Introduction: Reanimating the Auteur

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Despite the contemporary emphasis on plurality and diversity as *de facto* good things, it seems that there only a very limited number of approaches to interpreting film. There are two basic steps in producing an interpretation. The first is to choose the subject of the interpretation and could be called the primary taxonomic (of course, there are always more taxonomic levels, and even, possibly, different taxonomical systems). The second step is to produce a judgement of that subject based on what is often termed a "methodology". The problem, if it is indeed a problem, is that there seem to be only a small number of taxonomical choices and an even smaller number of possible "judgemental" methodologies.

In order to determine the subject of an interpretive discourse (let us, for the moment, pretend that we understand what an "interpretive discourse" is), the interpreter must have access to a system of division, which we will call a taxonomy (helpfully defined by the OED as a "classification of anything"). This system of division would be based on "common characteristics or affinities" which, one presumes, could be negative as well as positive. So we could divide a set of films into those that feature pomegranates and those that do not. In fact, one could produce an entire taxonomy of film based on the occurrence, or otherwise, of fruit within the diegetic universe. Whether this would be useful would really depend on the ingenuity of the interpreter (or the sudden revelation that god is a fruit).

More prosaically, film is taxonomically divided from other narrative forms (such as the novel, the television series and the extended joke) in terms of its physical medium.

Assuming that this is a straightforward process - which in many ways it is not since the simple ontology of film is more often assumed rather than actually discussed - it is then possible to divide films (or parts of films) into a number of categories. These categories are not as numerous as we might suppose. I would speculatively suggest that these are the general film divisions:

- Genre
- Actor
- Nationality
- Economic process of production
- Theme (understood broadly as "recurring element")
- Technological innovation (sound, colour)
- Auteur (or director)

It is this last possible division that has been the cause of much debate in film studies. I will not here repeat this familiar story (which is well presented most recently by Robert Buss (2006) and many others) but will move straight to a consideration of why dividing films into sets dependent on who their director happens to be might be problematic.

The first objection is one based on Beardsley and Wimsatt's "intentional fallacy" (1954): the presumption that the "internal" evidence as to a text's meaning (and, again, we will assume that we understand the meaning of "meaning") is stronger than any "external" evidence, including its author's biography and even the stated interpretation of that author. This, however, is not to say that a group of films attributed to the same director may not have some commonalities that another set of films with differing directors might not have. Nevertheless, Beardsley and Wimsatt point to a deeper problem, which is the conception that there might exist an unmediated communication between one person and another. The medium of communication, as both Saussure and Derrida have been at pains to point out, is not an impartial courier but is very much part of that which might possibly be communicated. There is no outside the text (nor is there really an inside the text…).

A second objection to the importance accorded to the auteur (and it is not certain that outside of academic circles all that much importance is in fact given to this entity) is that the process of film creation is one that depends on multiple decisions made by many people in widely varying circumstances. Some studies have concentrated on other figures such as the producer, cinematographer, editor or screenwriter but it would appear that

the role of the director, explicitly seen as the organiser of the event of filming, is one that has been usefully fruitful.

A third objection is that an emphasis on the auteur creates canons of texts that quickly become ossified and about which a doctrinaire criticism quickly arises. The problem of canon formation cannot, however, be simply solved by disregarding the auteur. This issue is discussed here in Claudia Kotte's review of Jonathan Rosenbaum's *Essential Cinema: On the Necessity of Film Canons* (87 – 90). I might also suggest that the reader consider Christopher Long's discussion of Rosenbaum's work (2006).

However, all these objections, or variations of them, could well be aimed at any other method of creating a taxonomy of film. Almost all the books reviewed in this issue of *Film-Philosophy* are in some way concerned with an auteur's oeuvre or with a singe film by an auteur. The exceptions are Kotte on Rosenbaum (mentioned above), Gardena on Tarr's book on *Beur* filmmaking (perhaps a sub-category of the national taxonomic) and Wright on Cook's *Screening the Past* (although this in part concentrates on the work of Scorsese). It is thus clear that the auteur appears to be alive and well. Or, rather, that the auteur is as useful (or useless) a category as any other.

The utility of the taxonomy cannot depend on some intrinsic notion of "correct" division (any film can always be part of some other taxonomy). It is here that we come to the second order of interpretation, which I call "judgement". It is a commonplace to tell undergraduate film students not to indulge in *evaluation* (is this film "good" or "bad") but rather to produce *interpretations*. But, while this is a helpful distinction, it is also clear that certain films allow for more interesting interpretations than others. I realise that this is a contentious point, especially with the rise over the last twenty years or so of a certain validation of the "popular" film. A rise, I would argue, that has demanded the appearance of an empirical positivism in film criticism since the films themselves have little to offer other than being examples of current consumer tendencies.

In order to "judge" a film a methodology of some sort must be applied and here, I think, we can take "methodology" to mean "politics". Thus the critic must have a political stance towards his or her subject if their interpretation is to be anything other than a mere taxonomy. To choose to discuss the work of a single director is not a political choice (or, rather, it is as political as choosing to discuss anything at all) but what one chooses to say about that auteur is. This, of course, brings up a much broader question: what is film criticism for? What is it that "interpretation" is trying to achieve? Here I can only briefly

suggest that it is in the institutions of interpretation (of which *Film-Philosophy* is of course a part) that we should look for an answer. What investment does the critic have in his or her criticism? Perhaps it is time for a philosophy of the film critic rather than of the film.

It is here that the specificity of a *philosophy* of film exists: that our emphasis is on film criticism rather than on film itself (and let us, finally, pretend that we know what film – itself – is).

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Bibliography

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