

HELEN GORITSAS

Academy of Information Technology

Dialogical meeting: an encounter theory of modern cinema.

ABSTRACT

Throughout the history of film studies the problem of authorship has challenged film theorists. In a medium such as filmmaking that is so collaborative it is conceivable that both authored elements and varying levels of shared authorship in a finished work occur. Notwithstanding the array of post-structuralist arguments aimed at diminishing the author to an abstract entity, culminating in the declaration by Ronald Barthes of 'the death of the author,' film critics continue to evaluate films as the works of individuals. This article will investigate the merits of widening and extending the definition of the director as author to include a relation between a more comprehensive position defending the primacy of the human factor in a theory of art and aesthetics of cinema. An encounter theory of modern cinema will be proposed that is signified by the two words 'artistic' which refers primarily to the act of production and 'aesthetic' which refers to that of perception and valued appreciation. A dialogical enquiry founded upon careful examination and observation of the link between creative process and viewer perception; a relation of address and response to address, evading reduction through signification.

KEYWORDS

Andre Bazin
Auteur
Authorship
Dialogical
Encounter

‘Would we know the day any better if there were no night?’ - Andre Bazin

THE AUTEUR POLEMIC AND ITS LIMITATIONS

Coming into great prominence in the mid-1950s in post-war France the *Politique des Auteurs* polemic was initiated by Truffaut and members of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* group and denoted the director's personal vision as paramount. This was fuelled by the belief that filmmaking as an artistic endeavour could transcend its industrial production. Film theorist and critic Andre Bazin played an integral part in this campaign to legitimize the human factor in the creative process and to improve the status and recognition of the director as artist, providing a forum

for the auteurist canon to flourish. 'The film-maker is no longer the competitor of the painter and the playwright, he is, at last, the equal of the novelist,' Bazin declared (1971: 40). Nevertheless Bazin was greatly troubled by the increasing exaltation of the auteur as personality especially when it threatened the primacy of the work, raising the pertinent question, is not the work as important as the auteur of the work? '*Auteur*, without doubt, but of what?' (Bazin 2008: 28).

The young critics who formed the backbone of *Cahiers du cinema*, most of whom were also to become the leading directors of the French New Wave movement, romanticized the figure of the director as the sole genius creator, alone on set, before a blank sheet, exercising artistic expression in much in the same way as a novelist - independently and without the need for teamwork or collaboration. (Neupert 2002 : 49)

This was a portrayal of the director as an autonomous agent rather than an artist engaged in a genuine and mutually-constituted relationship with the cast and crew involved in the production, a position which Graham Petrie has critiqued as assuming and egotistical: '[t]he arrogance of refusing to respond to or to recognize the whole of the creative experience is more an impoverishment than an enrichment' (1970: 8). Acknowledging the danger of an aesthetic cult of personality, Bazin withdrew his support at this juncture. He sought to rein in the inordinate claims of his junior *Cahiers* colleagues, pointing out that individuals transcend society but that it is through relationships that society is also internalized within each of us so any auteurist analysis must inevitably consider pertinent social circumstances and technical conditions (Bazin 2008 : 28).

The claim that the film work bears the mark of its director grossly understates the dominance of the studio system and the impact of production conditions on authorship. Often, in practice the casting of the film's principle actors, the script and budget for the film are all outside of the immediate control of the director and therefore outside the conception of a single implied author. Unlike the more traditional arts such as painting, literature and sculpture the artistic variables in filmmaking are so numerous in the process of the film's production and the thread of artistic progress so tenuous that it is difficult to establish a one-to-one correlation between the artist and the work.

Starting in the 1960s, the American film critic Pauline Kael (1979: 676) strongly contested the publicization of the auteur model in the United States by rival critic Andrew Sarris on the grounds that it insulted the valuable contribution and artistic expression of other artists including scriptwriters, sound technicians, cinematographers, production designers,

composers and actors. Citing as Orson Welle's *Citizen Kane* (1941) as an example, Kael challenged the privileging of the auteur, arguing that the film artistically depends on the special abilities and expression of cinematographer Gregg Toland and co-writer Herman J. Mankiewicz. A positive working relationship can therefore lead to an extremely creative partnership as argued by Kael and further evidenced by many rewarding collaborations like the notable partnership between producer Val Lewton and director Jacques Tourneur for RKO. Upon critical reflection the overall consensus strongly indicates that although the auteur concept is a useful construct the romanticized figure of solitary artistic genius appears rather narrow and at best incomplete. Perhaps this is because it fails to acknowledge interdependence in the process of a film's production, negating any respect for the value of genuine collaboration. It also offers too simplistic a solution to adequately account for ambiguity in artistic creation. Artistic creation surely allows for moments of possibility free from the constraints of a controlled outcome and beyond that of an act of self-expression or the replication of a rigid, preconceived, singular view.

POST STRUCTURALISM AND AUTHORSHIP

The problem of authorship in film studies continues to challenge film scholars. In the late 1960s and early 1970s a great deal of contemporary film theory replaced the study of the auteur with the study of sign systems reinforced by cultural norms and beliefs and with studies of genres, large-scale productions and new media platforms. The rise of theoretical convergences of semiotics, Marxism, psychoanalysis, linguistics and audience studies also challenged auteur theory by shifting the emphasis from the production to the reception of films. As part of a mass media economy the auteur was reduced to a sign, a semantic label conceived as part of a structure, an implied author rather than a living human being with the capacity to exercise creative agency. These changes in scholarship were informed by Michel Foucault's deconstruction of the authorial 'function,' and Ronald Barthes' differentiation of the authored work in which Barthes argues that the origin of meaning rests within language and how language is interpreted by the reader (Sellors 2007: 268). Nevertheless despite such a period of abstraction in the critical discourse the intuitive position that a film hinges upon the film-makers involved in its creation has proven durable. This gap in the literature suggests that complimentary approaches which broaden our understanding of the human factor in the art of filmmaking and deepen our understanding of audience engagement are sorely required.

DIALOGICAL MEETING

Recognizing the creative act of filmmaking as intrinsically collaborative and in direct relation to the viewing subject, encounter theory attempts to address the absence of reception theory relating to the auteur paradigm. In an endeavour to provide a link between art practice and the role of the spectator in the creation of a work the encounter perspective considers the way in which the film-maker and the spectator are bound together in the activities of creation, communication and apprehension. It will be argued that the work should not be diminished or subordinated by the importance accorded to the film's director and that a spectator's interaction with a film may be regarded as an art object of transformation, a transformation which arises from dialogical meeting a communion between the film-makers engaged in the production and experienced through the film text by the spectator, a phenomenology of an art and aesthetics of cinema connecting the creative process with the viewer's reception of the work in which the director cast and crew exist for the benefit of the film, relating to something other than him- or herself.

AN ENCOUNTER THEORY OF MODERN CINEMA

The view of authorship offered is the possibility of an encounter theory of modern cinema - a model of film as an art form of transformative meeting which endeavours to expand the concept of the auteur beyond the self-enclosed, private subjectivity of the director. This view offers an aesthetics of cinema that is grounded upon the percussive seeds of personalist humanism which refutes an either/or division, underscoring both the uniqueness of the person and the person's essential communitarian nature, which so informed Bazin's own film criticism. The view is not singularly 'personal,' a multifaceted state paradoxically present but a moment of 'leaving the self behind' (Rosenberg 1994: 28), an instance of self-liberation in which the work transcends the director.

This theory has been strongly informed by the philosopher Emmanuel Mounier and the French personalist movement which he founded and articulated in the journal *Esprit* (Copleston, 2003:311); in particular the principles of engagement emphasizing an ethics of relation without indulging in immoderate collectivism and with a respect for the unique dignity and value of persons which so influenced the renowned film theorist Andre Bazin. *I and Thou* (1937), Martin Buber's philosophy of personal dialogue in which he establishes two modes of human engagement, I-Thou and I-It, has also significantly influenced this theory. I-Thou is a relation

of subject-to-subject and I-It is a relation of subject-to-object. In the I-Thou relationship human beings participate in a shared reality and engage in a dialogue involving each other's whole being. In the I-It relationship human beings objectify one another and view themselves as part of a world which consists of things.

The I-Thou interaction invites encounter a mode of relationship facilitating mutuality, reciprocity and community. In the process of filmmaking an I-Thou engagement between artists would enable a dialogue with the spectator and an ethics of collaboration involving the unique contribution and recognition of the individual as part of a whole and for the good of the work. This is an approach which has led to many exemplary film moments in the history of cinema and is indicative of the art practice of many directors defined as auteurs. However, an I-It interaction would render the filmmaking process a relationship of utility separateness and alienation characteristic perhaps of lesser notable films by popular or Critics' Poll.

It is important to acknowledge that great directors exist in a fertile relationship with other outstanding artists and collaborators, such as screen writers and directors Joel and Ethan Cohen and composer Carter Burwell, cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki and director Alfonso Cuaron, production designer Catherine Martin and director Baz Luhrmann, film editor Chris Dickens and director Danny Boyle, and actor Christian Bale and director Christopher Nolan. **all of whom have been described in the press as auteurs.** In these creative alliances, when the director's vision is shared by another key creative they are able to achieve something greater than either could achieve individually. Together, a fluent dialogue has been engaged in and transcribed to screen a phenomenology of film linking the process of film production to its reception in which the film text is able to engage the spectator because the director in collaboration is able to commune with someone other than themselves.

Further, encounter theory is premised on film-maker Robert Bresson's conclusion that like creation in nature there is no art without transformation. **(Bresson 1986: 9)** This position encompasses relations between persons; cast and crew, film-makers and audiences in an I-Thou encounter and may be extended and applied through film techniques in a dialectic approach to the form and content of the film text. This is a position reinforced by film-maker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein's principle of a 'montage of attractions' and film theorist Hugo Munsterberg's supposition that the spectator's experience of being transported whilst viewing a film demonstrates film's value as art. **(Munsterberg 1970 : 74)** Encounter theory indicates that the auteur concept does not adequately encompass the art practice of many directors considered

auteurs, limiting our understanding of the role of the director and the complexity of the creative process.

The possibility of an encounter theory of modern cinema is the possibility of a meeting which transforms and encompasses the idea of self-transcendence reflected not in abstraction but in relationship through close involvement with the sensory world and in a demonstrated willingness on the part of the artist to surrender to the work and experience the other side (Buber 1967: 610). For in reality there are no such things as isolated entities. Entities all exist in relationship to other entities. The premise represented by the pronoun 'I', designating the singular personal vision of the director as author, is also deduced from these relationships. Thus the starting point of an encounter theory must be relationships, because it is from relationships that we deduce things (Samuelson 1989: 191).

A POST-HUMANIST ALTERNATIVE

A relational framework, the possibility of an encounter theory of modern cinema aims to uncover a pathway between the artistic process and the aesthetic appreciation of that process and is based on an analysis and evaluation of screen studies anchored in practice. It presents an applied theory of screen studies supporting a holistic cinema linking the experience of the director and the collaboration of the cast and crew mutually engaged in the creative process, and embodied in the fabric of the work along with the viewing experience. It supports a dialogue capable of evoking in the spectator a common relatedness; a shared participation; one which 'expresses us by making us what it expresses' (Bachelard 1994: 23). What distinguishes encounter theory in its theoretical approach to screen studies is its acceptance of the interconnectedness and continuum of the film-making process and its reception, thereby avoiding any complicated and fruitless discussion of the subject or object dualism of an aesthetics of cinema. It is a theory of modern cinema that is firmly founded upon careful observation and examination of the link between the creative process and viewer perception; a relation of address and response to address evading reduction through signification (Fackenheim 1996: 61). Encounter theory is a movement hinged on the premise that the aesthetic may be conceived through a process of encounters, an encounter defined as a meeting which consumes and transforms a paradoxical 'in-between' state of 'presence' and 'disappearance' in harmony with the living flow of existence (Friedman 1976: 67). It is a communion between the film-makers, the spectator and the film, a phenomenology of aesthetic experience, in which the film as an object of art springs from the fact that the film-makers are essentially related to something other than themselves. Encounter theory is not a symbol or an

expressive form but derived from the sensory realm, from the fullness of the presence of being; one from which a relation arises, a relation with the power to address the viewer as an independent other, so much so that the work confronts a response, impinging upon the viewer's entire being (Buber 1967: 624). In the case that human interaction is involved such as on set between the director and an actor or the director and a member of the crew, it involves a meeting of absolute immersion; of moving into and putting oneself in the place of another to enter and apprehend with a deeper understanding of what is singular and inexpressible in order to experience the immediacy and full spectrum of an experience or thing without modification and to transform and be transformed in the process.

Traditional methods of film analysis have tended toward the examination of film as an object of study removed from the context of its genesis; an examination predominately centred on the study of aspects of the film once it has been completed with minimal regard for the manner in which the film has come together in the first place. The construction of an additional layer of abstraction that places the spectator outside the potentiality for dialogue and participation only serves to isolate the viewer from the immediate experience of the work, unlike a phenomenological approach to the study of the medium which is more invested in comprehending the process than changing it (Dudley 1985). Perceived outside of collaborative and audience relationships, this abstract point of view is partially limited and misrepresentative of the whole. As an attempt to overcome objectification in the art and aesthetics of film, encounter theory is signified by the two words 'artistic' which refers primarily to the act of film-making and 'aesthetic' which refers to the spectator's appreciation and perception. It recognizes the intimate and interconnected relationship of the subject and the object in its comprehension, one that contains both these processes and also the embodiment of the first which makes possible the second (Thampi 1965: 75).

The aim of this article has been to examine and reassess the concept of the auteur and its deficiencies and to uncover a pathway beyond these limitations. What is required as this study attests and in agreement with film theorist Andre Bazin is a complementary approach - one which will embrace the human factor and the prioritization of film as an art form despite the constraints of its industrial production. Encounter theory is an effort to compliment and extend auteur theory so as to be inclusive of the Other; to acknowledge inter-subjectivity and that which is not of the director's own making to create a dialogue with the spectator and to value the unique talents and potential synergies of collaboration. It has been demonstrated that the starting point of the auteur position is the romantic solitary conception of artistic genius in

cultural and meaning production which undervalues collaboration and the complexities of the industrial and creative issues involved. The auteur position has seen the rise of the cult personality of the director threatening to eclipse the importance of the work itself which is problematic.

CONCLUSION

To address the limitations of the auteur position and to reinstate the importance of the work relative to the singularity of the individual, a balance inclusive of relationships is recommended. An encounter theory of Modern Cinema is presented to place dialogical meeting above the subjectivity of the director in order to broaden the auteur position. In its defence, the mind/body distinction of Cartesian dualism is a system of closure that, it has been argued, fails to allow for the multiplicity of possibility. This dualism creates a framework in which neither the new nor the uncertain is permissible, a completeness that has proven itself disempowering of the spectator. The categorization which has segregated film theory undermines the legitimacy of the dynamic and interconnected relationship between the art and the aesthetic appreciation of cinema and has been critiqued and rejected.

In its place encounter theory has been advanced and substantiated, offering a post-humanist relational framework that privileges the human coefficient in film discourse, a dialogue that envelops both the individual and the other. The outcomes from this article highlight the need for further research in the area of collective creativity and authorship and a more extensive enquiry into the productive synergies of collaborative relationships.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Helen Goritsas is a Senior Lecturer in Film and the course coordinator of the Bachelor of Interactive Media at the Academy of Information Technology. She holds a PhD from Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney. This year Helen exhibited 'Lightwell', a collaborative installation for Vivid Sydney and was an associated producer of the Australian feature film *Alex and Eve* (2015). Her research interests include Australian cinema, film theory and aesthetics, screen craft, phenomenology and dialogical enquiry.

Contact: helen.goritsas@ait.nsw.edu.au

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