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A Theory of Origin - A Revision of the Auteur Theory in Film Studies

Rachelle Gallagher

This article reviews the traditional auteur theory within film and television studies, looking at how notions of the author and authorship are constructed. It moves through an overview of traditional auteur theory, highlighting its successes and failures as an academic theory. In reviewing the theory this article presents an alternative and hopefully more productive way in which to analyse and decipher notions of authorship. The new theory is tested by application to three distinct case studies involving the film director Tim Burton, singer Lady Gaga and the video-on-demand service provider Netflix.

Auteur theory is inadequate and misleading for the study of film and television. Nevertheless, it has been, and continues to be, a useful and productive mode of thinking. In this article I will review the drastic failures and the partial successes of the traditional auteur theory within film studies whilst offering an alternative model of critical theory. The adapted theory will centre on discourses of authorship that are constructed via various factors around a film text. I propose that this approach should be called a theory of origin. By evaluating and examining three different forms of authorship – one director, one music artist and one production company – I will show how the auteur theory can be manipulated and developed from its primitive source in the pages of the French film criticism journal *Cahiers du Cinema* to keep up with the multi-faceted and complex landscape of film and television culture that exists today.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE AUTEUR THEORY

The traditional auteur theory works by assigning the director as the central author of a film text. As a result, he or she is designated as the source and creator of all inherent meaning produced by the film text. This mode of thinking echoes theories of authorship in other humanitarian disciplines such as literature, art and music which are believed to

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have developed from the Romantic ideal of the author in the nineteenth century. The Romantic ideal is based on the notion that the artist, as an individual, should be recognised as the source of all meaning produced by their text. Understand the artist, understand the work: the key was in the creator. This model of authorship elevated the author to the bearer of meaning in a work, rather than any meaning being determined through the interpretation of the audience, be it a novel, work of art, or a film text.

However, when this model of authorship was applied to the study of film it encouraged the elevation and glorification of film directors. This had a detrimental effect on the multi-faceted and complex analysis of films and film authorship. In 1962 Sarris claimed that 'it requires cultural audacity to establish a pantheon of film directors. Without such audacity, I see little point in being a film critic'.¹ Yet with this 'audacity' came an inadequate and misleading concentration on the personas and personalities of the directors themselves. Critics would assign any and all interior meaning in a film text exclusively to the director,² since directors were conceived as being absolutely emblematic of the film texts they created. Bordwell summarises and articulates this approach stating that a 'unified personal vision should be expressed' and 'evaluation of the entire oeuvre is justified on the basis of the quality of coherence to the expression of that vision'.³ Therefore the entire body of work from a particular director is reviewed by critics to evaluate how well the texts successfully represent the director's personality and opinions. A clear issue with this approach is that it depends on the perception and understanding of the director's personality by the film critic, which, according to the Auteur theory, can only be interpreted through the film texts.

The Auteur theory has been criticised many times previously (most notably by Pauline Kael⁴) yet it remains prudent to revisit the aims and omissions of the auteur theory that Sarris and others⁵ negotiated around and often ignored. In so doing a better developed

¹ A. Sarris, *The American cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968* (New York: Dutton, 1968), 37.

² Regardless of any other circumstances or knowledge that may have surrounded the film, i.e. more than one director, a change of directors mid-filming or factual circumstances that may have proven another individual to be the main creative force behind the text, i.e. the screenwriter.

³ D. Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (New York: Harvard University Press, 1989), 44.

⁴ P. Kael, 'Circles and Squares', (1963) 16:3 *Film Quarterly* (1963), 26.

⁵ Many film critics have adhered to this theory throughout the history of film criticism. Staiger includes a brief but fairly comprehensive evaluation of critics who have subscribed to the

and more refined theory can be sought.

Firstly, assigning a director's personality as a 'criterion of value'⁶ is a ridiculous element of any critical theory. To try and understand a single person through their creative expression, especially within such a diverse, complex and multi-faceted media such as film, is arbitrary and virtually unverifiable. As Catherine Grant has articulated there has always been 'queasiness' around auteur theory due to the fear of developing essentialist and prescriptive tendencies.⁷ If the purpose of critical theory is to expand our understanding of the world and our relation to it, then surely to narrow the focus to one individual's personality is reductive and borders on the obsessive. Despite the potential for productive and useful formulations of styles, genres, or motifs that can be generated around the relentless pursuit of psychoanalytical theories (created to understand the minds of individual directors in line with traditional auteur theory), it is still constrictive to try and assign the interior meaning and value of a film to the character of one person. As Wimsatt and Beardsley have attested 'the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging a work of art'.⁸ A theory of authorship that only offers space for the personality of one individual as the source of meaning is fundamentally limited and limiting.

Nevertheless, one productive element that has emerged from auteur theory is the primary method of analysing film texts: critical analysis of a film's *mise-en-scène*. Analysis of *mise-en-scène* became the fundamental critical device on which the reputation of film studies as an academic pursuit was built.⁹ What critical reading is to literature the analysis of *mise-en-scène* is to film. The technique is based on the combination of an extensive knowledge of a large body of films with a suitable method that is used to decipher and elicit meaning from the film texts. The method created harbours a close visual-textual analysis of all the on-screen content in order to thoroughly understand the intention of the author. At this point authorship would be assigned solely to the director-auteur. However this approach breeds prescriptivism: the

'authorship as-personality' approach in 'Authorship Approaches' in *Authorship and Film*. (eds.)

David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 27–57.

⁶ Sarris (1968), 43.

⁷ Grant, Catherine. www.auteur.com (2002) 41:1 *Screen*, 101–108. 101.

⁸ W.K. Wimsatt, "Genesis: A Fallacy Revisited," in *The Disciplines of Criticism*. (eds.) Peter Demeu, Thomas Greene, and Lowry Nelson, Jr. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), 468.

⁹ Caughie, John. *Theories of Authorship: A Reader* (London: Routledge and Kegan and Paul with the BFI: 2007), 414.

theory looks for a very specific answer *before* evaluating any data. In scientific terms this would be called speculation, and would not be considered a proper basis for an academic theory.

Instead what may be proposed is wider application of the method normally used to decipher a film text's *mise-en-scène*. This method has been defined as 'the methods of decipherment or decoding through an investigation of the language and signification'.¹⁰ It is possible for this technique to be applied to both the content on-screen and the wider discourses (i.e. spoken and written communication as well as *visual* forms of communication) that surround discussions of a text's authorship. I believe this would lead to a more productive, adequate and useful theory for answering questions about authorship in relation to film and television. To demonstrate, I will apply and extend the technique that underlines *mise-en-scène* to critically analyse, decipher and understand the construction of authorship in three distinct case studies: one director (Tim Burton), one music artist (Lady Gaga), and one production company (Netflix). This is where the theory of origin begins.

TIM BURTON AS FILM AUTEUR

The discourse that surrounds Burton and his films (and his consequential status as the driving creative force behind films directed by him) will be discussed by reviewing theoretical criticism, marketing materials and audience reception.

Academic criticism that positions Tim Burton as the driving creative source behind all of the films he has directed include *The Works of Tim Burton; From Margins to Mainstream*, *The Films of Tim Burton: Animating live action in contemporary Hollywood* and *Tim Burton: The Life and Films of a Visionary Director*. Throughout this criticism character motivations are consistently attributed to and compared with Tim Burton personally. Mark Salisbury shows this when he draws parallels between Burton's characters and Burton's own personality, going so far as to say that Burton literally 'embodies' some of the idiosyncrasies that his characters also exhibit.¹¹ Here academics position the individual as the source of meaning and point of origin of filmic texts, through their consistent and strict adherence to traditional auteurist theories of understanding.

¹⁰ Ibid, 414.

¹¹ M. Salisbury (ed.), *Burton on Burton*. Revised edition (London: Faber and Faber: 2008), xiv.

Another way in which Burton, as an individual, is positioned as the authorial subject for the films he has directed is the semantic shift operated and worked upon his name. The repeated focus and inclusion of Burton's name functions as both a naming device for the private individual and as a comprehensive way in which to investigate the meaning of all films directed by Burton, above any other categorisation. This specifically promotes and perpetuates the idea that Burton is the central source of authority in the films he has directed, both in terms of professional on-set presence and as a dictator of meaning above any possible audience interpretations. The latter conception of the director encourages fans and academics alike to further their understanding of the man himself in order to further their understanding of 'his' films. The name 'Burton' is therefore expanded to refer to the private individual, as well as the specific aesthetic style, character tropes, and particular nuances of tone exhibited throughout films directed by Tim Burton.

Furthermore, the discourse surrounding Burton's personality strengthens his identification as a source of meaning and champions him as the authorial subject. Burton is characterised as an 'outsider'¹² in Hollywood, known for his eccentric image and quirky mannerisms. However this is precisely part of his appeal to devoted fans, academic critics and general audiences alike since the non-conformist characterisation of both Burton and his films promote an undeniably appealing narrative to contemporary audiences. To be specific, his unconventional personality does not appear to be stifled or oppressed within the Hollywood film industry.¹³ The alignment of Burton's films with perceived aspects of his personality can also be identified as a selling point to market and brand his films, resulting in a unified vision through filmic text and the authorial subject. The articulation of loneliness and isolation in the contemporary world is effectively and uniquely expressed through the combination of conceptualisations of Burton and his films. One could argue that a deliberate characterisation of Burton is used to proliferate, distribute and sell his films since the characterisation of Burton fulfils a tangible and distinctive feeling. Put simply, the purpose is to fill a gap in the market in order to sell products.

¹² 'Outsider' is put in quotations to mark the notion of this as a constructed image, rather than a factual one, as will be elaborated.

¹³ As articulated by Johnny Depp "In not just film but drawings, photographs, thought, insight, and ideas...I have never seen someone so obviously out of place fit right in. His way." [original emphasis]. Taken from M. Salisbury (ed.), *Burton on Burton*, 3.

What it is essential to articulate here is that it is not Burton's actual personal life that provokes my interest, nor am I attempting to examine. Rather what I am suggesting is that it may be more critically productive to examine *how, why, by whom* and *for what purpose* does the specific discourse that surrounds Burton life and work operate and function, *regardless of how true or not it may be*. It is on these terms that the theory of origin operates.

LADY GAGA AS BODY AUTEUR

By applying this method of critically analysing discourses surrounding authorship another type of creative source can be investigated through music artist Lady Gaga. Whilst not immediately relevant to the world of film and television, it is prudent to include an example of authorship that includes control and creative vision using the body and physical performance as a type of text that produces meaning. From 2008 Stefani Germanotta rebranded herself as Lady Gaga, penning the title as an artificial and constructed alter ego through which she is able use her body, voice and musical ability as a text. The themes most commonly associated with Lady Gaga which distinguish and underline her characterisation and realisation as a cultural icon are her strong feminist attitudes, her relentless advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights and her determination to undermine detrimental dominant ideologies. In essence, the intention is to break down barriers for the marginalised and oppressed within society. Essentially what Burton appears to do for other self-titled 'quirky' film enthusiasts, Gaga purports to do for people who identify as gay, lesbian or transgender.

Many of Lady Gaga's songs are understood to support LGBTQ+ communities and this is most obviously demonstrated by the title track of her second album *Born This Way*.¹⁴ Her nominal single specifically promotes the idea of self-love for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered individuals. She has also spoken and attended many events concerning gay pride and equality including the National Equality March Rally (Washington, 2009) and the Gay Pride Rally (New York, 2013). In addition to which Lady Gaga promoted political and social reform when she spoke out against the US 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' legislation which encourages the discrimination of gay soldiers within the American army.

¹⁴ Gaga, Lady (2011) 'Born This Way', Track 2 from the album *Born This Way*. Written by Stefani Germanotta and Jeppe Laursen. Produced by Stefani Germanotta, Jeppe Laursen, Fernando Garibay and Paul Blair. (California: Interscope Records).

Furthermore, a critique of the lyrics and imagery in Lady Gaga's music videos may elicit and echo feminist film theory elaborated in a study by Adam Sorice. Sorice identifies Lady Gaga's use of a radical feminine darkness with a need to reclaim the space for freedom and creativity, free from patriarchal rule.¹⁵ Sorice specifically identifies this through the signification of Gaga's lyrics in her song 'Dance in the Dark' where she draws on other female icons, such as Marilyn Monroe and Diana, Princess of Wales, whose identities have been shaped and oppressed through patriarchal rule. Gaga expresses a desire for solidarity and freedom of expression, as Sorice elaborates 'Together, radical darkness and cultural female identity can join forces, as it were, to further empower women, both culturally and sexually and further oppose patriarchy's attempts to limit female cultural agency.'¹⁶

The way in which Lady Gaga functions as an authorial subject can now be reviewed. By consistently using lyrics, identifications, images and ideas around the oppression of gender and sexuality in modern culture, Lady Gaga opens up a space through popular music in which to discuss and deconstruct these issues. A prime example can be identified in Halberstam's *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender and the End of Normal*.¹⁷ Halberstam's choice of title, and consequent theorising of concepts such as gender politics, challenges to heteronormativity, and the continual questioning of how traditional power relations operate, are repeatedly and consistently associated and aligned with Lady Gaga herself. Halberstam specifically and deliberately represents the singer as the embodiment of a specific and contemporary brand of feminism, therefore significantly *attributing to her as the author* of a multi-faceted discourse. As an individual constructed through music and performance, Lady Gaga is reworked, elevated and expanded to combine and reference an entire branch of ideology. It is here that the theory of origin searches for reasons as to why Lady Gaga has been positioned as the author of a branch of discourse that, at first sight, looks to be beyond the power and influence of popular music.

To play devil's advocate for a moment, the categorisation and elevation Halberstam attributes to Lady Gaga could be considered inappropriate, inaccurate and misleading. One critic to voice his concern is Derrit Mason, who finds three important faults with

¹⁵ A. Sorice, 'The girl who lives behind the aura': A Dissertation on Lady Gaga (2014) published in series of blogposts at <https://adamsorice.wordpress.com/2014/01/14/gaga-dissertation/>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ J. J. Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender and the End of Normal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).

Halberstam's *Gaga Feminism*. Firstly, there is not enough analysis of Lady Gaga herself, either through her lyrics, performances or music videos. Secondly, there is not a precise definition and understanding of what 'Gaga feminism' is. Thirdly, Mason finds the novelty and distinct differentiation Halberstam attributes to Gaga feminism as 'curious' because of the historical lineage that this branch of feminism is clearly indebted to from previous studies of queer theory, including Halberstam herself.¹⁸

In direct opposition to Mason's position, where fault is found in the Halberstam's discourse, I find areas of investigation. Instead of questioning Gaga's appropriateness as a vehicle for these cultural debates (therefore questioning her as a valid source and author of the texts) which fall into the prescriptive tendencies of auteurism, attention should instead be paid to *why* Halberstam (as a highly respected queer theorist) may have felt the need to characterise and use Lady Gaga in this way. This is where the theory of origin operates and investigates in order to generate answers, or at least more productive questions. Is it therefore possible to assume that within the conceptualisation of the musician as an authorial subject, critics and fans alike *do* find an appropriate, flexible and thoroughly adequate vehicle to discuss these cultural issues. Proof of their very existence and popularity indicates a thorough consensus between fans and activists alike. Indeed Halberstam him/herself addresses this issue when s/he writes 'To be clear, what I am calling 'gaga' here certainly derives from Lady Gaga but it is not limited to Lady Gaga.'¹⁹ Therefore whilst Gaga-feminism is perhaps produced from and embodied within the music artist, it also may be emblematic of a wider and more complex discourse. In Lady Gaga this discourse finds a home, a mother-creator-figure, who is able to voice these matters in a way that is relatable and identifiable to others who feel the same.

NETFLIX AS DISTRIBUTOR AUTEUR?

The last case study will look at the production ability of the video-on-demand streaming service Netflix. A major issue that Netflix faces is the high cost of acquiring content for its services since copyright costs for film and television programmes are high. One way in which Netflix has overcome this issue is through co-financing the production of television shows in exchange for exclusive streaming rights. Consequently the term 'Netflix Originals' is used to denote content commissioned exclusively by the company.

¹⁸ D. Mason, 'The Trouble with Going Gaga' (2013) 4:1 *Reviews in Cultural Theory*, 19-24, 21.

¹⁹ Halberstam (2012), xii.

The semantic choice of 'original' emphasises Netflix as the driving creative force behind both texts, even though (in complete opposition and contrast to the traditional auteur theory) Netflix, neither collectively as a company nor through individual members of staff, had any influence over the creative origins of the texts in either scripting or production. The only causal effect Netflix have is through pure finance. For example popular 'Netflix Originals' shows such as *House of Cards* (2013-present) and *Orange is the New Black* (2013-present) are both adaptations from other previous texts. Therefore Netflix, as a brand with major capital and cultural currency, is able to overpower any factual authorial brand, by assigning, attributing and titling the programmes to themselves, where the only right to authorship has come through finance alone. Whilst they may legally claim originality in terms of expression and style, the semantic choice of 'original' is quite misleading and arguably, false.

Another profound and startling example of Netflix's manipulation and power over branding concerns the detective drama series *The Fall* (2013-present). Originally produced and broadcast by the BBC in 2013, Netflix bought exclusive rights to broadcast the series in the US and Latin America a year later. In this instance, Netflix bought the rights to a pre-existing programme from an equally significant organisation -the BBC- with its own distinctive and globally recognised branding. Indeed the BBC had already perpetuated its own authorial branding of the television crime drama. Claiming the text as its own, the BBC choose to categorise the show as 'BBC Original British Drama' due to the production being set primarily in Belfast with a predominately British cast. However, in a revealing overturn and controversial stance, Netflix also choose to brand the programme as a 'Netflix Original'. In this case Netflix only paid for *distribution* rights and plays absolutely no part in the cost of production.

From this comparison the differences between authority, ownership and the constructed point of origin over a televisual text can be critically analysed and understood from the visual forms of communication and discourse surrounding the television series. Although referring to Hulu's similar acquisition and claim over the Israeli text *Prisoners of War* the critic Karen Petruska perfectly illuminates this point of contention:

In most instances, the program in question has enjoyed its world première on the network that claims it—the distributor has given the producers a means to reach an audience, and in exchange, they claim a sort of *ownership* stake in that series. But when Hulu promotes an international series as an original, that program has generally enjoyed

a successful run in at least one other nation prior to its online première in the U.S. *'Original,' therefore, seems a misnomer.*²⁰ [own emphasis]

Whilst this may seem pedantic to argue over semantics, the fact remains that *The Fall* was not originally sourced by Netflix in any way, shape, or form – therefore the term 'Netflix Originals' is a seriously questionable use of branding.

CONCLUSION

When considering the notion of authorship the closest identification found is the critic Janet Staiger who conceptualises it as a 'reading strategy'²¹ and a 'site of discourse'²² and yet she is quick to dismiss it, stating that looking at constructed ideas of authors and authorship is essentially futile, naming them as entirely 'fictional'.²³ However, when Staiger identifies the author as no more than a fictional construction of the reader, is it not then significant and illuminating to look at how these modes of thinking came into operation, why they operate and what their perceived functions may be? In favour of this method is the inherently flexible, open and malleable form of this theory, as it can be applied to different modes of authorship, and most significantly, does not prescribe a model answer in the same way the traditional theories of authorship leaned towards, allowing the information gathered and sources analysed to formulate a conclusion instead. By using the method that underlines *mise-en-scène* analysis, this can in fact be based on empirical evidence, as I have shown, by looking critically at the ways in which authorship around text has been constructed through various academic, commercial or spectral sources.

²⁰ K. Petruska, 'Content That Travels: International Content and Original Programming on U.S. Streaming Sites' in *Flow Online Journal Austin: University of Texas, 2015*).

²¹ 21 J. Staiger, 'Authorship Approaches' in *Authorship and Film*. (eds.) David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 27–57, 45.

²² Ibid, 46

²³ Ibid, 46

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