

AUTEUR IN THE MIRROR

(Re)interpretation of the auteur's concept in contemporary self-reflexive films

Theses of the Doctoral Dissertation

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Basic Hypothesis:

The present dissertation is based on the assumption that a new and idiosyncratic intertwining of auteurism and self-reflexivity has emerged as a phenomenon in contemporary cinema during the last two decades. It means that – beyond the permanent and sporadic cases of cinematic self-reflexivity – we can find special instances in contemporary film that are based particularly on this intertwining and lay the foundation of a trend in film style (i.e. Iranian cinema in the 1990s) or define the oeuvre of a film director (i.e. Michael Haneke, Lars von Trier, Nanni Moretti).

Main Objectives:

The main objective of my dissertation is to demonstrate that among these instances of contemporary self-reflexivity we can find examples where the connection between auteurism and self-reflexivity has a unique quality unprecedented in film history, and to reinterpret the concept of the auteur's position based on this unique connection.

In order to demonstrate the new features of the auteur concept in contemporary Iranian cinema and in Haneke's films, I give an outline of a historical framework of film theory and film history by making connections and pointing out parallelisms between filmic self-reflexivity and the concept of the author. In Chapter 3 and 4 I proceed to exhibit these new features of the auteur concept by analysing particular films.

Concerning the concept of the author, the filmic self-reflexivity and the possible conjunctions between them, a historical examination was needed, since, according to my basic hypothesis, the connection between auteurism and self-reflexivity in Iranian cinema and Haneke's films is unique in film history. I have accomplished these examinations both in connection with film theory and film history because one of my assumptions was based on the idea about the history of film style formulated by András Bálint Kovács in his book on modernism.¹ According to Kovács the interrelation of cinematic self-reflexivity and the birth of the auteur in film theory is one of the defining features of modernism. It follows from this concept that film historical and film theoretical aspects need to be connected when the intertwining of filmic self-reflexivity and the auteur are examined.

Structure:

The first chapter of the dissertation focuses on the theoretical connection between the author and self-reflection. In order to demonstrate the novelty of the phenomena examined in my dissertation, in this chapter I give a survey of the development of the link between the notion of auteur(ism) and self-reflexivity in film theory. The first section discusses the history of auteur's theories. In the second part I deal with the problem of defining self-reflexivity in film and make an attempt to narrow down this universal and broad concept and transform it into a useful analytical tool. The third section proceeds to present an overview of the theory of cinematic self-reflexivity regarding the role the author can occupy in it.

The second chapter discusses the possible positions and relations the author can have in connection with self-reflexivity in dominant self-reflexive films during different phases of film history.

And finally, the third and fourth chapter of the dissertation present two case studies on the new concept of the auteur in contemporary self-reflexive films (Iranian self-reflexive films; and Haneke's films with a special emphasis on the film *Caché*) and demonstrate the new features of authorship present in these cases compared to those outlined in chapter 2.

¹ Kovács, András Bálint: *Screening Modernism. European Art Cinema, 1950–1980*. Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007. Chapter 12: Critical Reflexivity or the Birth of the Auteur. pp. 217–237.

The Major Theses:

By examining the historical patterns of auteurism and self-reflexivity, I point out some remarkable interrelations between the two phenomena. While, for example, the emergence of the author's figure in film art and film theory during the 1950s correlate to the formation of self-reflexivity as a stylistic trend in film history, the emergence of the theory of self-reflexivity is consequent upon the decline of the author's theoretical concept during the 1970s.

Among the historical interrelations detected between the phenomena of film theory and film art the one that has proved to be especially useful with respect to the aim of this dissertation is the renewed and intensified interest of film theory in the auteur's concept at the beginning of the 1990s together with the emergence of the new concept of the auteur's presence in Iranian cinema and in Haneke's films.

Theoretical discussions of the auteur's role in art during the 1990s focused attention on repositioning this figure as a historically and culturally determined function and creating a new non-universal concept of authorial subjectivity. As it has been stated in the books of Anna Gács² and Seán Burke³ concerning the need for situated authorial subjectivity in contemporary literature the author could regain its power in the interpretation as a figure that connects his text to its historical, geographical, political and cultural context.

The third and fourth chapter of my dissertation demonstrate the implementations of this situated authorial subjectivity in the context of Iranian cinema and Haneke's films. Whereas the situated authorial subjectivity of Haneke has been defined as a characteristically European, post-'68, postcolonial, multicultural phenomenon, the Iranian version has been marked by the consequences of its Middle Eastern, religiously determined, autocratic context bound by censorship.

In the films analysed in chapter 3 and 4, the author again emerges as a figure with certain authorial power entitled to make moral judgements. From a certain aspect it seems that it is the subjective, artistic auteur of critical modernism, the alienating, Brechtian author of the political modernism and the sceptic, unauthorized author of the postmodernism that had been merged into a new figure who is able to make comments on reality even under postmodernist conditions when superior moral points of view no longer exist.

I maintain in my dissertation that my two case studies are similar with respect to the new concept of situated authorial subjectivity, although important differences can be detected. The main difference is rooted in the use of self-reflexivity. On one hand, Iranian self-reflexivity can be approached most fruitfully by considering relationships between art and reality, fiction and documentary. It is the unique merger of fiction and documentary features that makes Iranian self-reflexivity and authorial subjectivity distinct from the concept of the author present either in critical modernism or in postmodernism.

On the other hand, Haneke's use of self-reflexivity focuses on the mediated nature of perception. He concentrates on the spectatorial position in proportion to the medium. In connection with the films *Benny's video* and *Caché* I focus on postmodernist examples of the weakened trust in representation. Haneke emphasizes the relationship between the spectator and the image and creates his post-modernized authorial position in connection to this relationship.

I show that the role of the artist as a social agent is an integral part of the new concept of the auteur in both Iranian cinema and Haneke's films. Taking into consideration the ideological and political self-reflexivity of Godard and the self-reflexivity based on personal commitment in the films of Wajda and

² Gács, Anna: *Miért nem elég nekünk a könyv? A szerző az értelmezésben, szerzőség-koncepciók a kortárs magyar irodalomban*. Budapest: Kijárat Kiadó, 2002. p. 17.

³ Burke, Seán: *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault, Derrida*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1998. pp. 203-204.

Kieslowski in the '70s and '80s, I seek to demonstrate the distinct features of the new authorial position of the '90s concerning social agency and reflexivity.

I argue that the main difference between the self-reflexivity of the political modernism of the '70s and '80s and the situated authorial subjectivity of the '90s manifest themselves in the use of self-reflexivity: the former uses it as a tool for alienation, meanwhile in the latter case self-reflexivity functions in order to enhance spectatorial identification and through the strategies of self-reflexivity it makes the discussed social issues embedded into collective consciousness. Haneke urges his spectator to consciously look for the source of the images shown on the screen and be aware of the invisible but influential authorial presence. In the case of Iranian cinema, the author is a figure balancing between fiction and reality and has strong social responsibilities through his real persona since the biographical director is often present in the diegetic/real word of the movie.

The present dissertation demonstrates that these new features of authorial subjectivity present in the cinema of the '90s are in accordance with the new trends of author theory emerged at the end of the last century. The analysed films testify that the author is back, or rather, is still being here and, as Dudley Andrew wrote, *"the word »auteur«, and the occasional signs left by whatever this word signals, can thicken a text with duration, with the past its coming into being and with the future of our being with it."*⁴

⁴ Andrew, Dudley: The Unauthorized Auteur Today. In: Stam, Robert–Miller, Toby (eds.): *Film and Theory. An Anthology*. Malden, Mass.–Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2000. p. 27.