

Auteur Theory: An Interpretation of Cinematic Discourse

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Abstract – The ideas developed in this paper bring out an informative relevance of Auteur Theory, its origin and development in the cinematic progression of acceptance and rejection, deconstructing the age-old notion of established parameters. Here, it is stated how the role of director is significant, likened to a writer or painter, who not only understands the prevalent consciousness of the taste but at the same time recreate a logical, philosophical and cinematic discourse with the camera which enters into the cinematic representation of characters, situations and symbolism.

Key Words: Auteurism, Auteur Theory, Director, the Camera-Pen, Criticism and Challenges

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INTRODUCTION

Auteurism, so-called movement or theory in film study came into scene in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Auteur theory and criticism have exerted a considerable impact on cinema and cinematic discourse, engaging and inviting an attention of the audience and cinema critics to create an identity and significance of an auteur. True to say, this theory seems to revolve around the existential humanism of Satre as Bazin in his essays titled 'Ontology of the Photographic Image' and 'Myth of Total Cinema' elucidates individually rooted value system centering his vocabulary like 'freedom', 'fate', and 'authenticity'. Like Satre's dictum 'existentialism precedes essence' Basin conveys 'cinema's existence precedes its essence.' (Naremore, 1998, p.25)

DEVELOPMENT & TENETS

Alexandre Astruc, novelist and filmmaker discussed the tenets of auteurism in his 1948 essay titled 'Birth of a New Avant-Garde: The Camera-Pen' and showed glimpses of how cinema is an art of expression, which can be likened to painting or the novel. The 'camera-pen' symbolism further directed how 'the lenses of camera' could work as 'pen' and how as a powerful discourse of human world could be presented in the society. Like literary genres, cinema mirrors 'life in the society' based on human and nature relationship, mystifying and demystifying ways of living. With this the director of a film was repositioned and redefined to state that he is not merely a presenter of a novel, story or screenplay, but a creative artist with intellect and ability to make cinema a discourse and dialogue.

Francois Truffaut was against the old aged prevalent ways of French Cinema and the same he pointed out in his 1954 famous essay 'A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema', published in Cahiers du cinema. What was considered the best or classic was criticised by him. In his seminal book 'Film Theory: An Introduction', Robert Stam aptly writes:

Truffaut derided the tradition of quality as a stuffy, academic, screenwriters' cinema, while lauding the more vital American popular maverick cinema of Nicholas Ray, Robert Aldrich, and Orson Welles. The tradition of quality, for Truffaut, reduced filmmaking to the mere translation of a pre-existing screenplay, when it should be seen as an open-ended adventure in creative mise-en-scene. Although French cinema prided itself on being "anti-bourgeois," Truffaut taunted it was ultimately made "by the bourgeois for the bourgeois," the work of litterateurs who despised and underestimated the cinema. It is difficult to overstate the provocative nature of Truffaut's intervention, and especially his support for American cinema in the era of Sartrean "engagement" and the left's domination of French culture, when the US, for French intellectuals, evoked McCarthyism and the cold war, and when "Hollywood" evoked the powerful dream factory that had destroyed grand talents like von Stroheim and Murnau. (Robert Stam, 2000, p.84)

Truffaut disseminated that new wave of cinema would bring out the personality of an auteur, the director who devised 'Camera-Pen', which highlighted 'a recognizable stylistic and thematic personality' of the director. Here in this discussion, we are directed to deconstructive reading of

Derrida, stating binary of established notion of French cinema and emerging creative talent of newly entered directors in the film industry. In this sense, Truffaut wanted to topple the hegemony of French cinema, which hitherto blocked the talents of new directors. Cinema takes a different shape in the hands of director who involves his mental and physical efforts, using his skills of 'animal spirit'. From this perspective, study of auteur theory becomes a compulsion to identify the due credit of cinematic view of a screenplay. Andrew Sarris finely observes, "Once the principle of directorial continuity is accepted even in Hollywood, films can never look the same again." (Sarris, 1973, p.37)

The first issue of *Cahiers du Cinema* published in 1951 paved the remarkable way for auteurism. The Cahiers critics argued that cinema is no more without a director as he is an identity and genius for the beauty of cinema and *mis-en-scene*. According to them, creative directors design 'the interior of life of sentiments'(Self) In a 1957 article, 'La Politique des auteurs', Bazin conceptualized auteurism as "choosing in the artistic creation the personal factor as a criterion of reference, and then postulating its permanence and even its progress from one work to the next." The difference between *metteurs-en-scene* and *mise-en-scene* was shown by the auteur critics, stating that the former 'adhered to the dominant conventions and to the scripts given them and latter so-called auteurs used *mise-en-scene* as part of self-expression.' (Stam, Robert, 2000, p. 85)

Auteurism marked its presence in film criticism and theory in the 1950s, though not a new one in a way, and the status of director elevated to writers and painters. Just like writers play with words and painters with their brush and colours, directors play with their camera what to show and what not to show, how to show, where to show and who to show. The cinematic linking of events leads to deeper digging of socio-ethno and socio-political amalgamation with human weaknesses and bravery. Such a notion and arguments of identity and credit in the process of filmmaking, it transcends the industry as a business and entertainment. In view of Brakhage, Cinema is an adventure in perception, where the director can apply transgressive techniques – overexposure, improvised natural filters, spitting on the lens – to provoke a trans perspectival vision of the world. (Brakhage, Stam, 1963)

Auteurism, a new wave of filmmaking, bridged the gap between traditionally approved standard of presentation and low art and genres. Traditional established filmmakers had established their monopoly, not giving any scope to new, young and creative directors who wanted to make their talent of cinema in their own way. Auteur criticism opened a new perspective and debate in filmmaking process, stating who is to be given the prestige of auteur.

Andrew Sarris introduced auteurism to the United States as 'like Paris, New York had a strong tradition of cine-clubs, repertory theatres, and film journals such as *Film Culture*' (Stam, Robert. 2000, p. 89) His 'Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962' played an important role to mark the significance of auteur theory as it paved a wave of discussion. His study in American cinema had brought out a thorough debate of how cinema could be understood and interpreted and who was responsible for the making of cinema. Sarris mentions, 'A meaningful style unites the "what" and the "how" into a "personal statement" where the director takes risks and struggles against standardization.' (Sarris, Andrew, 1968, p.66) He studied how French critics had different notion for creative expression stating 'the way a film looks and moves should have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels.' (ibid., p.66) With his critic and broad knowledge of cinema, Sarris established superiority of American cinema. To mark an auteur, he formulated three dimensions of a filmmaker: 1. Technical competence; 2. Distinguishable personality; and 3. Interior meaning arising from tension between personality and material. Later, Pauline Kael rejected Sarris's three criteria in her article "Circles and Square" (1963) and auteurism was criticised on more practical grounds, stating that it did not consider the 'impact of production condition on authorship.' (p. 90) It was further argued that filmmaking is not like a job of poet or painter, on the contrary it is a collaborative system. A dance performance involves dancer, choreographer, set designer, composers, musician etc. Filmmaking involves a web of networks which communicate interactively and interrogatively making a so called 'cinema' for the audience 'to instruct and to delight'. Salman Rushdie aptly points out in his *The Wizard of Oz*:

No single writer can claim that honour, not even the author of the original book. Mervyn Le Roy and Arthur Free, the producers, both have their champions. At least four directors worked on the picture, most notable Victor Fleming. . . . The truth is that this great move, in which the quarrels, sackings and near-bungles of all concerned produced what seems like pure, effortless, and somehow inevitable felicity, is as near as dammit to that will-o-the-wisp of modern critical; the authorless text. (Rushdie, 1992)

CONCLUSION

However, auteurism brought a great change in cinema studies and filmmaking process. It brought the marginalized genres into a mainstream and created an effective stage and scope for those directors who were neglected merely for not having a great tradition of hierarchy and established reputation, despite they had creative genius and a new approach for cinema. Auteurism revolutionised the conceptualization of filmmaking from the 'what' (story, theme) to the 'how' (style

and technique). This is a great contribution in cinema study.

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