inclusion of figures normally overlooked in the process, from "special effects" artists, assistants, and even the "director's mom" (Gore and Salamoff 22). Such extreme tracks are relatively few and far between, however: in part because studios generally do not perceive insights from "below-the-line" production members to be a selling point for mass audiences, but also because of the potential legal ramifications of some of the other possibilities, such as the risk of commentators making slanderous or defamatory statements while inebriated.[5]

Once again, the falsified unruly extra, now featuring actual members of the Hollywood "elite," permits a flirting with the boundaries of acceptability without truly transgressing. This is particularly visible in many of the DVDs produced by the so-called "Frat Pack." As Brenda R. Weber outlines, this unofficial grouping is comprised of comedic actors such as Jack Black, Vince Vaughn, Will Ferrell, and Ben Stiller, "starring in a series of films that largely deploy fraternity-type puerile humor in stories geared toward adolescent male audiences" (70). The box-office (if

not always critical) success of many of their works was regularly matched – and sometimes exceeded – on home video, with distributors often taking advantage of the health of the market to issue multiple versions (including theatrical and "unrated" editions), as well as supplying copious bonus features.

Many of the commentary tracks created for these discs also eschew the "conventional" format, generally focusing on the participants' improvizational skills and the delivery of gags, rather than necessarily offering detailed insights into the filmmaking process. For instance, in *Tropic Thunder* (2008) – a comedy about the ill-fated production of a war movie – Robert Downey, Jr. portrays an actor called Kirk Lazarus, who is essaying the role of an African-American character called Staff Sergeant Lincoln Osiris. A recurring gag involves Lazarus' commitment to method acting, and his refusal to break character – despite all of the chaos that unfolds around him – until the shoot is completed and the DVD commentary has been recorded. In the "cast commentary" offered on the actual *Tropic Thunder* disc, Ben Stiller and Jack Black appear as themselves, but Downey, Jr. participates as Lazarus still playing Osiris, blurring the lines between the real actors and the characters they played in the film (Downey, Jr. et al.). The DVD release of *Step Brothers* (2008) contains a "musical commentary" scored by Jon Brion, which features the film's director, Adam McKay, and its stars Will Ferrell and Jon C. Reilly, as well as – for no obvious reason – the NBA star Baron Davis as an extra celebrity guest (Reilly et al.). In the standard ("PG-13") edition release of *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* (2006), Ferrell and McKay (the latter playing his own son) provide a "25 Years Later" commentary, supposedly taken from a silver anniversary edition issued in the year 2031 (Ferrell and McKay). The "Unrated" disc contains a different track, with the director and actor Ian Roberts spoofing the pretension of some "auteur" commentaries, treating the film as if it is a masterpiece that has changed the face of

cinema (McKay and Roberts). Although the prevalence of these bonuses has now arguably primed fans to anticipate raucous material, the commentary on the "Extreme Edition" of *Dodgeball* – released in the UK in 2005, and one of the first major special edition discs produced by "Frat Pack" members – predated these expectations, and displays many attributes of the hoax.

The track features the writer/director Rawson Marshall Thurber, as well as stars Ben Stiller and Vince Vaughn. On the surface, it appears to offer another example of the "cast and crew" commentaries found on many studio releases. Weber suggests that, although the "Frat Pack" movies often indulge in coarse humor, the star images constructed for these performers is "largely grounded on [each] being a regular Joe, an unpretentious, straight-shooting class clown." Audiences are encouraged to root for the protagonists – and support these artists' films – in part due to this apparently "authentic earnestness." As Weber elaborates, "we have the sense that these guys are [truly] eager to make us laugh, ostensibly not for the money they will make but for the sheer joy those guffaws can bring to our lives" (87). These attributes have been frequently reiterated in press releases, interviews, promotional materials, and so on.

By contrast, in the *Dodgeball* commentary, Vaughn is quickly revealed to be completely self-obsessed, frequently noting that the film would be improved by his character's presence during any short gaps in which he is off-screen. He also smokes, chomps potato chips noisily, and has several beers throughout the recording – prompting several guarded comments from the other participants that his drinking had caused problems during the film's production. Stiller similarly appears to be a troublesome actor, albeit in this case a somewhat deluded prima donna. He arrives late to the recording, and frequently butts heads with Thurber. After Stiller claims that Vaughn had referred to Thurber as "a piece of shit director," the latter figure gets upset and prematurely exits the studio. Stiller and Vaughn continue for a few more minutes, until Stiller is called by his

assistant, and both remaining participants decide to leave. The audio producers are heard pleading with the stars to stay, and the microphone continues to pick up their conversation as they debate how to proceed. Eventually, one of them suggests filling in the rest of the time from another Ben Stiller film, and the remainder of the track – more than forty minutes – features Peter and Bobby Farrelly's directors' commentary taken from the DVD of *There's Something About Mary* (1998). This obviously has no relationship to the events on-screen and simply cuts out when *Dodgeball* concludes.

The performative interplay between the real and the projected persona is also explored in the commentary track for the independent movie *Incident at Loch Ness*, which essentially operates as a hoax *within* a hoax. The film depicts director Werner Herzog attempting to make a documentary entitled *Enigma of Loch Ness*, which aims to explore and debunk the legend of the Loch Ness Monster. These efforts are hindered, however, by his producer Zak Penn – a Hollywood screenwriter who desires credibility by working with Herzog, but also wishes to make the film a commercial success. Penn increasingly starts plotting manufactured sequences behind Herzog's back, including hiring an "improv" actor to pose as a cryptozoologist and a buxom actress to portray the role of a sonar operator, as well as commissioning a model of the Monster in order to fabricate a "sighting." During filming on the Loch, however, the filmmakers' boat is attacked by a mysterious entity, which results in the death of two crew members.

Incident at Loch Ness is ultimately a mock-documentary (written and directed by Penn) that explores these fictional events. It is explained that much of the "on-set" and "behind-the-scenes" footage was taken from a second camera crew (led by the cinematographer John Bailey) who, in the narrative world of the film, were shooting footage for a documentary on Herzog's career, identified as *Herzog in Wonderland*. There are also retrospective interviews with figures

such as Herzog and Penn, again supposedly shot by Bailey, in which they give their own take on what went wrong with the production – with Penn, in particular, attempting to sidestep a lot of the blame. The film also uses other elements such as home video footage of "witnesses" and apparent excerpts from newscasts in order to make the events appear as authentic as possible.[6] These "truth claims" are emphasized by the adoption of the documentary form, and the presence of well-known figures using their real names and appearing in believable contexts: for instance, Herzog really is a renowned film director who has made several documentaries on off-beat subjects, Bailey is actually a cinematographer, and so on. Zak Penn, too, plays "himself." In reality, he does have several notable script credits to his name, such as *Behind Enemy Lines* (2001), which are namechecked in the film. However, Penn has also chosen to present this fictionalized version of himself as a deluded narcissist who desires the power that comes from graduating from writer to producer – another version of the trope also played with in the *Dodgeball* commentary. Penn's decisions over the course of the filming are seen as extremely dubious and could, as noted, potentially even fall into the realms of the criminally negligent.

Although all of the events depicted in *Incident at Loch Ness* are untrue, the film operates as a "hoax" because, in Dyer's terms, the fabrication is "concealed" and "not [overtly] textually signaled" (*Pastiche* 24). Audiences are certainly invited to question whether the crew really did have an encounter with the Monster or whether it was just another of Penn's schemes that backfired, but are not given many cues to doubt whether Herzog was actually making a documentary on that subject, whether two people really died, or whether the footage supposedly taken from *Herzog in Wonderland* was genuine. Penn has noted that, following the release of the film in theaters, he actually "received a significant amount of criticism […from viewers] unable to perceive that he was playing a role, […assuming] that he was indeed the Philistine Hollywood

producer whose degraded values threatened the purity of Herzog's art" (Rugg 188n11). The DVD, and particularly the commentary, serves to perpetuate this hoax further.

The included track (Penn et al., "*Incident*") begins with Zak Penn and Werner Herzog continuing to treat the events of the film as real. As such, there is immediately a frosty atmosphere between the two, with Penn mentioning ongoing "legal problems," and Herzog suggesting he is only there because the commentary is "one of the rituals of DVD" and that he is trying "to be a good sport." Although the first few minutes play out in a fairly routine way, with each participant responding to the material on-screen, it slowly transpires (within the diegetic "reality" presented by the track) that this is not just a freewheeling chat and that ground rules had been set ahead of recording. Following a tense aside from Herzog, Penn appears to talk to a member of the commentary production team called Lucas, asking "can we cut this?" and then notes: "Werner, part of our legal agreement is that you weren't going to talk about this stuff, that you weren't going to bring it up again." Herzog insists that they air this disagreement in the commentary, but Penn refuses and accuses him of character assassination. Just ahead of the fifteen minute mark, Herzog announces that he will no longer participate and that they will "sort it out in court." The producer advises Penn to keep going alone, but he quickly decides to cut.

The commentary resumes after several seconds of dead air. Penn states that they have started recording again a week later, and that he has brought Jana Ausberger – again, a real person who actually has a co-producer credit on the film – into the booth to finish the commentary with him. Tension quickly arises, however, as Penn still wishes to control the content of the track in order to paint himself in the best possible light. When Ausberger draws attention to the fake Nessie that was commissioned, he is evasive, and then reproaches her several times about further comments:

> Ausberger: How many subjects do you not want me to talk about?
>
> Penn: I want you to talk about how well the movie went, and how, um…
>
> Ausberger: Well, it didn't go that well. I mean, two people died.
>
> Penn: Okay, look. There's just no point in doing a commentary where everyone's just going to sit and criticize the movie… (Penn et al., "*Incident*").

After further squabbling, Penn attempts to wrap up the recording as if it were an amiable and planned conclusion. There is further dead air and the track resumes again, with Penn claiming that Jana had done "a fantastic job," but that he wanted to ensure the commentary was full of different voices. He then introduces Marty Signore, another member of the production team, but the track is destabilized anew as Signore complains that he has not been paid and questions whether Penn will offer compensation to the estates of the dead crew members. The commentary restarts further times, with Penn introducing an "expert in cinema," who reveals himself to know nothing about the production (and then upsets Penn by identifying Herzog as the "hero"). This figure is then replaced by Penn's estranged wife, who is angered at being ambushed to appear and say positive things. In desperation, Penn eventually tries to claim that he is getting the signal from the production team to wrap things up, and bows out of the track with over thirty minutes of the film remaining. There is a brief follow-up from a man who identifies himself as Kurt Campbell, who states that he was hired by Fox Home Entertainment, the DVD distributor, to "give a professional commentary." However, he admits that he has not seen the film ahead of the recording, and after several minutes of incorrectly guessing the context of what he is watching, he decides that it is

"not a professional assignment" and also leaves the recording booth. The remainder of the film plays out with no further commentary (Penn et al., "*Incident*").

The perceived appeal of commentaries featuring production personnel – relative to the academic track – is the "imagined co-watching, or 'para-watching'" of the film with the actual director and/or stars (Hills 53). This sense of closeness, inferred in part by the "real-time" progression of the movie as the commentary unfolds, gives the impression that one is receiving an unfiltered recording of the participants, and that one may be "let in on industry 'secrets'" (Klinger 73). Barbara Klinger positions this as a "rhetoric of intimacy" (89) – an unstable process which tries to obscure the amount of mediation that goes into creating something that appears at face value as spontaneous and genuine. This term evokes Dyer's concept of the "rhetoric of authenticity" underpinning stardom, in which the truth of the star's "real" personality is usually perceived to be "behind or beneath the surface." However, Dyer argues that "authenticity is often *established* or *constructed* in media texts by the use of markers that [appear to] indicate lack of control, lack of premeditation and privacy" ("A Star is Born" 141, my emphasis). The rhetoric of the *Dodgeball* and *Incident at Loch Ness* commentaries, then, is that we are truly getting to see "beneath the surface," and that the unpleasant "reality" of the participants is being laid bare. As Dyer suggests, a scandalous text of this type can appear so convincing in part because it exposes the falsehood of the previous rhetoric ("A Star is Born" 140-141) – i.e. the apparent capturing of Stiller, Vaughn, and Penn's vanity and greed proves their usual projected "earnestness" to be fake.

As with the *Blood Simple* disc, there is no overt indication on the packaging or in the DVD menus for either *Incident at Loch Ness* and *Dodgeball* that these are anything other than regular commentaries, and thus there is no clear textual explanation for the behavior that unfolds. The tracks also attempt to maintain a sense of verisimilitude – even in the most unruly moments – to

avoid clearly acknowledging the comedic and fictional intent. The participants stumble over their words, make mistakes, and often bash into the microphone or make other incidental noises when they decide to prematurely exit. It is also inferred that the raw audio of the recording session has been accidentally – or maliciously, given the exasperation of the audio engineers in both commentaries – included on the disc. This offers a potential explanation as to why the commentaries are so different to most DVDs, where it is usually expected that the track will have been through extensive post-production, editing, and legal vetting. By incorporating content usually lacking from most commentaries, these hoaxes attempt to imply – at least temporarily – that the viewer has stumbled into something that the studios do not want us to see.[7] All of the other materials accessible via the "Special Features" menus on the (double-sided) *Incident at Loch Ness* DVD maintain the hoax that the film is a true documentary. While the *Dodgeball* disc does have other extras that are more in line with what one expects to find on a "special edition" – deleted scenes, gag reel, and so on – one could view these as examples of the usual studio "puff pieces" (to return to Parker and Parker's description) when compared against the seeming "revelations" about the stars in the commentary.

The discs for both films do ultimately contain additional commentary tracks that reveal (overtly in the case of *Loch Ness*, and implicitly in the case of *Dodgeball*) the hoaxes perpetrated by the above material. However, these are hidden as "Easter eggs" – a term for extra features that are not clearly marked on the DVD menu (nor usually in publicity and/or packaging materials), and which are only accessible by performing specific (and often seemingly counterintuitive) button presses on the DVD remote. These serve as correctives to the material in the hoax commentaries. In the hidden tracks on the *Loch Ness* disc, Penn insists several times that he would never truly act like his movie persona in real life (Penn et al., "Easter Egg Commentary #1"; Penn and Herzog).

In the hoax *Dodgeball* track, Ben Stiller gets angry when a joke is made about his relative shortness compared to Vince Vaughn (Vaughn et al.). A similar gag is made in the hidden “real” commentary featuring the participants, and Stiller takes the jibe in good humor (Stiller et al.). Similarly, there is a suggestion of ill-feeling between Stiller and Thurber in the hoax track, whereas in another hidden commentary, the director emphasizes just how much he respects Stiller (Thurber).

Even if these Easter eggs are not found, it must be assumed that the audience’s eventual discovery of the hoax is the desired outcome of the experience – the participants are not, after all, attempting to permanently sabotage their careers. Within the *Dodgeball* track, the decision to fill the remaining time with the *There’s Something About Mary* commentary strains credibility too far, even if the apparent desperation of the production team heard over the microphones is rather convincingly played (Vaughn et al.). The collective star personas of the “Frat Pack” further encourage a degree of skepticism about the text’s veracity from the outset: a viewing position that one might not immediately apply to, say, Mickey Rooney’s appearance on the *Twilight Zone* disc. Prior to the DVD’s release, Stiller and Vaughn had already cultivated an association with an ironic, media-literate form of comedy, which included the use of parody and even moments of shock humor. Indeed, the commentary is playing over footage from *Dodgeball*, which begins with a ridiculously over-the-top advertisement for the gym owned by Stiller’s character, White Goodman, satirizing – rather than seemingly endorsing – the hyper-masculinity and sexism associated with this culture. While the commentary does not signal its humorous intent as overtly as the film itself, the juxtaposition of this new soundtrack over the movie’s images help to remind viewers that the actors are well-known for playing with our expectations. Just as *Blood Simple*’s commentary stealthily promotes the auterist control of the Coens, the *Dodgeball* hoax re-authenticates the earnestness of the “Frat Pack” team (after initially threatening to tarnish it). The same is true of

the *Incident at Loch Ness* track, where the ultimate realization of the joke reveals Penn's achievements in the film as its writer/director/performer, as well as in the creation of the accompanying DVD experience. To paraphrase Weber's earlier assertion, it suggests that these stars are *so* unpretentious and eager to make us laugh that they are willing to present such unflattering representations of their private selves for the sake of creating additional comedy.

Jonathan Gray argues that DVD special features teach "a significant amount of production literacy, familiarizing audiences with the vocabulary of pickups, foley work, mime passes, […and so on]" ("Bonus Material" 247). The above hoaxes provide, at least to some extent, an insight into the "vocabulary" of the audio commentary itself. Although fictionalized and heightened, these materials acknowledge the usually uncredited labor that goes into the production – for instance, by highlighting the presence of audio engineers, whose interjections would normally be removed. As noted above, the "roughness" of these tracks reiterates that most commentaries go through a process of vetting and re-editing, and are not simply spontaneous "real-time" recordings. One also gets a sense of the unwritten "rules" of the DVD commentary simply by seeing so many of the usual "clichés" pastiched within these hoax versions. For example, critics have complained about commentators committing offenses such as simply describing or narrating (rather than analyzing) what is happening on screen (Doherty 79), leaving large gaps of silence between comments (Gore and Salamoff 18; Balcerzak 21), and showing little knowledge (or recollection) of the film under discussion (Barlow 80). All of these infractions are present across the different commentary tracks outlined above. This can support the validity of the hoax by reproducing the verisimilitude of a "bad" track, but also – when the deception is revealed – it serves to emphasize the self-awareness of the creators and their apparent mastery over the DVD format.[8]

The suggestion that some commentaries may have ambiguous value for mainstream audiences is thus built into many of these hoaxes, not least because their very presence consigns the more substantial, analytical features to hidden areas of the disc – where they only likely to receive the attention of the most dedicated viewers – or in some cases just take their place entirely. Kenneth Loring on *Blood Simple*, and the clueless "expert" added to salvage the *Incident at Loch Ness* track, offer a rather damning indictment of the scholarly commentary, in which unconvincing facts and suspect interpretations of the film are dryly delivered to the viewer with a condescending sense of authority. The spiky atmospheres in the *Dodgeball* and *Loch Ness* recordings are juxtaposed against the vapidity of most commentaries featuring Hollywood personnel, where – despite the illusion of intimacy – there is usually still a bland promotional gloss applied. The seeming lack of effort displayed by figures like Vaughn and Stiller in the hoax *Dodgeball* track also furthers the idea that the whole process is ultimately rather meaningless. Indeed, when the audio engineers decide to fill the remaining dead air with the commentary from *There's Something About Mary*, there is a suggestion that they will get away with it because "nobody listens to these commentaries anyway" (Vaughn et al.). Although intended as a joke – and one that only works if the viewer does persevere this far through the track – such a comment offers a rather bleak satire on the state of the home video industry, and the recurrent claims of "added value" offered by the DVD format.

With the slow decline of physical media over the last decade, fewer special edition releases are being produced for mass consumption and distribution. Extras-laden releases are once again becoming the primary domain of "boutique" media distributors, such as Criterion and Arrow Video, reinvigorating subcultural niches akin to the earlier laserdisc era (Parker and Parker 45; McKenna 44-45). Although the promise of a multitude of special features was once seen to be a

major selling point, there remained a question about just how much non-cinephiles truly engaged with this content, echoing the humorous statement made by the audio engineers in the *Dodgeball* hoax commentary. One Fox executive "admitted that most consumers only spent ten or fifteen minutes exploring the many hours" of extras, even though – in the emergent years of the format – it was perceived that "the list of features on the box (the more the better) somehow justified their purchase" (Trope 168). Bernard further notes that the rise of Internet-based video-on-demand services has led to "extra features such as [the] director's commentary [being dropped] in favor of the convenience of instantly streaming the film. When streamed online, the primary cinematic text shrugs off [the] encrusted extra text material" (190).[9] The hoax commentary has become a casualty of this trend as well: with drastically reduced budgets for home video releases in recent years, such frivolous (and potentially divisive) extras have generally not been prioritized. The underlying textual criticism of the audio commentary found in these tracks nonetheless demonstrates a suggestive prescience of the growing "apathy" expressed by casual viewers toward such forms (Gray, *Show Sold Separately* 229n12; see also Brereton and O'Connor 149; Dean 120).

This is not to suggest, however, that the hoax commentaries are particularly anarchic or destructive in their aims. There are some teasing aspects about the frustrations of "bad" tracks, but these texts do not conclude that *all* extra features are entirely or equally worthless – as explicitly indicated by the hidden materials included on certain discs where the participants happily fall back into the rhythms of a "conventional" commentary. In each case, the decision to create the hoax appears to have come from the film's creative team, rather than the distributor. While this does speak to an industry at one point more concerned with marketing the mere presence of extra features than always focusing upon the quality of said features (or even delivering exactly what is promised on the item's packaging), the hoaxes are not intending to sabotage either the profitability

of the specific release or the wider DVD format. Furthermore, rather than aiming to truly shock with the bizarre and/or damaging portrayals of the participants, there is always an attempt to guide the consumer toward a realization of the hoax at some point before the viewing experience concludes. The character of Kenneth Loring put forward by the Coens, and the personas temporarily adopted by the participants of the *Dodgeball* and *Loch Ness* tracks, are all designed to (eventually) encourage viewers to reflect on the diverse creative skills of the tracks' authors. As a result, then, the DVD commentary hoax is a more conservative form than initial appearances suggest. The illusion of rebellion ultimately gives way to a textual reaffirmation of the movie, its creators, and the broader corporate interests that surround it.

The success of these tracks as pure entertainment is also open for debate. While there often seems to be an appreciation of the underlying *concept* of the hoax, the actual experience of sitting through them has been viewed rather negatively in contemporary DVD reviews. One issue with the commentary track is its feature length and – even though *Dodgeball* and *Incident at Loch Ness* cut the experience short by having the participants leave early – there is a recurring sense from critics that the premise is being stretched too thin (see, for instance, Tyner; Handlen et al.). As Glenn Erickson suggests in his evaluation of the *Blood Simple* DVD, there is a danger that the hoax track could appear "contemptuous of its audience." Equally, he expresses hope that it does not "alienate viewers who might expect a real discourse on the making of the movie" (Erickson), implying that – for all of the underlying satirical intent – it has the potential to simply shortchange those who were looking forward to a conventional analysis.

It is revealing that, in 2016, Criterion re-issued *Blood Simple* on DVD and Blu-ray, reflecting the film's growing status within cinephile culture. Although Criterion have licensed preexisting DVD extras for a number of their other releases, the hoax commentary track – which,

as noted, partially mocks the format of scholarly Criterion commentaries – is conspicuously absent. (The Mortimer Young video introduction is also not included.) Instead, there are a number of newly-produced "serious" video extras that deconstruct *Blood Simple* and its impact. As Klinger notes, successive special editions […with] shifting supplemental materials" mean that the meaning of the included feature "becomes unstable", raising the question of "which [version] is the authentic film" (72). Whereas the previous DVD had jokingly positioned *Blood Simple* as a flawed work that was being oversold by a no-name distributor, the release of a Criterion edition suggests "cultural legitimacy" (Carroll 25), delivering a package in which claims of the film's importance are now seen as authoritative. The positioning of the filmmakers as legitimate, straightforward auteurs is undoubtedly desirable for Criterion's brand (and indeed for the Coens themselves), but a comparison against the earlier disc highlights just how much the creation of a home video product, and the attachment or omission of specific extra features, has the capacity to "influence reception" of the main feature (Klinger 19).

The hoax commentaries will likely fall further from popular memory as new technologies prioritize other aspects of the movie-watching experience, and physical media moves into obsolescence. It remains to be seen whether studios will undertake efforts to preserve and repurpose them, or if they will become a piece of ephemera that once happened to be directly attached to the source movie on a plastic disc. Regardless, these texts offer a valuable time capsule for a specific moment in home video production, reiterating the flexibility and creativity involved in the production of supplemental material at the height of the DVD craze. While the hoax unruly extra does not negate the celebration and promotion of auteurism perceived in many "conventional" special features, it does playfully expose some of the medium's excesses, and

demonstrates a greater complexity in the way that filmmakers choose to annotate and canonize their work.

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[1] Although, as Aaron Barlow suggests, an audio commentary may be "cheap to create" relative to a more substantial video-based extra (118), such materials can nonetheless have substantial costs associated with them. Even an academic track has traditionally involved a fee for the participant, however small (see, for instance, Gordon 289-290), while the inclusion of Hollywood personnel began to push budgets even further: in 2002, Sam Andrews reported that some American "directors are demanding about $10,000 for a DVD-Video commentary […while Arnold] Schwarzenegger is said to have charged $75,000 for his audio track on *Total Recall* [1990; DVD 2001]" (72). Furthermore, as Parker and Parker note:

> In many cases, commentary tracks give the impression that the process consists of little more than putting directors in a sound booth, running the film, and letting them talk. This is hardly the case. Assembling a good commentary track, whether it includes one speaker or multiple participants, requires artful [and, again, often pricey] manipulation. With few

exceptions, what one hears in a good commentary has been carefully assembled and thoroughly edited (34).

It is nonetheless possible for some aspects of a commentary track to be completed as a "labor of love," with participants donating their time (or getting involved for a reduced fee), but this has tended to be limited to independent rather than studio productions. For instance, the DVD release of the low-budget mock-documentary *Winners Tape All: The Henderson Brothers Story* (2016), continues the fictional world of the movie by including a hoax commentary featuring Michael Henderson, one of the figures supposedly profiled in the film, but in reality played by the actor Zane Crosby (Henderson and Channell). The package also includes a "Secret Commentary" (Channell and Crosby) revealing the actual production history behind the movie. Without the support of a major distributor, the filmmakers appear to have taken more direct responsibility in creating and compiling the discs' extras in order to keep costs low. The "Secret Commentary" even includes audio at the beginning – which would likely have been edited out of a wider retail release – in which the movie's director notes that the participants should hold off on speaking until after the logos, so that he (personally) will have an easier job syncing the track with the rest of the film.

[2] This was further emphasized by other contemporary extratextual materials designed to establish Loring's existence – most notably, the publication of an apparent "interview" with him about the *Blood Simple* release on the website *DVD Talk* (Kleinman).

[3] The Brothers have subsequently relented, producing their first commentary (with star Billy Bob Thornton) for the DVD release of their feature *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001). They have also

appeared in more traditional interviews and documentary extras, including participating in new special features for the Criterion Collection reissue of *Blood Simple* on DVD and Blu-ray in 2016.

[4] It is nonetheless a testament to the success of the DVD format that parodies of the form quickly intensified. In 2003, a book was published entitled *Speak, Commentary* (Alexander and Bissell): a collection of chapters purporting to be transcriptions of DVD commentaries by surprising individuals, such as Noam Chomsky on *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), and (then-) Vice President Dick Cheney on *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* (1999). The following year, the British television network ITV commissioned *Director's Commentary* (2004), a show in which comedian Rob Brydon plays the fictional media figure Peter de Lane, commenting over old TV shows (such as *Bonanza* [1959-1973] and Flambards [1979]), which he supposedly directed. Although this has some parallels with Loring's *Blood Simple* track, the show would arguably not be viewed as a hoax as it was widely promoted as a comedy series.

[5] Some examples include Jason Mewes getting drunk in the laserdisc commentary for Kevin Smith's *Clerks* (1994) and an entire group of participants becoming inebriated in a commentary for *Cannibal! The Musical* (1993). Director Cameron Crowe included his mother in a track for his film *Almost Famous* (2000), while the commentary track for Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) features interns who worked on the film. Perhaps most infamously, one of the commentaries for *The Rules of Attraction* (2002) features prop comedian Carrot Top, who does not appear in the film, and admits that he has not seen it before arriving in the recording booth. For more outlandish examples, see Handlen et al.

[6] Penn has also revealed that they created fake press releases during production, with several news outlets filing articles claiming that Herzog really was filming a Loch Ness documentary. Some of

these publications – along with one fabricated one – are actually shown on film to provide extra veracity (Penn and Herzog).

[7] The degree to which such tracks have truly succeeded in duping people for an extended period of time remains open to question, although there are some examples of viewers admitting that they were "fooled" (see, for instance, Sullivan).

[8] Indeed, on one of the hidden "real" *Loch Ness* tracks, the participants follow any lull in conversation with the ironic claim that it had constituted one of the nine "awkward pauses" that had been planned in advance – acknowledging that they are committing one of the apparent "sins" of the audio commentary and excusing it with humor (Penn et al., "Easter Egg Commentary #1").

[9] A few "boutique" physical media companies, such as the aforementioned Criterion and Arrow Video, have also developed their own streaming services which continue to place an emphasis on the availability of (mostly scholarly) bonus features, but this has not been echoed by many other, more "mainstream"-focused outlets. Netflix did briefly experiment with the offering of audio commentaries for the initial season of *House of Cards* (2013-2018), which could be toggled on or off in the streaming menu (Willmore). However, it has not really followed up on this approach, with additional content now tending towards separate "behind-the-scenes" shows, such as *Beyond Stranger Things* (2017) and *Making The Witcher* (2020-), with even these usually reserved for only their highest-profile productions. A number of other companies, particularly television studios, have experimented with the production of audio or video podcasts, usually available for download or uploaded to sites such as *YouTube*. Such materials – when prioritized at all – are therefore becoming increasingly distanced from the main text, relative to the DVD era, "in which the promotion of a media product is collapsed into the product itself" (Brookey and Westerfelhaus, "Hiding Homoeroticism" 23).