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**De auteur zij met ons : cognitief psychologische studie naar de ervaring van de toeschouwer bij het waarnemen van een auteursfilm**

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This study gives a new view on an old topic: the auteur film. The auteur film has always been defined as a film made in a new, artistic style. The style should be recognizable for spectators. A group of films by the same author, organized around the same visible style, is called an oeuvre.

The 'auteur film' was initially conceived and conceptualized by the writers of the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, who later turned into the leading directors of the French New Wave. The prominent cultural status of the auteur (and the market value that came with it) led 'auteurism' to become a dominant critical paradigm worldwide: a much used, perhaps even over-used concept. Its omnipresence and high degree of plausibility makes it even applicable to films that were made before the concept existed as such, i.e. before 1950.

The concept has been theorized in many different ways. For one, auteur filmmakers could also have a typical style that is not immediately visible (as Bazin argued); their signature was implied in the subject matter, rather than through visuals. The concept has been applied to other 'makers' than the film director, notably producers, collaborators (as scriptwriters, composers) and especially to women filmmakers (rather unjustly, most directors that earn the aura of 'auteur' are men).

One central issue in the auteur theory is: who decides whether a director earns the aura of authorship? Do the critics decide, or the fellow filmmakers, or the film festivals or the public? And is this aura a permanently bestowed upon a given filmmaker, or is it subject to reevaluation?

At the heart of every discussion of authorship is Roland Barthes' article 'The Death of the author', along with Michel Foucault's response to it. Both theorists argue that the spectator is never free in attributing meaning to an auteur film, as long as the spectator is aware of the film being made by an auteur (Barthes 1977a; Foucault 1977). For example: while watching *AMATOR* by Kieslowski (typically, auteurs never have first names), the spectator will spend most of his/her time watching the film looking for clues of what makes the film 'Kieslowskian'. Although this search for Kieslowskian features gives the spectator a certain pleasure, it withholds him/her from giving the film his or her personal interpretation.

Therefore, in order to regain this freedom of interpretation, the spectator has to declare the death of the auteur. Film theory took up Barthes' glove by shifting its focus from auteur film to the authorless film: the genre film.

This study begins with a discussion of Barthes' article, doing something that film theory could have done twenty years ago: study auteur film from the perspective of the spectator, and at the same time remove the 'auteur' from these films. The corpus of films consists of the work of a number of European auteur filmmakers from the post-Second World War period. The selection from each individual oeuvre includes two to three films made around the moment when a given filmmaker became acknowledged as an auteur, and ceased merely being regarded as a film director.

Accordingly, the research problem changes into the following: at the time those films were shown to the public, they were from an unknown director, whereas after their release, those films suddenly became known as auteur films. This raises the question of what intrinsic aspect is there in those films that make the spectator think: “now this is an auteur film”.

Since the corpus consists of so many different auteurs, this ‘authorlike intrinsic value’ is not specific to any auteur, but must be a shared value, shared by all auteur films.

Taking a cognitive psychological stance, the first point to make is that a spectator understands the film world (diegesis) with the same perceiving and psychological capacities as in real life. This means that people construct reality on the basis of schemas, earlier experience and inferences.

Through a close textual analysis of the film texts (giving equal emphasis on their visual and acoustic dimensions) and their implied (but not necessitated) spectatorial responses, there emerges a common deep structure of the films, reminiscent of Propp’s morphology. But unlike Propp’s model, it does not primarily concern the actions of characters, but rather the implied spectator’s inferences and emotions, constructed/ suggested - but definitely not dictated - by the auteur film. The resulting model assigns six phases to the plot of an auteur film:

In the **first phase** spectators construct the story world as a real world, according to the logics of understanding real life. This holds true for every film. But in the auteur film it takes somewhat longer than in classical films before the audience gets a good understanding of the story world and their characters. But even in the auteur film, the spectator eventually comes to a good (or at least a good-enough) understanding of that world. In no way does the spectator need the concept of the auteur in order to understand that world.

In the **second phase**, immediately after beginning to understand the film as a world, the spectator decides to understand the film as fiction. Using play theory and make-believe theory, I conclude that there is no decisive cue in the auteur film that suggests ‘fiction’, and that it is the full responsibility of the spectator to understand it as such. The importance of the concept of ‘play’ is that it suggests (but does not warrant) safeness. For example: to enjoy seeing a caged tiger in the zoo means seeing the tiger as if he were near us without the bars of the cage. This suggests safety, but, of course, it is always possible that the cage was not closed properly.

The psychological implications of understanding a perception as play, is that all emotions become differently (oppositely) valued: strong fear becomes strong joy, boredom becomes entertainment.

For the auteur film, this concept is like in any other film, however, the harshness of the depicted reality common in author film makes it amendable (but not necessary) for the spectator to watch it as fiction.

## English summary

In the **third phase** (which also sets in almost at the start of the plot) the spectator begins to understand the characters as real people. Since we cannot get into the head of people, we have to establish knowledge of those people and their motivations through analyzing the context of their actions. Because we never have all three parameters available (motivation, actions and context), we have to deduce one through the other. The field social cognition describes how we do that. The most important finding is that we become emotionally attached to certain people despite of what we consciously construct, and that this emotional attachment even influences how we construct those people. Apart from that we decide too soon (on the basis of insufficient information) what we think of people, how we judge them. Thus, although we think we treat every person according to what they objectively do and are, what we really do is make hasty, prejudiced, sloppy inferences of other people. At a certain point in the plot, the end of phase 3, we decide (on the basis of our character judgment): “this is the person I feel allegiance to, this is the person with whom I share moral values, this person’s goals are my goals”.

In **phase four** we slowly come to realize that this person we feel alleged to appears to be not exactly what we expect such a person to be or do. The spectator is confronted with a cognitive dissonance: a good person does wrong actions. Cognitive dissonance theory posits that people deal with this kind of dissonances by ignoring the new (dissonant) information and holding stronger on to the first opinion. Which means that despite the wrong actions of the character, the spectator becomes more alleged to this character.

In **phase five** the film reveals this character to be immoral beyond the point to which we can sustain the assumption that this character is a moral character. The spectator comes to understand that this is a character one never wants to be alleged to, but unfortunately that is exactly what the spectator is.

This puts the spectator in a true moral crisis, which even surpasses the fact that the film was understood as fiction. Although the character/story was fictional, the moral crisis of the spectator is real. The way the spectator constructed this character and became alleged to him was done in the very same way, as the spectator understands people in real life. Consequently, the spectator becomes aware of the prejudiced way he judges others, and the immorality of his own moral belief system.

To fully understand the nature of the moral crisis, a short explanation of how a moral belief system is understood within the cognitive psychological field is necessary. Morals do not exist outside persons, they are part of a psychological state that people construct and live up to during their lives. Moral is understood as a personal schema. But although a moral schema is highly personal/ subjective, in this study I use Michael Lerner’s Belief-in-a-Just-World (BJW) belief system, as a

typical Western European belief system, overarching (and including) both the Judean-Christian morals as the secular morals.

The BJW posits that the world is a Just-World. The main point of this belief system is to uphold this ideal image of the world as Just. The consequence of every injustice occurring in this world means that there must be a reason for it, and final justifications. If someone is murdered, that does not destroy the image of the World as Just, as long as the murderer is punished. And even when the murder is never solved (as happens with some murders), we retain this image of a Just World by saying: “the murderer will get his come-uppance sometimes (or maybe even in the afterlife, in Hell)”.

Some unjustness cannot be explained in this way: e.g., starvation, war, and disasters. We have learned to accept the existence of such injustice by defining it as part of a different world order: the Unjust World. It is like saying: I know this Unjust World does exist, of which I am not a citizen. I cannot alter this injustice, but I can try to be Just in my Just World.

As explained in this way, this Belief system is rather a-moral in its base. This, of course, leads to a completely different meta-theoretical debate which is not part of this thesis. In general, people live up to this BJW, unaware of its amoral base. The BJW just explains the psychology of people dealing with moral issues.

What is really problematic about the moral crisis of the spectator in phase five is the realization of the spectator that either a. his moral fault places him as an Unjust Person in a Just World, or b. his moral fault (generated by relying on his moral system) shows the ugliness and bankruptcy of the moral system itself. Help is needed.

In the sixth phase the spectator seeks refuge with the author. He wants to trust the author by confessing (*monologue intérieur* by the spectator) his moral fault, and asking to be forgiven, or at least shown a way out of this moral crisis. The author (as the authority projected by the spectator) can show the restoration of the Just World, show some just closure, or show that the spectator is not alone in his moral crisis.

The spectator will see the sixth phase mostly in the light of his own redemption.

When the spectator feels his trust is not returned, he feels abandoned, and is stuck with his moral crisis. He will distrust the author forever, and will refuse to see any other film by this author.

It does not take more than one film by a given author that conforms to this model to make the spectator enter into a trust relation with an author. However, some authors have a more impressive oeuvre, for example Lars von Trier, whose films are always prototypical author films.

## English summary

The theory that is put forward in this thesis helps to solve many problems concerning author theory. Furthermore, it indicates possible solutions to the pressing questions about the (im)morality of film. Morals have nothing to do with the amount, strength, gruesomeness or portrayal of immorality. It only has to do with the immorality of the spectator in misjudging characters and become alleged to the amoral characters.<sup>91</sup>

Against common wisdom, I would like to suggest that style does not form a central part in the construction of authorship: the only role it plays is in the construction of a kind of trap for the spectator. The fact that the characters are introduced without a past, without a goal is not part of a certain realistic style (or 'art-film' mode of narration), but it is a necessity for making the spectator judge the character.

The author film is presented in this study as a prototype. That means that it is some sort of ideal model, to which not all films comply in the same perfect manner. A more precise definition consists in that we can say that a director can only be called an author after having made a film that comes close to the prototype, and trust being needed by a spectator. Regardless of whether spectators actually have experienced trust or whether trust is not part of the definition,

The weak definition would be that a film, which unsettles the spectator and destroys his view of the World as Just, is enough to make the spectator crave for trust: a documentary about the Holocaust can count as such.

Authors are a product of the time they live and work in. Since ideas and concepts of morality change through history, author films questioning the morals of their time are subject to reevaluation through time. Some traps set for the audience fail to work after a few years, while others remain as useful as in the year of production. In my study, the definition of the author film rests solely on the success of causing the spectator to experience a moral crisis. Therefore, a film remains an author film as long as it performs this task. When, through changing morals, films fail to do that, the author loses his aura of authorship as it is mediated by his or her films.

If one considers all the different definitions of authorship within film studies of what it takes for a director to be called an author - style, working within the system, films set apart from other films in the same period (renewal), biography, alter ego - one finds that they are all implicated and explained through my model. The moral crisis necessitates the spectator to look for the author, and look for cues (signatures) of his presence, thereby recognizing his style, seeing characters as alter egos of the auteur. For recognizing the trustworthiness of the author, even after viewing the film, the spectator will look for interviews, and read biographies,

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<sup>91</sup> The model also accommodates the opposite possibility, namely that the spectator does not want to become alleged to a character because he judges this character to be amoral. In the authorfilm such a character is later revealed as a very moral character. This realisation leads to the same moral crisis in phase five.

## In the author we trust

to find out whether the author is trustworthy, or just to meet their 'friend' again, just to know how their 'friend' is doing.

One cannot fail to recognize that some of the moral basis of authorship has been lost in recent times of an ever increasing commercialization of the film business. The marketing of films is well aware of the practice of connecting directors with style, biography and oeuvre, and thus promotes certain directors by focusing on their specific style and relation to their biography. This does not disprove my model, but only stresses the point that the term 'auteur' has been diluted in recent times.