

Authorship in Political Film Practice: A Reading in the Times of Digital Proliferation

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This paper is an attempt at interrogating the questions related to auteurism in political cinema in the digital era. Drawing from the theoretical interventions on Third Cinema and its call for social and political transformation, we focus on a new cluster of politically charged shorts, documentary films, alternate news videos, parodies, spoofs and film fragments that are circulated through online portals and offline platforms.¹ The paper will then go on to thoroughly scrutinize how the lens of authorship could be made more fruitful to examine these new tendencies of political film practices in our times.

The idea of authorship in this context must be problematized in several ways. To begin with, one can perhaps start asking whether the concept of “auteur”, an individual genius film practitioner, is an ideal frame to examine the sphere of political filmmaking that has been historically associated with collective and democratizing production and reception practices? Does the political film itself have a critique of the individual genius film maker as its ideology? As far as digital times are concerned, can we truly identify a single author in the times of fragmentation and amalgamation of diverse filmic and non-filmic materials? The paper will try to grapple with these questions and also attempt to investigate whether this current proliferation of diverse cinematic works through multiple digital interfaces encourages newer and alternative perspectives on our imaginings of the author.

“Political Cinema” in the Digital Era

The contemporary digital moment is witnessing an abundance of diverse film practices outside the spheres of both popular and art cinema.² The sphere of filmmaking continues to expand in scope with both original and reworked audio-visual content that circulates through multiple online platforms and diverse physical spaces. Significant changes in film culture through the rise of film clubs, alternative film festivals, online film

discussion forums, etc. have begun a new dialogue on video activism.³ A newly emerging cluster of politically energized short films, video documents, comic content like spoofs and parodies, etc. are being circulated by an assortment of contributors like university students, media activists, alternate news handles, political groups and human-rights collectives.

In this context, the questions around political cinema require a brief discussion. An important body of political films that have been theorized under the rubric of Third Cinema, emerged in Latin America in the 1960s. Third Cinema rose into prominence with a militant anti-colonial, anti-imperialist call for change and an exploration of newer cinematic languages to map local narratives of struggle and history (Armes, 1987). Third Cinema was inspired by a wave of film manifestos - Glauber Rocha's *Aesthetics of Hunger* (1965), Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's *Towards a Third Cinema* (1969) and Julio Garcia Espinosa's *For An Imperfect Cinema* (1969) (Martin, 1997).⁴ These manifestos shared a common thread, one that emphasized on the value of a militant alternative cinema in opposition to both commercial mainstream cinema and the auteur cinema of self-expression. The emancipatory function of cinema was viewed as fundamental along with the refusal to recommend a specific aesthetic form (Willemsen, 1994). It is also important to note that the criticality of third cinema lies not only in the radical transformations of the film form but also in significant changes in the mode of production through democratic working practices and reception through fostering of active spectatorship (Wayne, 2001).

The contemporary times are witnessing an upsurge of multiple cinematic forms like video shorts, documentaries, parodies, even fragments of popular film texts that circulate independent of the central narrative of the film. This digital moment doesn't seem to only stand for a diversification of forms but also a burgeoning of alternative modes and spaces for production, distribution

and reception. We see voices from marginal spaces and backgrounds translating their ideas into moving images which circulate often through unexpected territories of informal film festivals, campuses, factory gates, sites of protest demonstrations and different online platforms. Interestingly and perhaps paradoxically⁵, in its tendencies, this breed of content probably furthers the Third Cinema's ideology of cinematic investment in the spirit of political transformation. We would like to examine here the significance of the author, a very important category, to dissect these political filmmaking practices.

Auteurism and Its Discontents

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, auteurism debates took center stage in film criticism and theory. Auteurism had its roots in French film criticism of the late 1940s as a barometer for aesthetic assessment that drew from the writings of Alexandre Astruc who was at that time rallying behind an analogy between cinema and other arts like painting or writing, ushering in the filmmaker figure to embody the singular creative force, an artist unto himself. Astruc also coined the term "camera – pen", mapping how cinema was turning into a medium of personal expression like all other art forms (Graham, 1968). Astruc's theorization paved way for Francois Truffaut's famous manifesto-essay, "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema" published in the *Cahiers du Cinema* in 1954. Truffaut called out on the strategically manicured and stylistically formulaic films based on French classics, dubbing them "cinema de papa" (Daddy's Cinema). For Truffaut and his peers at the *Cahiers* an auteur's film should carry a signature style of the creative individual who made it. A case was specifically made for the distinguished personality of the director, one that needed to be made recognizable through the mise-en-scene, the thematic and stylistic disposition of narrative, a quality that should surface across the oeuvre of the individual genius. The *Cahiers* critics identified Hollywood directors like Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, Samuel Fuller et al as auteurs.

The auteur debate was introduced to the film scholarship in the United States by Andrew Sarris in his "Notes on the Auteur Theory" in 1962 where, in his hands, the auteur theory portrayed a film as an exclusive work by the director and also as an instrument for claiming the superiority of American Cinema (Sarris, 1968). Sarris's intervention drew severe criticism from the writing of Pauline Kael, another American film critic (Kael, 1971). The auteur theory, while ascertaining the primacy of the director-author, came under fierce attack several times for ignoring the collaborative aspect of film production.

For instance, Kael, in her thorough reading of Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941), a text considered as a classic for the study of the auteur model, argues how the film is highly influenced not only by Welles's authorial signature but also by the distinctive talents of writer Herman J. Mankiewicz and cinematographer Gregg Toland.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the interventions around auteurism in cinema further evolved. Film theorist Peter Wollen introduced the idea of "auteur-structuralism" in his book *Signs and Meaning in Cinema* (1969). According to auteur – structuralism, the author is a critical construct or structure rather than one individual genius. There were attempts to read cinematic elements which were beyond the conscious control of the author. At the same time, in the field of literary theory, the notion of the author as the sole creator of the text was being destabilized in the literary theorist Roland Barthes' landmark essay "The Death of the Author" (1968). Barthes thoroughly criticized the idea of explanation of any artistic work as a "voice of a single person" and brought to the fore the replacement of the author by the "destination" of the text, the reader. On the other hand, Michael Foucault (1969) also declared the "birth" of the author, in a specific historical time, thus historicizing the universal concept. He was pointing at the emergence of the idea of the author in the specific historical moment of the 18th century, the era of "individuation". These interventions resulted in the dissolution of the idea of the author as the sole producer of the text to the historically formed ways of reading or viewing.

Auteurism was also criticized, as Robert Stam has pointed out, by the ardent followers of experimental cinema, Third Cinema and through Marxist and Feminist interventions (Stam, 2000). Auteurism's extreme fascination for the commercial cinema completely marginalizes diverse avant-garde filmmaking practices. Third Cinema pioneers Solanas and Getino thoroughly criticized auteur cinema finding it politically compromising and open to appropriation in the dominant commercial practice of filmmaking. Marxists thoroughly denounced the ahistorical celebration of the auteur theory that claimed that individual geniuses would always prevail, whatever the political and economic scenario is. Feminist film historians criticized the boy's club masculinist tendencies of auteurism, by also trying to recognize female auteurs, an effort never made by conventional auteur theorists (Lewis, 1990). But in spite of all these criticisms, the lens of the auteur remains a significant critical tool to understand cinema, in both journalistic and academic discourses.

It is also important to note how the idea of auteur further gets complicated in filmmaking practices in the digital era. At the time of the shift from celluloid to digital,

a number of film scholars and critics had spoken about the death of cinema and the death of the auteur. One of the earliest statements about the demise of cinema came from Susan Sontag's writings (1996). Sontag lamented:

The theatrical release time of movies became shorter and shorter (like the shelf life of books in bookstores); many movies were designed to go directly into video. Movie theaters continued to close--many towns no longer have even one--as movies became, mainly, one of a variety of habit-forming home entertainments. ... In this country, the lowering of expectations for quality and the inflation of expectations for profit have made it virtually impossible for artistically ambitious American directors, like Francis Ford Coppola and Paul Schrader, to work at their best level. Abroad, the result can be seen in the melancholy fate of some of the greatest directors of the last decades.

The anxiety about cinema and its author is palpable in the time of demise of the big screen experience and the alleged degradation of cinematic images into diverse new technologies. On the other hand, several other scholars highlight the democratic potentials offered by digital technologies. Because of the relative affordability of digital equipment and diverse circulation platforms, the film viewer is being seen as often turning into the image-maker and the new author. Hito Steyerl (2009) maps the contemporary creative energies around remix, appropriation and experimentation where the user may also become editor, translator or co-author. The digital has, perhaps, resulted into a discourse about despair reeking off the end of cinema and the cinematic author, but what needs to be considered is how this shift has assisted interventions by offering spaces for new authors, often destabilizing the long-established hierarchy between the maker and the recipients of the filmic image.

Legally, sharing a post or reposting is now as much an offence as the production of "offensive" content in India. Shaheen Dhada was arrested under Section 66A of the IT Act, for writing a post which was allegedly offensive for Shiv Sainiks on the occasion of Bal Thackeray's death (Das, 2016). But, the deeply telling fact for us to note here, while dealing with the author, is that her friend Renu was arrested for "liking" the post. This makes the liker and sharer equally culpable legally as the author. This has serious theoretical implications for the idea of the author.

New Imaginings of the Auteur

In popular discourses and even in the interventions in Indian film studies, the idea of any kind of oppositional cinema (to the mainstream commercial), has almost always been ascribed with the skill, method, artistry and personality of individual directors. Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Shyam Benegal, Govind Nihalani and Anand Patwardhan have all been credited the authorial

power to produce critical or politically interventionist films. The extra-textual life of the films directed by these filmmakers, like discussions with audiences at screenings and seminars, commentaries and extra materials on DVDs also reflects the "author's" deep engagement in the creation of the filmic object. What often goes unaddressed though are the perspectives from the scriptwriter, cinematographer, cast, crew, staff and other professionals involved in the entire process of filmmaking.

The current digital moment has cultivated newer formal devices of cinematic production and exhibition spaces that have changed viewing habits and cultures of circulation. Does the authorial figure, in this new cinematic situation, gets problematized, perhaps even stand in for more than one author? *The Factory* (2015), directed by Rahul Roy, is a film that documents one of the most long-drawn industrial unrest in recent history: Maruti Suzuki factory workers' protests against the company administration in Manesar in Haryana that started in 2011. Roy, who has also shot the documentary, started filming on July 18, 2013, a year after the death of the general manager of Human Resources. The company alleged that the general manager died from beatings and suffocation after his floor caught fire, and 147 workers were jailed on murder charges. The workers, who had been demanding from the management their right to form a union for several months, countered that the general manager's death was an excuse to frame them and demonize the union. The documentary brought to public sphere the criminal prosecution of hundreds of workers exposing a widespread system of injustice. Roy has since been invited to various screenings and post-screening discussions as the director of *The Factory*. In an interview Roy remarked:

I filmed at a point when the movement was waning in terms of its public presence and the entire concentration was on the court cases. ... Where you place the camera reveals a lot about the film and filmmaker. I very consciously decided that the camera would always be on one side. It would look at the workers' angle, not in terms of becoming a PR job, but becoming observant to how they are dealing with the issues. (Ramnath, 2015)

It is important to note that Roy has previously directed a film titled *When Four Friends Meet*, which narrates the stories of four young men from Jahangirpuri, a working-class settlement in Delhi. He again picked up the story of the same four protagonists in a subsequent documentary *Till We Meet Again* in 2012. Clearly, much of Roy's works observes and explores working class lives in urban spaces. *The Factory*, while revolving around similar thematic tropes, consolidates Roy's authorial style in lieu of the very public nature of the Maruti movement and

prolonged legal battle. Roy's own association with the Maruti movement came through his filming, screening and circulation of *The Factory*. The idea of auteur of a documentary is here built not just by the filmic content but the specific venues and festivals where the film gets screened, the awards, circulation by words of mouths and critics' reviews.

In March this year, after more than four years of trial, 13 workers were convicted of murder and sentenced to life imprisonment in the Maruti case leading to widespread protests. It is interesting to note how a short video clip titled *A Letter from the Jailed Workers of Maruti Suzuki* (2017) uses, and perhaps subverts, the idea of the auteur. The video opens piecing together the Maruti administration's lawyers announcing the verdict to the press as the camera moves away from the court and the usual post-verdict media furor transitioning to the protest demonstrations in response. Worker's gathering at the factory gates, marching, sloganeering and reading a solidarity note, written by the convicted workers who are the union leaders of the plant to workers across the country who have stood in support of the Maruti workers struggle, is what makes up the content of the document. Three filmmakers, each of them with their own auteur images, Navdeep Sharma, Rahul Roy and Saba Dewan, who were present at both the court verdict and the demonstrations, filmed and edited the short clip while a network of political activists, trade unions, students and academicians helped circulate the film on social media. While Rahul remains one of the contributors of the film, should the tag of authorship not extend to the other two filmmakers? Or would it be appropriate to consider this clip a mere extension of *The Factory*? What about the circulation of the clip through political groups in their specific social media platforms? What does this circulation do to the authorship of the film? Isn't this clip more symbolic of a collective authorial style?

The present-day matrix of social media has also sprung on us the phenomenon of content being accessed through personal gadgets inculcating an audience that scrolls, clicks, likes, shares, copies, pastes and subscribes. Contemporary audio-visual content makers challenge conventional notions of the auteur as the single distinguishable personality of absolute creative value hence furthering this very query. Video Groups and Collectives, often sharing comedy as the common ideological aesthetic, produce and disseminate videos that often go viral online. One such team of innovators in the universe of online satirical viral videos is AIB (*All India Bakchod*) who make political sketches, film parodies, podcasts, web shows etc. for their multiple internet channels.

AIB also make available behind the scenes pictures,

bloopers, gig updates and other tidbits on their Facebook page and YouTube channel that makes known the production process, regularly breaking the fourth wall and interacting with the fans. The group's claim to internet popularity is their often-brazen news parodies, political humor and satire. Through SnapChat controversies and a growing online viewership, AIB has come to represent a network of comedy content producers with a distinct authorial style. Several other such groups have mushroomed across YouTube, in the past few years, that critique the politics of popular representation. Or as AIB explains in a video interview for an online magazine in reference to the misogynist content in the popular mainstream television series called *Comedy Nights with Kapil*, "we try and punch up at the system rather than punch down", a remark made on the misogynistic contents of the TV show. This putting up of a collective front by a motley group of stand-up comics could be read as another contemporary reflection of collaborative authorial stamp. A video produced by AIB titled *Harassment Through the Ages* featuring popular actors Richa Chaddha and Vicky Kaushal takes an 'honest' look (a part of a regular 'honest' look series) at how mainstream Bollywood songs have enabled and encouraged harassment over the decades, is one among the many parody videos that the group produces on the theme.

In terms of their textual nature, fragments of certain films also present an interesting case for collaborative authorship. For instance the 2014 film *Haider*, a modern-day adaptation of William Shakespeare's tragedy *the Hamlet* and an adaptation of Basharat Peer's memoir *Curfewed Night*, is set amidst the insurgency-hit Kashmir conflicts and civilian disappearances. The film drew criticism from several film critics for collapsing a long-drawn issue of political conflict into a titular personal narrative (Kamath, 2014). But the *aazadi* sequence from the film, located at the historic Lal Chowk clock tower in Srinagar, has since breathed a life of its own on social media portals, where it continues to be circulated from various accounts as a fragment independent of the feature length of the film. Would it then be sufficient if the authorial voice is accredited to Vishal Bhardwaj, the director of the film? Or does the anonymous editor of the clip, the original post that first ran it on social media, along with the subscribers-circulators, trouble the claim?

Do We Need an Auteur for Political Cinema?

Noted scholar James Naremore uses Giuliana Bruno's argument to problematize the undoing of the idea of auteur:

it is very important indeed for us to know who is speaking. Readers or viewers always decode messages by positing a

source, even if only an imaginary or unconscious one, and the source has a political meaning. ... a good many previously marginalized groups need some identification with authors to help shape their identities. Thus in a recent book on Italian director Elvira Notari, Giuliana Bruno poses a rhetorical question: "Can or should we consider as dead an author, such as the female author, who is yet to be fully established in the public sphere and theorized?" (Miller and Stam 2004, 22).

This is pertinent in this context because it talks about authorship in relation to marginalized groups, especially in the context of political film practices. The online environment today enables multiple contemporary forms of audio-visual activism like short video documents, mash-ups carrying messages of dissent, alternative reportage, candid cellphone videos recording protests, public address, police brutality and civil unrest. Networks of political organizations, students' collectives, worker's unions etc. run regular updates, protest videos, documentation of public meetings and demonstrations etc. on their YouTube, Twitter and Facebook pages. *Dalit Camera*, a YouTube channel through which a collective of video activists document perspectives on/voices of Dalits, Adivasis, Bahujans and Minorities explains in their 'about us' section,

We capture narratives, public meetings, songs, talks, discussion on Dalits. It is largely run by students and their expenses are mostly met by themselves. At present our people work in Hyderabad, Mumbai and Calcutta. Although we have people in other places we or they don't have cameras to capture. We would be happy if someone comes forward and supports us. We also need volunteers who can translate videos from Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, Marathi to English.

There are also instances of independent online publications, run by small groups of journalists, like *The Wire*, *Quint*, *Newslaundry*, etc. which have short videos in reportage style produced by field visit correspondents who travel in motley crews, and present another example of contemporary forms of audio-visual journalism via portals of alternative news handles. The videos, sometimes of high production value, don't respond to a singular auteur but rather to a group of content producers whose strategies may be situated within the market logics of social media and user-generated cultures but whose content and presentation functions as a rebuttal to the dominant mainstream narratives.

The need for these collective voices to stand in as author, as the alternative against mainstream jingoist journalism of today, has critical potency. We urgently need the *Newslaundry* or AIB version of news to counter the world of *Zee TV* – *Republic* – *Times Now*. So that the auteur here can perhaps transcend the idea of a mere individual signature style and become associated to a notion of a collective critical oppositional voice. The concept of the

auteur can also perhaps serve as an assault on convention and even a kind of resistance in some contexts.

Sometimes even the anonymity of the author-figure, or a particular screen persona to which the authorship of the handle is accredited, is another strategic move that could be read as problematizing the idea of the author. A YouTube handle from Haflong, Assam, that goes by the name Mr. India is an example. A video titled *No 1 Gau Rakshak* by this handle uses a collage of *gau raksha* posters from right-wing outfits as a man with half his face covered by hands-shaped glasses, sword raised high in one hand, ridicules the violence that the mushrooming *gau raksha dals* promise the country. The Facebook page, Mr India, describes him as a fictional character and so the signature of the author is transferred to his alias-like screen persona. The entire video carries a hard-hitting message, from the context of the North-East, on how it is mostly the unemployed youth who are brainwashed into joining these gangs and talks of how no one has forgotten Mohd. Akhlaq of Dadri. Things that contextualize political turmoil and the art that takes on the rise of the right-wing in the video are mockery of the Nazi salute, a mention of Patanjali salwar and the visual strategies that borrow from the remix ethos and aesthetics of mash-up videos online.

Personal narratives and accounts of lived experience are now surfacing more often in even the course of the current films reflecting the attempt to break out of conventional positioning of filmic subjects. A 26-minute documentary titled *Where Have You Hidden My New Moon Crescent* by Iffat Fatima, which is the story of Mughal Masi, a Kashmiri woman who died after waiting for 20 years for her son to return, explores narratives of loss and separation in the context of young men who disappeared allegedly due to the atrocities of the Indian army in Kashmir. Fatima's oeuvre, one that has received recent interest from progressive academic spaces, women's organizations etc., posits a contemporary example of a woman auteur, read for her commitment and prolific coverage of both the ruling powers' political failure and societal hierarchy imposed on women's lived experiences.

So, how do we rethink the idea of authorship? Here, I would like to draw from Robert Stam, who places authorship in the intersections of biography, an intertext, an institutional context, and a historical moment (Stam and Miller 2000). Stam's idea of the "intertext" is interesting, because it relates to fragmentations, combinations and recirculation of video shorts, alternative films and other such examples taken up in this paper. The institutional context and time are significant in this regard as they overhaul the idea of the author at a moment where the corporate nexus threatens to dictate almost every film and media imagery. In this spirit, there is perhaps a need

to rethink the traditional conception of the author and move beyond the idea of an individual genius to reading the filmic text as the site of encounter of filmmakers or groups of filmmakers where a process is developed around intertextuality and the specific socio-political context and time.

Notes

1. The genre of shorts loosely refers to film texts of comparatively shorter duration than the mainstream commercial ventures. Through the history of filmmaking, this genre has always found a place in practice, even if marginal. But in the contemporary digital moment the shorts have resurfaced and caught on as a significant trend because of multiple and flexible exhibition platforms. On the other hand, earlier, a piece torn from the "main text" and circulating need not have been noticed as having a separate identity at all. But, the digital era has also produced the technological possibility of tearing away a fragment or producing a fragment accessible to a large audience. Therefore, its visual circulation which produces the possibility of an independent text emerging in new contexts is much more now. Mechoulan for instance, grapples with the problem of archiving of texts in the digital era (Mechoulan 2011, 92).
2. The term art cinema is generally defined as a film practice in opposition to the commercial mainstream cinema. Film theorists have identified the emergence of art films with particular strands of filmmaking in European Cinema in the post - Second World War era with distinct formal and thematic conventions, specialized exhibition venues and often associated with "high culture". But, in the post - television, post - multiplex and digital times, there was an alleviation of the traditional opposition between culture and entertainment, and also art and commercial cinema. (Betz, 2009, Galt and Schoonover, 2010).
3. For instance, film festivals organized by *Cinema of Resistance*, is one such example of the many recent efforts to create democratic screening spaces away from the exclusivity of festival circuits (Suman, 2011).
4. Michael Martin, in his book *New Latin American Cinema*, Volume I, traces the theories, development and transcontinental articulations of Latin American film practices. In the section on theoretical trajectories, Martin compiled the manifestos penned by Rocha, Solanas and Getino, Espinosa and others Latin American film practitioners.
5. Paradoxical, because the digital moment is also the globalization moment of the capital. French social philosopher Andre Gorz(2010) speaks about the 1990s economic boom and its subsequent collapse in 2008 stemmed from an "immaterial" consumption of symbols and ideas.

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Filmography

Citizen Kane, 1941. Dir. Orson Welles

The Factory, 2015. Dir. Rahul Roy

A Letter from the Jailed Workers of Maruti Suzuki. 23 March, 2017. Dir. Saba Dewan, Rahul Roy, Navdeep Sharma

Haider, 2014. Dir. Vishal Bharadwaj

Where Have You Hidden My New Moon Crescent, 2013. Dir. Iffat Fatima https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZK_J96O6gQ

When Four Friends Meet, 2011. Dir. Rahul Roy <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFHd0qYPPJs>

Harassment Through The Ages feat. Richa Chadha, Vicky Kaushal, 2016. Produced by AIB (All India Bakchod) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzRwawgzeTw>

GAU RAKSHAK NO.1, 2017. Mr. India <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEZqUtw8oUg>

All India Bakchod's Tanmay Bhat & Khamba talk Bollywood & more, 2016. Published by HARAVTAAR <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQjqaZr9YhE>