

Visual Parallels Between Two Auteur Directors In Hindi Cinema: VishalBhardwaj & Sanjay Leela Bhansali

Sanika Kulkarni

Assistant Professor

Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth

Abstract:

The term Auteur is commonly referred to directors who apply highly consolidated and subjective control to many aspects of a collaborative creative work; they are considered equivalent to authors of a novel or a play. In simple terms, the director of the film is the author; it is his vision of how the film should be presented and everyone in the production process is just assisting it. Though there have been several examples proving the term Auteurs and legitimizing the director as the author, this theory has faced a lot of backlashes especially from the radical critics posing that the process of cinema is that of collaboration and teamwork. Some of the critics still state that this gives the director a sense of ownership and film can be seen only as a work of a collective and not as a work of a single person.

What these critics fail to take in consideration is that even before the existence of Auteur theory, directors were still considered to be the most important among the people working on film. After various studies, critics coined the term and they identified that each director had individual stylistic techniques as well as specific things which were prevalent in their respective films. An examination of film authorship should cover the evolution of authorship theory from the 1960s to the present.

The following study will talk about the different aspects of authorship revolving this theory; proving it by presenting case studies of films directed by well-known Hindi film directors Vishal Bhardwaj and Sanjay Leela Bhansali.

Key Words: *Auteur, Directors, Authorship, Cinema, Visual Representation, Aesthetics*

Introduction:

Cinema is one of the most admired media of communication. Through cinema, the director communicates with the audience. The present study will analyse films with clear application of auteur theory and approach of film criticism, to dig up meanings from the texts and arrive at a conclusion that auteur directors are the ones who present thematic, stylistic consistencies and articulate unique worldview and philosophy in their films.

History & Origin of Auteur Theory

“Authorship does matter,” says Janet Staiger, because it addresses the difficulty of acknowledging credit behind a movie (Gerstner and Staiger 27). It is important to understand who is responsible for making of a film when giving out analysis. Not just for analysis, but it also covers credit giving while giving out recognitions and awards as well as the reason behind the failure of the production. Film authorship theories fall under one among three categories: auteur, writer, or collaborative. Classic auteur theory has commanded much of film scholar debate since the 1960s. While critics and students can debate for eternity on topics of authorship, the important issue is what filmmakers actually practice during production. But before stepping into the thematic and aesthetic logistics behind the making of a film, one must understand the theory in itself.

Early German film theorist Walter Julius Bloem credited the film to being an art for the masses, and therefore the masses being familiar with regard someone who gives the ultimate product (in this case, the director) as an artist, and people who contribute before (i.e. screenwriters) as apprentices. Likewise, James Agee, one of the most famous film critics of the 1940s, said that “the best films are personal ones, made by forceful directors”. Around the same time, the French film critics André Bazin and Roger Leenhardt became advocates for the idea that it's the administrators who bring the film to life and use the film to precise their thoughts and feelings about the topic matter also as a worldview as an “auteur”. They emphasised that auteur directors can use lighting,

camerawork, staging and editing to add to their vision.

The French magazine *Cahiers du cinéma* was founded in 1951 and it quickly gained recognition for its witty and quirky remarks on films and its articles focusing on the roles of directors. François Truffaut criticized the prevailing "Cinema of Quality" trend in France in his 1954 essay "Une certaine tendance du cinéma français" ("A certain tendency in French cinema"). He said that these films are made by faithful directors who follow the script which is as good as an adaptation of a literary novel. The director was used a "stager" who simply adds the performers and pictures to an already completed script. Truffaut argued that the administrators who had authority and adaptability over the way to realise the script

were those who made better films. He coined the phrase "La politique des auteurs" ("The policy of the authors") to explain his view. These discussions took place at the beginning of the French New Wave in cinema.

Jerry Lewis was one of the earliest Hollywood studio-system actor-turned-directors to be critiqued as an auteur, who with his first self-direction 'The Bellboy' gained a lot of accreditation and praise. His films focused both on the business as well as the creative production: writing, directing, lighting, editing and direction. He earned consistent praise by French critics in both *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Positif*. His singular mis-en-scene, and skill behind the camera, was aligned with Howard Hawks, Hitchcock and Satyajit Ray. Jean-Luc Godard said, "Jerry Lewis...is the only one in Hollywood doing something different, the only one who isn't falling in with the established categories, the norms, the principles..... Lewis is the only one today who's making courageous films. He's been able to do it because of his personal genius".

Andrew Sarris, well-known Hollywood critic is credited for the origin of Auteur theory in America and actually popularising it by coining the term in his 1962 essay, "Notes on the Auteur Theory." He began applying its methods to Hollywood films, and expanded his thoughts in his book "The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929–1968". The impact of Sarris's work was that critical and public attention on each film focused less on its stars and more on the general product. In the 1960s and the 1970s, the filmmaking industry was revitalized by a new generation of directors. Known as the New Hollywood era, these directors were given increased control over their projects. Studios showed an increased willingness to let directors take risks.

At its heart, auteur theory promotes the director because the author of a movie. Behind every movie lies a director with a vision. The director is responsible for giving a particular film its distinctive style and representation value. Many motion pictures are extensively guided by a director from the script to completion of the final output. For instance, Alfred Hitchcock's films are recognizable not just for their story and stylistic elements but also for his standardized production method. According to Truffaut, an auteur transforms the film into something personal, "an expression of his own personality".

Criticism of Auteur Theory

Feature films are never made by a single person. From the writer to the director to the studio executives, many ideas and hours of hard work go into collaborating on a film production.

Many researchers argue that one theory of authorship will never answer the question for all films. But then again, studying the work of filmmakers is one way to improve the production value of a film.

Researchers discuss that the process of filmmaking aligns with a more collaborative form of authorship than other artistic media. While some films are recognized for their direction or writing style, their true authorship lies in the intentionality of the collective that produced the final product. The art department's contribution is arguably no less important than the camera department in bringing the story to the big screen. Many argue that even the director and producer's power on set may be debatable considering the impact of actor input, assistant director's duties and technicians' crafting.

More recently, theorists have delved into the cultural context in which French New Wave critics birthed the auteur theory in order to explain the original idea as well as revise it for contemporary critique. Andre Bazin, a critic with the *Cahiers du Cinema* wrote, 'The evolution of Western art towards personalization should definitely be considered a step forward, but only so long as...[it]

doesn't claim to define culture". As mentioned previously, Sarris argued that auteur films gave them more value in society than other films. Bazin argued the theory should not be used in this way because it perverts the entire idea the creators had in mind.

Critic and theorist Pauline Kael wrote that Sarris's breakdown of the auteur theory in "Notes on Auteur Theory" (1962) relies on "incongruous premises and incorrect assumptions". Kael considered Sarris to "lack rigor" and be "undisciplined". Many critics agree that auteur theory is fraught with logical problems. For example, auteurism unnaturally elevates the director's place within production and judges films based on their directorial work rather than as an solo artistic work. Charles Eckert complains there is "so much oversimplification, obtuseness and downright unfairness running through the whole debate." Historically, critics have attempted to design formulas and methods with which to recognize auteurs separately from the others.

Objectives of the Research

1. To understand the true nature of study behind auteur theory
2. To prove and examine the auteur theory with practical support of films with visual representation
3. To understand the work of two directors as auteurs – Vishal Bhardwaj and Sanjay Leela Bhansali through their visual and aesthetic cinema

Methodology

This research will look at filmmakers Vishal Bhardwaj and Sanjay Leela Bhansali through analysis and examples from their films. It will analyze their methods and understand how they prove existence of authorship within the director. Summary of their movies as case studies will allow for a more in-depth analysis and review into the director's work.

Each case study will provide evidence for both of the director's production methods which make their style auteuristic. This evidence will then be used as a practical support for the theory.

Analysis

Auteur study has become very common and important in the field of film studies. Although, auteur theory was almost abandoned long ago yet it is still relevant in the field of film studies. Auteur studies of renowned directors like Alfred Hitchcock, David Lynch, Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, etc. have been conducted in the past. As far as Indian cinema is concerned, auteur studies of directors have not been carried out in the academic field. No doubt, Indian cinema has produced great directors and legends but filmmakers like Guru Dutt, Mehboob Khan, Satyajit Ray, Raj Kapoor and Gulzar should be studied in more depth in the academic framework. The present study focuses on present day directors who have auteuristic styles in their work viz. Vishal Bhardwaj and Sanjay Leela Bhansali.

Cinema as an Art & Visual Form

Before we jump into the logistics of the directors and the study of their work, we need to understand cinema and how it has been evolved as an art and visual form.

Cinema, the fusion of several arts including painting, dance, music, poetry, sculpture, architecture, photography, editing, etc. is a unique art. What makes cinema unique is its life like quality. People on the screen can be seen walking, talking, laughing, and multiple other activities and countless emotions. Although the action of a cinema does not take place in realtime or in real life, yet it is believable. What distinguishes cinema from other arts in its 'movement'. The 'movement' makes cinema life like. Cinema does not look artificial.

Through frontal shot, a director can make a character to 'talk' to the audience. No doubt, it is one-way communication. However, the audience becomes the part of the action that takes place on the screen. A house cannot move. Each image or frame is static. When twenty-four frame/photos per second are projected on a screen at a particular speed, the images appear to be moving. There is no physical movement on the screen; it is an 'illusion of movement.' What gives movement to cinema is the concept of 'persistence of vision.' Persistence of vision is also known as an optical illusion that takes place when pictures are in motion. This happens when the human brain

perceives more than two images that are formed on the retina within a time period of 1/16th of a second.

When we talk about the vision behind a film, why not talk about the director's vision behind making it. A film director's vision is someone seeing a movie in their head. Almost everyone has had some movie, or scenes, play out in their heads, that they think would be really amazing if they happened for real. That movie that you see in your head – that's your director's vision.

Vishal Bhardwaj: The Indian Shakespeare

Vishal Bhardwaj is that director who does not dwell on fantasises; in fact all his movies portray realism even if they are fictional or adaptations of a novel/story. Known for his flawed characters, he prefers to adapt known stories and present them in a modern-day tale. It is his concern if the story fits in well with the context of the times we are living in. Take the Shahid Kapoor starrer *Haider* for instance; *Haider*, like *Hamlet*, wanted to murder his uncle. And it had been also hinted implicitly within the film that he desired his beautiful mother Ghazala. However, the narrative was framed in and around the socio-political fabric of Kashmir.

Vishal Bhardwaj's comedy is never on the nose. His characters might always be in trouble or bad situation, but the filmmaker brings in comic relief in unexpected ways. In *Kaminey*, the hilarity was brought in via a lisp that its primary characters had. However, it was never of the demeaning kind. It was just something Shahid Kapoor's character had to affect as a neighbourhood of his lifestyle. In *Makdee*, the interaction between the characters of Shweta Basu Prasad and Shabana Azmi gave way to laughter. Interestingly, *Makdee* was touted as a horror film with some elements of comedy.

Another fascinating similarity in his movies is the strong female characters. The way he writes, the central conflict in a plot arises via a woman. Be it *Haider*'s Ghazala, *Omkara*'s Dolly Mishra or *7 Khoon Maaf*'s Susanna Anna-Marie Johannes. They are broken, beautiful and real.

Bhardwaj is influenced by the film-making sorts of Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Kurosawa and Krzysztof Kieslowski. Kieslowski's *Dekalog* (1989) inspired him to become a film-maker. All of the above mentioned filmmakers are considered one of the finest auteurs of their era. So having their influence, Bhardwaj seemed to have maintained the same artistic style in his creations. Two of his films will forever enchant and leave the audience in trance – *Kaminey* & *Haider*. While *Kaminey* is set up against the backdrop of Mumbai underworld; *Haider* is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* dealing with the socio-political unrest in Kashmir.

According to the *Hindustan Times*, *Kaminey* "is the first attempt to deal with reality in a mature, matter of fact manner." Unlike other Hindi films, in which the female lead is Sita, the protagonist is Rama and the antagonist is Ravana, the characters in *Kaminey* are nuanced humans in "layered and complex" situations. *Kaminey* reflects Bhardwaj's enduring fascination for underdogs, characters who are on the margins of society and therefore, morally compromised. Bhardwaj told *Rediff.com* that the film deals with "themes that affect our lives directly", and "is a reminder that we all have a dark side, and often we are not fully aware of that side". Bhardwaj presents the two brothers who are also on a tiff; with speech defects. Bhardwaj gave the twins verbal impediments to show that the world has now been so cruel to complex and disastrous communication that it needs silence or a speech defect to hash things out. The film also explores sex and sexuality in a radically different and refreshing way.

Haider, an Indian film based on *Hamlet* that is set in the contested Kashmir region during a volatile period in the 1990s, constructs one notable backdoor out of the play's bleak ending. The rejection of tragic closure for the protagonist does not here result instead in the bliss of comedy or even the bittersweet consolations of tragio-comedy.

Bhardwaj uses simple but effective cinematic techniques to convey *Haider*'s isolating perception of the world around him. This view of his mother and uncle almost charming courtship is intercut with *Haider*'s opaque, unnerving view of them, creating a powerful dissonance. But the audience is more forcefully aligned with *Haider*'s perspective as the scene unfolds. Bhardwaj, in a series of heavily edited shots over a three-minute or so sequence, externalizes *Haider*'s disorientation and confers it on the audience by subtly violating the "180-degree" rule, one of the basic principles of continuity editing in conventional film grammar. The 180-degree rule establishes the screen direction of the

subjects' sightline as they address each other.

The particular setting of Bhardwaj's film comes to the front here. The use of Kashmir in the mid 1990's was not an accidental choice, but a medium to explore the human inclination to seek revenge within the context of regional and religious sectarian violence that contemporary audiences can recognize. There isn't space here for an extensive background on this intricate geopolitical situation.

In a similar setting, Bharadwaj has created another one of his masterpieces – *7 Khoon Maaf*, a dark, wickedly humorous morbid tale about a tragic woman named Susanna and her quest for love. From Vishal Bharadwaj - Ruskin Bond duo that gave us the critically acclaimed *The Blue Umbrella*, came this movie, which divided its audience into extreme poles, thus accomplishing its function as art- to comfort the disturbed and vice versa. The movie refuses to contain itself in the categories of conventions as it switches between a childish riddle and Bharadwaj masterpiece, between a slow melodrama and a gripping thriller, between a layered piece de resistance and a pretentious precocious parable. And as such this movie is not everybody's cup of tea.

Inspired by Godfather and other classics, Bhardwaj's movies are those of gangster or underworld genre, depicting emotions like jealousy, power, sorrow, hunger which he thinks that a human cannot think beyond. Bhardwaj is an auteur, having not only produced and directed this film, but also having co-scripted it and composed the entire musical score (he started out in the media industry as a singer, musician, and composer). The music, camera work, editing, and scene staging here have a distinctive quality to them, though again they may not be for all tastes. Bhardwaj's choice of social setting for his meditations on Shakespeare's tragic tales of kings and generals continues to be interesting. In setting both *MAQBOOL* and *OMKARA* among criminals (albeit in each case these local "big men" are closely tied to ruling elites), he simultaneously draws on the legacy of the gangster film as a medium of high drama and powerful emotion, and pointedly highlights a reality in today's India: the volatile intersection of the economic and social aspirations of a vast and restless underclass with a democratic system dominated by corrupt and often criminalized politicians.

Sanjay Leela Bhansali: Magnum Opus Cinema

When we talk about aesthetic cinema or magnum opus, one must not forget the name of Sanjay Leela Bhansali. The way he composes his frames leave the audience enchanted and his presentation style looks like a painting in motion. Larger-than-life sets, melodious and lyrically mesmerising songs, spellbinding visuals and gorgeous costumes are indispensable aspects of his filmmaking style. Bhansali creates a spectacle on screen that helps us transcend to a world that we wish existed. In short, the films of SLB are an extravagant affair.

There are many elements and visual themes that make SLB a part of auteur group. One such aspect is his way of using water or rain as motif. In many of his films, he uses water in different ways for symbolic as well as aesthetic purposes. For example, in a scene in *Bajirao Mastani*, where it is revealed that Mastani is pregnant; they dance in a water fountain. In a similar aspect but a completely different movie: *Black*, where Michelle learns her first words, she and Debraj Sahai (Amitabh Bachchan) enact the entire scene in a water fountain. It is clear that water here is a symbol of life used by SLB in his movies. Not just this, but water is used as a symbol for love and sexuality in his films; romance being the central theme of almost all his movies. A Sanjay Leela Bhansali film is incomplete without rain or a fountain shot.

Not just water, but Sanjay Leela Bhansali also uses fire as a symbol for heartbreaks, sorrow and grief. It is shown through burning curtains, burning letters, even burning clothes! Apart from this Sanjay Leela Bhansali's films have weird obsession with female anklets. The romance, playfulness, love, etc. is depicted through either the shots or songs and the theme is anklets! The symbol Moon also has a special place in all SLB movies, most of his famous songs, revolve around the full moon or the characters symbolising their love for each other by giving out moon metaphors.

Sanjay Leela Bhansali is also known for his efficiency in use of colours and colour grading in his films. For every scene, Bhansali thinks about the colours, lighting and synchronization according to the mood of the scene. One classic example is *Saawariya*, where with the exception of one or two

scenes; all of the film is covered in shades of blue. Bhansali has given the film a blue colour palette to actually create a dream-like vibe which symbolises the obsession and dream of love in the movie itself. While the film *Saawariya* is drenched in blue, the film *Black* has colour shades of only black and white. This of course is in setup with the major themes of the movie – darkness and light. One noticeable colour palette in

Bhansali's films is red when there is death or murder in the scenes; such as the scenes in *RamLeela*, *Bajirao Mastani*, etc.

Another very unique appeal to Bhansali is his exceptional long takes which can reach up to 2-3 minutes. One such example is that of Devdas and a scene where his mother excitedly runs in the entire house exclaiming that her son is returning. This long take is taken in a single pan and visualises the love and excitement of a joint family. Another example is from the film *Guzarish* where Sofia is being manhandled by her husband and Ethan is unable to move because of his condition. This is a perfect example of a long take from just one camera position to exactly capture the emotions of a particular character.

Bhansali will always remain the pioneering cultural storehouse. Casting Hrithik Roshan, known for his fluid dance and rock-solid physique as a bed ridden, ageing, and potbellied patient in *Guzaarish*, he is the same artist who tried to cast Amitabh Bachhan known for his baritone as the mute character. His nurses wear Sabyasachi gowns, and deep red lipstick is used to portray loneliness. His homeless lover in *Saawariya*, who sleeps on the streets, wears velvet and tweed, with no home, but has keys dangling from his chest; his universe does not care for reason.

Conclusion

The core of auteur theory of film criticism lies in the view that art expresses the vision and worldview of a single artist. Auteur theory examines a single director's film, stylistically (visually) and thematically (textually). First parameter of such an examination is mise-en-scene and the second is a consistency of themes in the oeuvre of the director. An auteur critic finds out the common characteristics and features from the whole body of a director's films because he is the person who looks after the audio-visual aspects of the films.

In this research work, after a close analysis of the works of two critically acclaimed directors – Vishal Bhardwaj and Sanjay Leela Bhansali, the researcher has ascertained that they can be called as auteurs. Based on a dual case-study, the analysis in this research has explained how the notion of the auteur is transferred from film theory to filmmaking practices. Traces of auteurism are identified in both cases as the abilities of the directors are seen as the starting point and motive for making the films.

Vishal Bhardwaj through his trilogy (*Maqbool*, *Omkara*, *Haider*), has shown the mastery art of filmmaking. The way he projects his characters seem to come straight from the Shakespearean plays but the treatment is truly Indian which helps the audience to connect with them. Sanjay Leela Bhansali, on the other hand, creates a magnum opus through his amazing art pieces viz. his films. His excellent choice of colour grading, lighting, camera techniques and shots makes him a distinctive filmmaker and an auteur.

This study also brings in light the unique vision of the directors to make the cinematic experience of the audience one of its kind, making the director get the authorship of the film. In the end, it is the director's word, his interpretation and vision which the audience experiences in the theatre.

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