

The Auteur Theory, Style in Film and Your Choices as a Young Filmmaker

There seems to be some romantic notions floating around the term “Auteur” (French for author) and the “Auteur Theory” in regards to film. There also seems to be a hefty cynicism around what’s considered “mainstream” filmmaking, which is more widely acknowledged as a communal effort as opposed to the single-visioned, director-dominated auteur approach. Now, as healthy as I believe that cynicism to be, it may also be a bit misinformed by a great many who carry it around with them, hoping to be the next big filmmaker (I include myself in that generalization). The fact is, all film is a communal effort, and the idea of the aloof artistic director is a myth, or perhaps more astutely, a hoax.

In practice, the Auteur Theory simply means the director is the author of the film and has final authority over artistic decision making, but every one of those decisions are executed through a group effort with specialists from every department weighing in on the crossroads in front of them. Poems are often written by one poet. Paintings are usually created by one artist. Movies are made by villages.

So disregard all the stories you’ve been told about Stanley Kubrick. Yes, he was a perfectionist, but firstly he was a leader for his crew, a general who inspired obedience to the artistic principles of his projects, and he always put his films before himself. Being an auteur isn’t solely about control, but being able to work jointly with others to ‘put together a universe.’ It’s knowing when to take charge and when to relinquish your white-knuckled death grip to create something uniquely yours out of the minutia of a thousand ideas.

I say this not to discourage, but with the desire to share crucial knowledge I had to simply discover on my own. My goal isn’t to dash dreams, but to give any aspiring filmmaker out there a solid and realistic head-start. Going into the industry now, with more freedom of choice than we’ve ever had, it’s good to know what exactly your choices are and what methods are most suitable to finding success once you’ve made your choice. You can be the free-spirited auteur or you can climb that treacherous yet rewarding ladder of Hollywood.

The first thing you must do when putting your dreams of making movies into action is: know what kind of filmmaker you want to be NOW. Worry about tomorrow...tomorrow. You’ll grow and change naturally, but you need to understand what portion of the creative side you want to call home and how your

choice equates to the business side of filmmaking. And yes, the business *side* is often two-thirds of your filmmaking experience and usually means an uphill battle in executing your vision. But to accept the fact that calling yourself a filmmaker also means branding yourself a businessman is an enormous advantage and one way to avoid getting discouraged. Learn everything about the industry, relish in the negotiations, the fights, the compromises, be extremely humble and thankful for every opportunity you receive, educate and prepare yourself, learn how to sell yourself, your ideas and your finished film. Find out what *they* want from *you*. It is often the first step in getting them to think what *you* want is what *they* want. Auteur or not, all of this applies if you want your films to go further than your DVD player.

Right now, more than ever, is the time where this choice I'm talking about really exists. Thirty years ago in America, our only option was Hollywood. Not anymore. Independent film is bigger than ever. Internet distribution is a real and present way to get your work to the world. So, clearly define if you want to *be* the system or if you want to *use* the system. Each answer has its benefits and its pitfalls and it depends on what you want to get out of this field. Moviemaking more than any other art is polarized. You can use it to make unimaginable riches or you can use it to create supreme art. Not often enough do both those things happen simultaneously.

Now, if you choose the auteur route, know what exactly it means and use the responsibility wisely. Some confuse auteur for "style." Not so. This is where most people are misinformed. Putting your stamp on your films doesn't always mean saturating the movie with particular stylistic choices. And there's no definitive practice of filmmaking that implements style or uses it sparingly. There are independent auteurs and mainstream hack-jobs alike that use and misuse style in their films. The giant of American cinema Sidney Lumet (a self-identified resister of the auteur theory) refused to acknowledge an identifiable style in his work, instead demanding that his "style" be completely unnoticeable picture to picture and be dictated by the films' themes. An auteur who shared this sentiment was one of the greats of world cinema Louis Malle. If you took two of his films *Murmur of the Heart* and *My Dinner with Andre* and showed them to a person unaware of who Malle was, I doubt very highly they would know the same person directed the films.

Other directors have a subtle yet undeniable style, such as Kubrick. He was a filmmaker that never fell into cliché or repetition. He never pandered to his audience, but within one minute of watching his movies you know they're his.

And Kubrick was one of the few successful hybrids between ultimate auteur and studio golden boy, but he achieved that status by making consistent critically acclaimed and financially viable motion pictures. The fact that they were also true art only stands to show Kubrick as one of the great filmmakers to ever live.

And then, alas, there are the filmmakers who use style to make up for lack of substance. There are the Oliver Stones of the world, the Quentin Tarantinos, the Paul Thomas Andersons, the filmmakers who coast on style; very talented people, no doubt, but filmmakers, in my opinion, who sacrifice story and substance for trivial, unoriginal fluff that becomes more of a trademark, a slogan, than it does an unconscious exercise in style.

In a film style must be achieved organically. It must come from what the film demands. Lumet, a gun for hire (for lack of a better term) didn't write his own material and he doesn't particularly have an "agenda" that he wanted his films to express. Therefore, he could become invisible within his films, and rightfully so. Directors like Ingmar Bergman and Federico Fellini on the other hand, men who conceived, wrote and produced their films (either in part or in whole) had a world view, a life idea that they tried to convey again and again in their films, and it went beyond Bergman's close-ups or Fellini's seashore circuses. What emerged out of their burning, raw passions, their obsessive desires was the elusive, dangerous, undeniable face we all know. It was their style.