

CASE STUDY: CORPORATE AUTHORSHIP – INDUSTRIAL LIGHT AND MAGIC (ILM)

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The beauty of ILM is that it has done so many productions, and so many of them have been groundbreaking, that there is a technological culture there that is beyond the individuals who made those advancements.

(James Cameron, 1999)

Andrew Darley argues that the idea of the director-as-author working within a commercially driven film industry is becoming increasingly untenable to the extent that “quite simply it is no longer an issue” (2000: 141). Moreover, he suggests that cultural production in an age of digital visual culture becomes “first and foremost a technical problem” in which “technique, technicians and technology itself take command” (2000: 141). Within this context, it is significant that a set of company names such as ‘Industrial Light and Magic’ (ILM), ‘Disney’ and ‘PIXAR’ now operate as an index of artistic style alongside or in front of individual creative agency. So while on the one hand such names do not necessarily displace the director (directors such as George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, James Cameron, Ron Howard and Robert Zemeckis all regularly collaborate with ILM while retaining a distinct creative identity, and the name of PIXAR is virtually synonymous with John Lasseter), on the other hand they now tend to “vie with them as a way of accounting for or measuring creative worth within the popular aesthetic imagination” (Darley 2000: 137).

One implication of this situation is not only that authorial agency might usefully be located with creative personnel other than the director, but that it becomes possible, even desirable, to identify multiple authorial agencies within a film. Moreover, it opens up the possibility not only of collective or collaborative authorship but also that of *institutional or corporate authorship*. Indeed, if we think of recent Hollywood films such as, *The Abyss* (1989), *Terminator 2* (1991), *Forest Gump* (1995), *Titanic* (1997), *Men in Black* (1997), *Mercury Rising* (1998), *The Perfect Storm* (2000), *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), and *Minority Report* (2002), as well as the entire *Star Wars* and *Jurassic Park* series, then some of their most important visual and stylistic features which would, under the classic model of auteurism, be ascribed to their respective directors can be more plausibly traced to the work of other collaborators, and in particular ‘Industrial Light and Magic’.

Established by George Lucas to develop the visual effects for *Star Wars* (1977), ILM has since played a pioneering role in the creation of modern special effects techniques. And while they continue to develop and utilise the full range of those techniques, it is nevertheless in the field of digital effects that ILM now stands as emblematic of the technological thrill of the contemporary blockbuster. For not only is it now impossible to watch a mainstream film which does not employ a considerable array of *invisible* digital effects, but Hollywood’s chief commodity – the blockbuster – is significantly driven by the desire to *make visible* or showcase precisely the current capabilities of visual effects technology and techniques. It is in this respect that ILM, as perhaps the most influential visual effects company, can be considered to be more important than any single individual in determining and advancing the visual and narrative parameters of contemporary cinema. Moreover, these insights prompt analysis of ILM as a corporate author insofar as visual effects, and in particular digital imaging techniques are both *ubiquitous* (characteristic of Hollywood’s standard production and post-production processes and thus have a significant effect on contemporary film style) and *unique* (the technological or aesthetic specificity of particular effects sequences).

Applied to *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001) this involves on the one hand consideration of the function of visual effects in the narrative, and on the other, attention to the creative process and individual practices implicated in creating its spectacular imagery, and with it reconsideration of a range of elements that we have, up to now, willingly attributed to the director. Thus, despite the

considerable critical attention devoted to the working relationship between Steven Spielberg (the film's director) and Stanley Kubrick (who bequeathed Spielberg the project) and how this is manifested in the film's images and themes, the author of *A.I.* might credibly be considered to be ILM. For while a number of Spielbergian themes are detectable – particularly the notion of innocence played out through the 'child in peril' scenario – the film's futuristic tale is rendered possible and plausible by the specialised technical resources and creative skills represented by the corporate brand name ILM. Indeed, both the narrative and visual design of the entire second half of the film are predicated on the generation of believable synthetic characters and locations. In this way, ILM can be seen as a credible authorial voice within *A.I.* just insofar as it operates both as *a precondition to the film's realisation in the first instance and as a corporate agency through which key enunciative and expressive techniques are executed and cohere.*

These identifying characteristics of ILM's authorship can be explored in relation to the section of *A.I.* which takes place in 'Rouge City'. Taking considerable influence from Chris Baker's conceptual illustrations, the design and creation of Rouge City necessitated the collaboration of a wide range of ILM's creative and technical staff from the film's Senior Visual Effects Supervisor, Dennis Muren, to model makers, animators, art directors and so on. Indeed, the images of Rouge City, like the aerial and underwater sequences of a half-submerged New York that follow it, are comprised from a mix of visual effects techniques including a huge set, scale models, miniatures, blue-screen, and CGI.

In this respect, figure 4.3 is exemplary of both *A.I.*'s hybrid imagery and ILM's central role within the film's creative processes. For although at the level of the film's narrative it is visually symbolic of Spielberg's preoccupation with 'the imperilled child', at a stylistic level it reveals ILM's fundamental role in creating the technologically dense images that frame its narrative.

For, this is a sophisticated composite image which blends live-action footage with a range of visual effects. Gigolo Joe (Jude Law) and David (Haley Joel Osment), as well as the extras heading towards the 'Tails' building, are real actors shot on a sound stage comprised of the fountain behind Joe and David, the platform they are standing on, and the façades of the buildings in the background. However, the figure dancing above the entrance to 'Tails' is entirely synthetic, generated by computer animators. Moreover, the circular high-rise building behind 'Tails' as well as the neon signs advertising various products are computer generated and added to the scene in post-production. Likewise, while much of the complex lighting set-up for this shot was done on set, the architectural detail of Rouge City was enhanced through post-production CGI lighting techniques. As such, it is impossible not only to disentangle the thematic structure of the film from its stylistic composition, but to disentangle ILM from the technical and artistic processes which facilitated the creation of that composition.

It is in this sense, then, that 'Industrial Light and Magic' stands not merely as the name of a company which houses a set of material resources and employs certain individuals with specific technical and creative skills, but as marker of visual and stylistic imperatives in both individual films and across a series of films. As such, ILM can be seen as a corporate author precisely to the extent that its company name also acts as *a sign which organises and executes highly specialised and distinctive forms of industrial aesthetic practice within cinema beyond the scope of any one of the individuals it employs.*

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