

Chapter 20_ "Cinematic Authorship" by Paisley Livingston

Authorship in films is controversial.

1960s: 'some' traditional conception of authorship was applied to film (presumably modeled after literary (Proust, Joyce, Henry James), the visual (Picasso, Rembrandt, van Gogh), plastic (Rodin, Henry Moore) and musical composition (Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin) arts authorship)

Currently: widespread disagreement.

Options that reject the 1960s consensus:

“Authorship” idea does not apply to film creation *period*.

“Authorship” in film is fundamentally different

Film authorship is part of a social process, system, or structure “be it discursive, institutional, national, or international” [299Lm]

OR

Film authorship is like literary/et al. but only to “instances of independent film production, but not in cases of studio-produced works.

Livingston: contemporary discussions of film authorship are limited by the presumption that we have a shared and clear understanding of what 'traditional' conceptions of authorship, as applied to literature, etc., were.

PL seems to break work on film authorship into two groups:
anti-individualists vs individualists

PL adds that both approaches mistakenly assume there was a 'shared traditional view' in the past.

Section 1 looks at alternative definitions and makes a case for one “well-entrenched” and most-plausible way of defining general authorship.

Section 2 applies this well-entrenched way of defining general authorship to film authorship, and tries to show that the kinds of films that seem to be the very cases where individual authorship seems not to fit the phenomenon might nonetheless fall under it, at least for some kinds of films.

Section 3 contrasts anti-realist and realist conceptions of authorship “focusing on the common claim that the cinema is especially suited to the former.” [299Rb]

A PL Caveat: “...let me state at the outset that my goal in what follows is not to defend the idea that solitary artistic genius is the fundamental unit of all valuable cultural analysis. I do, however, maintain that an understanding of individual agency is crucial to the latter.” [299Rb]

Three types: films that emerge from a process of collective or individual authorship, while others may have makers, but no authors [300Lt]

I **What is an Author?**

PL begins by looking at how the various words associated with 'author' in English, and their cognates in other languages, for some idea what the term signifies/what concept, if any, they demarcate.

Some things that people called “authors” can author: Letters, schemes, mischief, disasters, poems, philosophical treatises, cookbooks, someone’s demise, instruction manuals,

Further, the conditions under which one can *become* an author of these things are quite diverse.

Earlier English usage allowed that **one’s father** could be one’s ‘author’. Editors of periodicals could be their authors, and an obsolete usage had ‘author’ “[designate] the person on whose authority a statement was made, such as an informant”

PL’s Upshot: “...if the term ‘author’ is to serve as a helpful descriptive or explanatory tool ... we need a consensus on a more limited and cogent usage.” [300Lm]

PL uses Michel Foucault's claim that ordinary personal letters have writers but not authors. For MF, in early modern Europe the word 'author' and 'authorship' came to have technical meanings: anything that serves "the author function". [300Rt]

For PL, MF's mistake was to claim that *authorship* had one meaning at one time and then at a later time changed to cover something else.

PL: but what MF thinks emerged in early modern Europe already existed as a meaning of 'author' at the time of ancient writers like Horace, Petrarch, La Croix du Maine, etc., who equally fell under that 'author-function' he had taken to only emerge in early modern Europe.

PL's Upshot: there **must** be something between no film has an author and every film has multiple authors, no one of which is responsible for more than *some* of the properties that mark the film off as *that distinctive film*.

PL's proposed term marks out a middle ground between these extremes:

Author = (def) the agent (or agents) who intentionally make(s) an utterance, where 'utterance' refers to any action, an intended function of which is expression or communication. [300Rb]

Here PL is working within a well-developed schema for communication that presupposes an agent/speaker and the attitudes/desires/beliefs/intentions that have a causal relationship to the content of the communication (he is borrowing from Grice, and others who studying the pragmatics of communication in language [chiefly, but this gets broadened to include anything that is meant to communicate]) [301Lt]

On this definition, a computer cannot be an author since it is **not an agent** (it does not **ACT**, which requires attitudes, beliefs, intentions, etc.)

Also, a parrot's sounds would not emerge from an **agent**.

Also: nonintentional states (dreams, Tourettes' utterances, shouts from sleepers in the night) **do not have authors** on this view.

Question for class: do they agree that these sources of meaningful content for **observers** do not constitute communications and so cannot be the product of **any author(s)**?

Refinements: an 'authored utterance' on this definition can have more than one intention (to convey a story and *also* show the inventiveness of the author, for example), more than one author (John and Mary co-author a Xmas letter for their family and friends), and need not be linguistic (e.g., the Diamonji Gozan Okuribi festival burning Kanji characters).[301Lb/Rt]

PL thinks one virtue of his definition is that it includes “unremarkable expressive and communicative actions” (the angry gestures of a person trying to catch a bus as the bus driver pulls away from the stop having failed to see them).

JP: It also includes things like saying “How are you now?” to a friend who has been sick, **but also** just deliberately going into the main office of an academic department and saying “Good morning” to the staff.

NOTE: These possible instances of authoring can be defeated/challenged in a given case, but that doesn't eliminate their usefulness as associated with a general schema of interaction that involves deliberate communication and applies very obviously and naturally both to ordinary utterances and those that come about through activities in the arts.[301Rb]

PL considers objections:

1. Why not stick to utterances that have artistic merit, are *more substantive* than *morning greetings at the office*, etc. as these clearly are devoid of the banality that so much ordinary intentional utterances involve? PL's reply: "[This] is arbitrary and purely stipulative to say that banal, non-artistic utterances have no authors, or to claim that great literary works have authors while pieces of pulp fiction do not." [302Lt]

JP: This would seem to also entail a problem making plausible distinctions between *high* and *low art*.

2. PL notes that many who object to this kind of pragmatic definition of authorship are clearly motivated by the desire to mark off only those utterances that entail strong intentionalism

But this ignores the fact that often someone strongly intends to communicate **one thing** but, in the process, very successfully communicates something **unintended** that seems to be a part of the communication **engendered/caused by** the way the author **put what was expressed**.

PL's best objection to #2 is " Do not the very conditions of *literary* authorship involve social factors that transcend the schemata of individualist pragmatics?" [302Lb]

2 What is a cinematic Author?

PL proposes to take the definition of 'utterance' given in Section 1 and modify it for film as "cinematic utterance".

General problem with this proposal: The means by which 'cinematic utterances' are conveyed are too diverse. It is implausible that there is a *single speaker* given that the utterance has multiple apparent 'authors' (screenwriter, editor, scene painter, animator, sound designer/editor, director, actors, etc).

PL decides that for the moment, the interesting question is “whether the kind of authorship we have in mind is absent in *all* (or even many) mass-produced commercial films.” [303Lm]

Here, PL uses Bordwell and Thompson’s notion of a film that is a production by means of ‘serial manufacture’.

JP: This is something like the sequential and hierarchical structure of industrial production via assembly line (even when there are multiple ‘side-stations’ that are part of the complex *steps* through/out of which which the product moves/emerges.

PL's interest is in whether, and if so, "...under what conditions ... the product of serial manufacture [has] an author or authors, and what are the distinguishing features of authorship in such a context?"

For this project, he considers various 'ideal-typical' examples.

Case One: an authorless film

JP: Read the description of the film's production history from the top of 303R to the middle of that column.

“The film certainly has makers – lots of them – but no author.”

But PL then asks the important question: **Why not?**

Answer: Authorship seems to entail some level of **effective control** of the processes of production and the outcome, and while **KK** has considerable control in the early going, he clearly has no control once he give up his involvement in, and rights over, the product “in exchange for a part of his initial investment.”

Case Two: authority without authorship

Big John's "authority-through-random-choice-generator [coin flipping]" story.

PL's reason for thinking that Big John's decision-making powers in this production falls short of constituting *authorship*: authorship requires an intention "to make manifest some meaningful attitudes (such as beliefs and emotions) ... [and] [t]o make an attitude manifest is to do or make something, the cognition of which is likely, under the right conditions, to bring that attitude to mind." But to make such meaningful attitudes manifest, one must act *according to some kind of plan* (true of **all intentional actions** [JP: all actions have an **objective/end-in-view** even if it is not fully clear to the agent]).

PL now gives his definition of a 'cinematic author':

Cinematic author = (def) the agent or agent(s) who intentionally make(s) a cinematic utterance; where cinematic utterance = an action the intended function of which is to make manifest or communicate some attitude(s) by means of the production of an apparently moving image projected on a screen or other surface.

[305Lt]

Big John's contributions to this film's production *does not constitute authorship* because "[a]t no point ... does Big John have any specific attitudes in mind that he intends the cinematic text to make manifest, and when he makes decisions that are relevant to which attitudes the film is likely to make manifest, he acts at random. Big John may very well act on the intention that the film be expressive of attitudes – that is, of some attitudes as opposed to none at all – but he has no plans or aims concerning which attitudes those should be." [305Lm]

Key to what authorship in the case of 'serial manufacture' requires: *not* that "a film's author does ... everything that has to be done for the text to be made" BUT "...when the author delegates tasks, he or she does have to have final say over which fruits of other people's labour do and do not get incorporated into the final work." [305Lb]

Given all this, "Case Two is another instance where there are makers but no authors." [305Rt]

Case Three: taking orders

Jeanne: the talented young film student who gets \$\$ backing to make a pet project and when the producer/financier sees the first cut and threatens to fire her unless she cuts a “long, central sequence he finds to difficult for a popular audience” and let some other director finish the film on his (the producer/financier’s) plan.

She capitulates, but then...is she the author?

PL thinks this depends on to what degree her original intended expression was preserved, and decides that for any such project, authorship “in a context of serial manufacture may usually be a matter of degree...”

He then considers a case of **successful individual authorship** in a similar context as that which Jeanne faced.

Case Four: authorship in the studio

PL turns to use Ingmar Bergman's *Winter Light* as the case here.

Distinctive features of *Winter Light* production process:

Created within the Swedish Film Industry's studio system (so, not an 'independent film')

Division of labor was influenced by Bergman's special talents: he a) wrote the script, b) did some of the casting, c) directed the actors, d) supervised the editing and the sound-mixing, e) worked closely with his cinematographer, f) "exercised a high degree of control over the choice of locations, props, make-up, and many other technical matters" and g) "at no point ... did any producer or other figure coercively require him to reverse an artistic decision he had made" [306Lm/b].

Due to these features of the production of *Winter Light*, “[w]e are wholly warranted ... in characterizing him as the author of the work...” even though “...he did not personally create or think up everything that can be seen[/heard] in the film.”
[306Rt]

Bergman is the author, and *part of his special talent as author* involves his *collaborative approach to working with co-workers in a dialogue about his vision for each aspect of the film, one that solicited their input regularly and at every step in production*. Result (among others): Bergman was especially good at eliciting remarkable performances from the actors in his films.[306Rm]

3 Real and Unreal Authors

On PL's approach to 'cinematic authorship', in any given case whether there is or is not an author (but only a *maker* as he says) depends on **interpretation of the evidence** and is **potentially false**. He implicitly regards this as a **realist** approach to the relationship between interpretation and authorship.

There is an alternative, **antirealist** approach to the relationship between interpretation and authorship.

Ignore any evidence "concerning actual processes of production" but instead, attempt to "construct an image of the work's author [without appeal to actual processes of production]" [306Rb] and "[simply] make believe that the attitudes expressed in the text were expressed by **someone** [my emphasis]"[307Lt]

The **Author** for antirealists "is variously [referred to] as 'real', 'fictional', 'implied', or 'postulated'"[307Lt]

PL focuses on the reasons that for **antirealists** cinema is *particularly suited* as an artform for which authorship is best understood along **antirealist lines**:

1) Ontological reason: cinema production is complex and this ontological fact makes it especially difficult to apply the **realist** conception of authorship to cinema production.

2) Epistemological reason: given the complexity of cinema production, and the problem gaining access to suitably conclusive information about the intentions of each *particular agent* in the collection of individuals and how they relate to even *a possible set of attitudes intended to be conveyed in the film*, it is not possible to have adequate epistemic access to the evidence in support of one or another interpretation of which party or parties would count as *authors* in the **realist sense**.

PL rejects the **ontological reasons** on two grounds.

Ground One: not every film's production process is so complex as to support either the *ontological* or the *epistemological* basis for the **antirealist** approach. Rather, since some films (as he has demonstrated with at least his **Cases Three and Four**) are produced in ways that preserve the ontological and epistemological features that seem inconsistent with the **antirealist** broad conclusion that cinema cannot support that view of possible authorship.[307Lm]

As PL notes: it makes more sense to assign to **Bergman** the authorship of *Winter Light* than to some **postulated but fictional, merely 'implied' author**.

Ground Two: for films that lack clear evidence of authorship, it makes more sense to regard these as **unauthored** films that only have **makers**, rather than to invent some **postulated but fictional, merely 'implied' author**. And anyway, regarding the film's **makers** this way doesn't seem to deprive the viewer's experience of the film (the experience, he suggests, is **unaffected** by whether they have an author to assign **as the causer** of what they detect in the film).

PL rejects the **epistemological reasons** on two grounds also.

Ground One: what makes it difficult to establish the evidence for existence of someone(s) with **authorial status**, or lack thereof, is not unusual for films and, anyway, afflicts all 'historical knowledge'. PL's latter point is just that even though we have trouble assigning a definite picture of the causes of, say, the First World War, this doesn't undermine the legitimacy of the *effort* to try to figure it out on grounds of inadequacy of our epistemic position (=access to adequate evidence).

JP: His point may simply be that it is not reasonable to suppose there is *no cause* of the First World War, even if it is difficult to uncover the evidence needed to establish which cause or which combination of causes was sufficient to produce it. But this is what the **antirealist** about cinematic authorship seems to assume.

The 'Weaker' Antirealist Position: that given an viewer's lack of access to lots of information about the making of a film, it makes sense to suppose that in the face of this fact, a typical viewer can *reasonably invent the idea of a possible maker or authorial entity(ies)* that they take to be responsible for what they *interpret* as the *attitudes intended by this fictional author*. [307Rm]

PL's response to the 'weaker' antirealist gambit: this presumes that the lack of information that afflicts this viewer is reason to claim there is **no need** for that knowledge, and this **ignores** a) that *acquiring such knowledge* is known to enhance **and modify** the viewer's interpretation of what was intended in the film they watched; b) [and] therefore, the weak antirealist implausibly gives up on the value of such knowledge; c) to even construct a 'make-believe' author requires *some* appeal to *actual evidence* of intended attitudes that are available the viewer on pain of making their construction of a 'make-believe author' both ontologically and epistemically ungrounded; and d) on this antirealist position, you can't make sense of what in fact can happen in a film, where the textual evidence available to the viewer can **suggest** an 'make-believe authorless' film when in fact the film has a single author (e.g., **Bergman**), and vice versa. [307Rm/b]