

Combining and Defining Auteur Film and Film Auteurism

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Abstract

This paper provides a concise overview of the history of film as a dynamic visual medium, analyzing European cinema of the nineteenth century and Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s. It argues that early films cannot be classified as auteur films due to the lack of a systematic auteur theory guiding their creation. Furthermore, it highlights that although Alfred Hitchcock is widely recognized as the first auteur director of Hollywood cinema, his relationship with producers at the time was notably strained. The paper concludes that the concept of auteur film necessitates that the director is entirely responsible for the artistic achievements of the film and consistently reflects their worldview and philosophy of life in their work. Additionally, auteur theory serves as a logical framework for directors to create films and as a methodology for critics to retrospectively analyze a director's creative style and interpret their films.

Keywords: auteur film, film auteurism, Korean cinema, Hollywood producer system

From a historical perspective, the development of film ever from 1895, when the Lumiere's brothers shot the moving images by using a self-made apparatus, the name of the films was called *La sortie de l'usine Lumière à Lyon* (1895) and *L'arrivée d'un train à La Ciotat* (1896), from then, later another French director called Georges Méliès, who made another sensational film: *Le voyage dans la lune* (1902). These are not only experimental attempts at moving images, but also trying to push narrative skill to the next level. Even though *Le voyage dans la lune* contains the montage special effects, however, the scenic view was kept still and no multi-lensed was used in while of the shooting. The film was more

of the stage performing process filmed in front of the new-styled camera. Even though the audience captured the director's special montage skill, the director, shooting and editing, was on no theoretical foundations of creation. Without any theoretical guidance a film cannot be counted as the auteur film.

From 1940s to 1950s, with the studios aggregation and market aiming purpose, in north America the studios stabilized a commercialization model, which directly caused Hollywood film-making factories rapidly prosperous. The commercialized model established a Hollywood star system as to

guarantee the ticket box during the pre-movie publicity, at the same time the invention of the idea 'genre film' also provided double insurance for the return of the funds. The emergence of genre films has made Hollywood's unique producer system have been vigorously developed, and the commerciality of films has been established as an important attribute since then. Producer system endowed the producers, who normally belonging to major studios, the privilege of operating the entire film and the directors and actors don't have much decision-making power. Everyone was more of a link in the pipeline that is not directly responsible for the artistic effect and box office of the entire film. Because the system is a mimic of a factory so Hollywood is famous for dream factory instead of dream art.

Of course, there were also some extraordinarily good directors during this period of time, benefit from their outstanding ability, and thus received rights beyond the reach of other directors, such as Alfred Hitchcock, who was recognized as the first Hollywood film writer. Alfred Hitchcock is considered a director with a distinctive cinematic style due to his unique type of suspenseful storytelling, narrative techniques, use of cinematography, music and soundtracks, and the consistent physical characteristics of his leading actresses.

In fact, Hitchcock in America was not the kind of director with power surpassing that of the producers, as we might imagine. During his period of filmmaking in Britain, he had already directed films such as *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, *The 39 Steps*, *Secret Agent*, and *Sabotage*. In 1937, Hitchcock came to America and collaborated with producer David O. Selznick. He found that the directing methods he used in Britain were somewhat incompatible with Hollywood. Selznick, being a producer who paid great attention to shooting details, frequently engaged in a battle of wits with Hitchcock, leading to constant conflicts. The producer attempted to restrict Hitchcock's editing style, while Hitchcock sought to break free from the nineteenth-century literary narrative tradition upheld by Selznick. Their collaboration existed in a delicate balance, yet during this period, Hitchcock himself was far from the creative freedom he had imagined.

Through the producer system, Hollywood successfully commercialized film production, highlighting the commercial nature of cinema to

the fullest extent. At the same time in Europe, particularly in France, a creative doctrine emerged in the film industry, drawing from literary criticism. This doctrine posited that film, like literature, serves as a tool for expressing personal emotions and thoughts. Just as a writer uses a pen, the filmmaker, or director, "writes" with the camera. The director possesses the same rights and responsibilities as the author of a literary work and should be accountable for the artistic effect and philosophical content of the entire film, akin to that of a novel. This notion was in opposition to the Hollywood producer system of the 1950s. French film theorist and director François Roland Truffaut published an article introducing the concepts of the "auteur" and "auteur cinema." The concept of the auteur is that the film's director is fully involved in and controls the entire production, including the subject matter, content, filming techniques, actor selection, and post-production editing. Throughout this process, the director must convey their philosophical worldview through the film's narrative. By watching the film, the audience can glimpse the director's inner world, thoughts, and emotions.

As exemplified by Truffaut's own film *The 400 Blows* (French: *Les quatre cents coups*), the movie breaks many of the taboos of Hollywood filmmaking at the time by adopting a teenage perspective. For instance, it employs long takes to realistically recreate scenes, uses real locations instead of studio sets, and eschews sensational scenes and intense dramatic conflict. The smooth editing characteristic of Hollywood is also abandoned in favor of extensive use of non-linear editing. This style, markedly different from the mainstream, had a significant impact on later Italian neo-realist films and provided considerable inspiration for realist cinema in other countries around the world.

Many scholars of film theory contrast auteur cinema with Hollywood cinema, and this comparative approach serves as a shortcut for audiences to understand the differences between the two concepts. To distinguish between these two concepts, some necessary conditions must be considered, particularly during the 1940s and 1950s. Firstly, Hollywood cinema refers to films produced by major Hollywood studios. Secondly, it involves films where producers are directly responsible for both the artistic achievements and the box office performance. When both conditions are met, Hollywood

cinema stands in stark contrast to auteur cinema.

Film auteurism refers to the approach to film artistic creation or criticism that adheres to the concept of auteur film in modern times. Auteurism primarily represents a directorial mode of creation, where the imagery is not controlled by producers or investors; rather, it is determined by the director, who decides both the content and the method of filming. The expression is reflective of the director's own perceptions and thoughts. Even without the director's explicit value judgments, their films portray the world and its inhabitants as seen through their own perspective. Furthermore, auteurism in film represents a theoretical framework for evaluating or understanding directors and their works. Through examining a director's personal background, educational experiences, choice of subject matter and thematic direction, perspective on society, and consistent filming style, we can gain insights into the director's inner world, thereby enhancing our understanding of the films they create.

Many Korean directors meet the criteria of auteur film director, and their films often bear distinct directorial signatures. For example, director Hong Sang-soo's films evoke comparisons with another American director, Woody Allen. Like Woody Allen, director Hong is skilled at depicting ambiguous romantic relationships. Additionally, both directors have a recurring muse: Mia Farrow for Woody Allen and Kim Min-hee for Hong Sang-soo. Just as the relationship between Farrow and Allen behind the scenes adds intrigue, so too does the dynamic between Kim Min-hee and Hong Sang-soo in his films. Research into Hong Sang-soo's auteurship reveals his early education at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the United States, suggesting that he was exposed to American cinematic artistry at an earlier stage in his career.

After the screening of his film at the Berlin International Film Festival, director Hong Sang-soo, during an interview with the production crew, stated that he doesn't have any specific goals when shooting. He often refrains from intervening too much on set and simply sets up the camera on the shooting day to capture the scenes. Having watched his films, one would notice that in Hong Sang-soo's collaborations with actress Kim Min-hee, there

are few edits, with more emphasis on long takes and fixed shots. Even during dialogue scenes, the camera often repetitively oscillates between characters or focuses on one character while excluding the other entirely, resembling the creative approach of Italian neorealism, which similarly captures the "useless time." Hong Sang-soo consistently works with a select group of actors across several films, a method akin to that of Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki. Each of his films bears distinct directorial imprints.

Despite the distinctive cinematic characteristics associated with these directors, they do not fully encapsulate the essence of auteurism. The concept of the auteur undergoes varying interpretations across different eras and regions. In Korean cinema, particularly in works representing realism, Professor Wen Zai-che's assertion holds true: "The essence of an author in Korean film criticism aligns with the inner essence and creativity of an artist, refusing to succumb to the intense spirit of reality." In the confrontation with commercial cinema, within the realm of artistic freedom, the pursuit of authenticity in imagery becomes the rallying cry of Korean auteur cinema and serves as the theoretical foundation of the Korean New-Wave cinema.

Across the global spectrum of auteur films, a common thread emerges: auteur film directors often choose non-commercial, non-mainstream subjects and marginalized groups as to be their focus. They train their lenses on individuals who escape the notice of the mass popular culture, often using films to explore someone's hidden inner worlds and the obscure alleyways where they live. Directors approach life with an egalitarian perspective, observing it from various angles. Although at times, the director's intentions may be difficult to grasp, it is the diversity of voices that enriches our world. Through experiencing different perspectives, we gain insight into the lives of others, providing a fascinating way to observe the world through the lens of the auteur film.

In reflecting on auteur film, it's important to consider its inherent characteristics, including the aim to maximize the director's individual artistic expression and its somewhat anti-commercial nature. However, these qualities also impose certain limitations on the choice of subject matter and content. In the case of historical or epic narratives that require substantial production costs, the involvement of

various financial stakeholders inevitably leads to compromises in the director's creative vision. As South Korean female director Lim Soon-rye, known for her low-budget film that maintains a distinct directorial style, faced challenges due to the non-mainstream nature of her works, resulting in underwhelming box office performances. In interviews, Lim acknowledged the financial constraints, stating that the inability to generate profits hindered her ability to continue making the films she wanted. Consequently, she found herself occasionally compelled to venture into commercial filmmaking in order to sustain her career.

Reflections on auteur films: Firstly, since auteur cinema aims to maximize the director's personal expression as an artist and possesses an inherent anti-commercial characteristic, there are certain limitations on the themes and content it can address. When it comes to subjects involving national history and grand narratives, the high production costs necessitate financial investment from various parties, inevitably leading to compromises in the director's creative vision. South Korean female director Lim Soon-rye has produced numerous low-budget films that reflect her personal style. However, due to their non-mainstream nature, these films did not perform well at the box office. In a later interview, she mentioned that she couldn't continue making the films she wanted because they didn't generate sufficient revenue. Consequently, she occasionally needed to direct commercial films.

Secondly, auteur film inevitably leads to the loss of a small portion of the audience. As the antithesis to commercial cinema and mass appeal, auteur cinema is highly regarded in film criticism circles. However, art films often attract a niche of audience that appreciates and aligns with the director's artistic vision, rather than the general public. Consequently, auteur film loses a segment of the audience. For filmmakers who have already achieved international success, securing funding to create a film in their own style is not difficult. However, for new to the film directors, it is challenging to initially adopt and execute their distinctive style on a large scale. However, we must also recognize those directors who successfully blend commercial appeal with artistic merit and personal style. The films of such directors embody both artistic and commercial qualities. These directors are rare, and thus, their work is especially valuable.

In conclusion, the auteur film theory serves as a theoretical framework in film criticism; in the filmmaking process, auteur cinema functions as a counterpoint and critique to commercial and realist cinema; and in the exhibition of films, auteur films provide audiences with a unique artistic perspective on the world and that should be all about the meaning of making these films, so to speak.

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