Title of the Module:
Auteur Theory

Theoretical conceptualization of auteur, in the context of cinema, has its fountainhead in the highly prestigious French film journal, Cahiers du Cinema (Notebooks on Cinema) which had started its publication from Paris, the capital city of France in 1951. Cahiers du Cinema was cofounded by following three French cinema critics: Andre Bazin, Marie Lo Duca and Doniol Valcroze. Prior to the launch of Cahiers du Cinema, these film critics were associated with another film magazine, Revue du Cinema (Review of Cinema) which had been in publication since 1928 to 1948. Cahiers du Cinema, which is still being published, is considered to be the intellectual space out of which Auteurism or Auteur Theory originated and further developed.

Learning Objectives
To enable the learner to:
1) understand the concept of auteur in Film Studies
2) grasp the essential characteristics of Auteurship
3) familiarize with a few auteurs and their films
4) follow a few theoretical models of auteur theory

The lexeme 'auteur' is considered to be the French linguistic equivalence of the English lexeme 'author'. Traditionally, literary authors have been credited with a creative and intellectual aura around them. However, till the emergence of auteur theory, or Auteurism in mid-1950s, film directors were not credited at par with literary authors. It was with the French New Wave films that Auteurism got established as a practice in French cinema. French filmmaker, Claude Chabrol's La Beau Serge (Handsome Serge), which was released in 1958, could be considered as one of the first auteur films in the French New Wave movement. Auteur theory proposes that a film director has to be acknowledged as the most important creative factor behind the execution of a movie. Auteur directors invariably leave a signature style in their movies. It is believed that the fundamental touchstones of Auteurship were offered by the French film theoreticians like Andre Bazin and Alexandre Astruc. Andre Bazin always believed that a film is basically the conception of its director. Proposing the idea of camera-stylo or camera-pen, Alexandre Astruc provided further explication to auteur theory. Just like a literary author uses the pen to achieve the uniqueness of his writings, a film director imagines a unique mise-en-scene to create a distinct visual language. An auteur is the primary agent who uniquely assembles various departments of film production so as to bring all of them together into the making of a particular cinematic craft. With his camera-pen the auteur writes the cinema text by combining the various visual, aural, textual and editing elements in a film. Later on, Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut became the forerunners of the Auteur Theory.

Andrew George Sarris, the American film critic, "coined the term 'auteur theory' to describe the contention that the director is the vital creative force of a movie" (Britannica). It was in his essay "Notes on the Auteur Theory", published in 1962, that Andrew Sarris coined the term 'auteur theory'.

The theory of the auteur still eludes a precise definition, as most of the theoretical conceptualizations on films do. Andrew Sarris acknowledges that it was the theoretical writings on cinema which appeared in the Cahiers do Cinema that laid the foundations of auteur theory. Sarris, at the beginning of his essay makes it clear that auteur theory does not attribute a gift of prophecy and any extracinematic caliber to cinema directors. It also has to be noted that auteurs need not exhibit a cent percent stylistic consistency always. Sarris says that, "The badness of a

director is not necessarily considered the badness of a film" (562). There can be many films with high entertainment values, which even do not thrive on the single intellectual capacity of its directors. Film like the Cherry Orchard, and One-Eyed Jack cannot be called director's films. These films make their impact not primarily with their directors' ability, but with other factors like celebrity actors, theme, cinematography, editing and so on.

Andrews Sarris also observes that all films could not be brought under the critical lens of auteur theory. He says, "Obviously, the auteur theory cannot possibly cover every vagrant charm of cinema" (562) Films like The Longest Day cannot be considered under Auteurism, according to Andrew Sarris.

Sarris proposed the following three theoretical premises of the Auteur Theory.

1. Technical Competency of Auteur
According to Andrew Sarris, "the first premise of the auteur theory is the technical competence of a director as a criterion of value" (562). If the director does not a have the basic technical competency, he will automatically be out of the auteur pantheon. Even though the directorial talent is very abstract in nature, an auteur director exhibits an allrounder's grip over the various aspects of film conception, filmmaking, film technology etc. Firstly, an auteur director has to be a good director. To take an example from India, Satyajit Ray is considered to be an essential auteur. Ray's *Charulata* proclaims beyond doubt the auteur status of Ray. His talent in all areas of filmmaking, scripting, direction, music, editing etc. turned him into an auteur.

2. Signature Style of Auteur
Auteurship is primarily detected through a few consistent signature stylistic traits found across the cinematic oeuvre of a particular director. "The second premise of the auteur theory is the distinguishable person personality of the director as a criterion of value. Over a group of films, a director must exhibit recurrent characteristic of style, which serve as his signature. The way a film looks and moves should have some relationship to the way a director think and feels" (Sarris, 562). Sarris explains this with special reference to Hollywood movies as he believes that American directors are forced to express their filmic personality through the particular visual handling of cinematic materials, rather than through the literary merit of the content. It is the auteurship talent that provides the signature visual idiom of a film. Films of Douglas Sirk and Otto Preminger are cited to establish their Auteurism. Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* is one of the films which is often cited as an example of cinema as a work of art that reveals the significant style of its author, i.e., the director. An auteur is supposed to be a "metteur en scene" or a scene setter. The consistency and uniqueness of the auteur scenography would be visible across the body of his cinema.

3. The Auteurist Soul or Interior Meaning
More than what is materially manifested in the body of the film and its aesthetic distinguishability, the presence of an auteur in a film is experienced by the spectator in a rather abstract way. Auteur cinema has a larger semantic and aesthetic interiority attached with it. The tension between the film director and the cinematic materials at his disposal produces the soul of cinema. In Sarris' words, "The third ultimate premise of auteur theory is concerned with interior meaning, the ultimate glory of cinema as an art. Interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension between a director's personality and his material. The conception of interior meaning comes close to that Astruc defines as mise-en-scene, but not quite. It is not quite the vision of the world a director projects nor quite his attitude toward life. It is ambiguous in any literary sense, because of part of it is imbedded in the stuff of the temperature of the director

on the set, and that is close approximation of its professional aspect" (562-563). Sarris further clarifies that by the 'soul' of an auteur he means "that intangible difference between one personality and another, all other things being equal. Sometimes the difference is expressed by no more than a beat's hesitation in the rhythm of a film" (563). Andrew Sarris, suggests the following sequence in Jean Renoir's film *La Regle du Jeu* (The Rule of the Game, 1939)

Graphical Visualization of Auteur Theory

Andrew Sarris, presents a graphic model to comprehend the idea of auteur more clearly. "Three premises of the auteur theory may be visualized as three concentric circles: the outer circle as technique; the middle circle, personal style; and the inner circle, interior meaning. The corresponding role of the director may be designated as those of a technician, a stylist, and an *auteur*." However, there is no path that a director could be graduated to the status of an auteur. Some filmmakers evolve from metteur en scene to an auteur; others can move from auteur to metteur en scene.

Auteur theory, as an intellectual enterprise to highlight the role of the director as the most significant single element in moviemaking, has developed through various theoretical formulations. It was not developed by a single theoretical school or with a fixed manifesto; but with different types of critical contributions from different intellectual quarters. Peter Wollen says that, "The *auteur* theory does not limit itself to acclaiming the director as the main author of a film. It implies an operation of decipherment; it reveals authors where not had seen before" (563). This statement means that with the notion of auteurship, many filmmakers who had been pushed to anonymity were brought into the attention of film scholars and cinephiles. "In fact, the auteur theory itself is a pattern theory in constant flux (563)", according to Sarris.

Peter Wollen mentions two major schools of auteur critics: The Semantic School, and the Formalist School. The Semantic School of auteur scholarship concentrated on the exploration of the meanings and motifs in a films. On the contrary, The Formalist School of auteur scholarship concentrated on the exploration of the signature stylistic features of auteur cinema revealed primarily through the films mise-en-scene.

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith offers a 'structural approach' by explicating auteur theory further. This approach predicates two levels of structures in an auteur cinema: one the external apparent characteristics, and the second, the hidden internal characteristics. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's structural approach to auteur theory resembles Saussurean linguistic binary of the externally manifested parole and the internally structured langue. Nowell-Smith elaborates the structural approach further in the following words. "One essential corollary of the theory as it has been developed is the discovery that the defining characteristics of an author's work are not necessarily those which are most readily apparent. Th purpose of criticism thus becomes to uncover behind the superficial contrasts of subjects and treatment a hard core of basic and often recondite motifs. The pattern formed by these motifs … is what gives an author's work its particular structure, both defining it internally and distinguishing one body of work from another" (qtd. in Wollen, 18).

The films of American auteur Howard Hawks, though externally look different as per generic classification, exhibit a consistency in thematic motifs, according to Peter Wollen. In spite of each film's external differences, almost all the films of Hawks "exhibit the same thematic preoccupations, the same recurring motifs and incidents, the same visual style and tempo. In the same way Roland Barthes constructed a species of *homo racinianus*, the critic can construct

a homo howksianus, the protagonist of Hawksian values in the problematic Hawksian world. Hawks achieved this by reducing the genres into two basic types: the adventure drama and the crazy comedy. These two types express inverse views of the world, the positive and negative poles of Hawksian vision" (Wollen, 81).

John Ford, the American film director, is another example of an auteur filmmaker, in whose films the recurrent theme of death and heroism could be detected as the internally consistent elements. Peter Wollen fixes the auteurship of John Ford in the following fashion. "All these directors [including John Ford] are concerned with the problem of heroism. For the hero, as an individual, death is an absolute limit which cannot be transcended: it renders the life which preceded it meaningless, absurd. How then can there be any meaningful individual action during life? How can individual action have any value? —be heroic—if it cannot have transcendent value because of the absolutely devaluing limit death? John Ford finds answer to this question by placing and situating the individual within society and within history, specifically within American history. Ford finds transcendent values in the historic vocation of America as a nation, to bring civilization to a savage land, the garden to the wilderness" (81).

Establishing auteurship is a critical practice, not a subjective initiations of filmmakers; auteurship is attributed from outside, not claimed by the film directors. There are three important scholastic considerations behind the formulation of the idea of the auteur. Separate analysis of individual films by a filmmaker, understanding of paradigm shifts across the filmography of a filmmaker and, a critical comprehension of the underlying homogeneity distributed throughout her filmography. Therefore, ascribing auteurship is a complex process of the comprehension of the totality of a filmmaker's politics, aesthetics, idiom and finally his philosophy of life. Peter Wollen mentions that, once Jean Renoir famously commented that a director spends his whole life making one film. Wollen lays out the practical method of proving auteurship in the following words: "Of course, the director does not have full control over his work; this explains why the auteur theory involves a kind of decipherment, decryptment. A great many features of films analysed have to be dismissed as indecipherable because of 'noise' from the producer, the cameraman or even the actors. …. What the auteur theory does is to take a group of film—the work of one director—and analyse their structure. Everything irrelevant to this, everything non-pertinent is considered logically secondary, contingent, to be discarded, …. It is as though a film is a musical composition rather than a musical performance, although whereas a musical composition exists a priori (like a scenario), an auteur film is constructed a posteriori" (104-105).

In the context of filmic adaptation of literary work, how does the theory of auteur operate? When literary masterpieces are adapted into films, whose authorship will prevail in the film? The literary author's or the filmic authors? Auteur theory essentially acknowledges only the filmic author's contribution. "What the auteur theory demonstrates is that the director is not simply in command of a performance of a pre-existing text; he is not, or need not be, only a metteur en scene." For an auteur, a literary work is only a trigger that ignites his cinematic imagination. Wollen elaborates on the minor connection between a literary work and a cinematic adaptation of it by an auteur. "Incidents and episodes in the original screenplay or novel can act as catalysts [as Don Siegel opined]; they are agents introduced in the mind (conscious or unconscious) of the auteur and reacts there with the motifs and themes characteristics of his work. The director does not subordinate himself to another author; his source is only a pretext, which provides catalysts, scenes which fuse with his own preoccupations to produce a radically new work. Thus the manifest process of performance, the treatment of a subject, conceals the latent production of a quite new text, the production of

the director as an *auteur*." In fact, the literary author dies in cinematic adaptation in the hands of the filmic auteur.

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