

## **Film Theory: key concepts- evolution, major features, theorists- an outline, Indian film theory**

### **Auteur Theory:**

The term 'auteur' is the French term for author and became a part of the film studies register in the 1950's after the debate on the "polemic about authors" or the *politique des auteurs*, when the French film critics associated with the film magazine *Cahiers du cinema* adopted the term to recognize the director of the film as its author. It is he who is responsible for the aesthetic quality of the film. The critics came to be known as the Cahiers critics and included critics like François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard, who argued that since the director controlled all the aspects of film making and editing, it is only he who can employ them effectively to produce the desired aesthetic effect. The final artistic result is not the script writer's but the director's visualization has already been discussed in the section on film as art.

This theory gave rise to the technique of recognition of peculiarities in the cinematographic techniques of a particular author, which eventually became his signature style- visible in his movies even if they differed in genre and themes. The concept of the auteur initially gave the critics the liberty to attribute the aesthetic quality of a film to the director, a proponent of this theory Andrew Harris went as far as to create a ranking system of the directors. However, the voices of dissent against this theory soon began in the 1960's and 1970's when the waves of structuralism, Marxism and psychoanalysis began influencing the film discourse. The adherents of these theories emphasized the lack of objectivity and led to the creation of a personality cult around certain directors, which undermined the more complicated processes of film production. The 1980's saw the emergence of the historical and cultural studies, which when applied to film theory stressed that the film's production and reception by the audience is not so much the work of the director's artistic vision, rather it is a cumulative of the spatio- temporal social and cultural milieu of the film's production.

The cinema in west saw great auteurs like Alfred Hitchcock (*Psycho*), Akira Kurosawa, Woody Allen, Steven Spielberg, etc. whose films have been recognized for their aesthetic and artistic value and stand apart from the others of their genre, as they carry the distinct signature style of their directors. The New Hollywood wave of 1970's also called the 'American New Wave' contributed to the propagation of the auteur theory as it shifted the focus from the studio system to the director.

The Indian Cinema has produced some great auteurs beginning with the likes of Satyajit Ray, Shyam Benegal, Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Anurag Kashyap, Ashutosh Gowaridkar. These auteurs have effectively shifted the focus of the film from the protagonist to themselves, and thus the films have started being called, for example "A Sanjay Leela Bhansali film" instead of a "Shah Rukh Khan movie."

## **Adaptation**

Adaptation in film studies refers to the process of deriving the basic plot and the story line from a piece of literature and revising it to make it conducive for presentation through a film medium. This has been a very popular norm in film making, as film making itself takes its roots from the theatre, which inevitable was the stage adaptation of a play, and the Lumière Brothers' employed it in their *L'Arroseur arrosé* (1895). The filmmakers constantly sought to reproduce the successful plays to cater to the elitist notions of the bourgeois audience. In the 'Classical Hollywood' phase, the scripts of the plays and novels were bought from the film makers from the theatres particularly the New York stage and produced bowdlerized versions of these classical works to provide complete family entertainment, even if it meant compromising the work being produced. Apart from being able to draw in a larger number of audiences from the various sections of the society, it also benefitted in a greater economic benefit as well as contributed to an increased nationalistic fervor, as the native writers of a country had more and more of their works adapted by the compatriot film makers.

The auteur critics, especially Francois Truffaut, however, criticized the notion of "Quality Cinema" on the grounds of the diminished role of the director who is the true auteur of a movie. This led the French New Wave filmmakers to borrow heavily from the popular culture rather than mere adaptation of acclaimed works.

In the process of adapting a text into a movie the medium of the text is transformed from a verbal/ written word to an audio- visual medium. This change of medium signals the change is the signifiers of the almost similar signified. André Bazin in 1948 contended that "faithfulness to form . . . is illusory: what matters is the *equivalence in meaning of the forms*," where these equivalents have more to do with the "characters or their environment" rather than the style (in Naremore, 2000, p. 20).

The Modernist stance considers adaptation to be one of the many interpretations of a work rather than an extension and the contemporary theory of adaptation is nestled in the theory of intertextuality- where by the adaptation of film is considered a text in its own right and it too becomes an addition to the existing tradition of texts, thereby having covert/ overt relation to other texts. The postmodernist stance where deconstruction and "the death of the author" have turned the existing theories on their heads the adaptation are devalued in comparison to their original written text.

In the west adaptation has been so prominent that according to Dudley Andrews more than 50% of all film productions have been adaptations. The rich legacy of plays by the English playwright, particularly William Shakespeare's plays have provided readymade raw material for a film adaptation. They have been adapted spatio-temporally across nations and languages. A brilliant example of this is the *Throne of Blood* by Akira Kurosawa which is an adaptation of Macbeth by William Shakespeare.

The Indian Cinema too has its fair share of adaptations since its inception. Satyajit Ray's Pather Panchali- an adaptation of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay is still considered a

masterpiece. *Devdas* by Sharadchandra Chattopadhyay has seen around five adaptations. The trend now has come to include adaptations from western literature as well, and an example is the movie *Aisha*- an adaptation of *Emma* by Jane Austen.

### **Semiotics**

Semiotics is the branch of analysis which studies how the language and auxiliary sign systems come together to create meaning. Linguists and philosophers like Charles Sanders Peirce, Ferdinand de Saussure and others presented theories which came to influence almost all branches of study- literary as well as recently developed cultural theories. According to Saussure- the relation between the signifier and signified is arbitrary and a product of the cultural milieu. Within a language system these signs come to denote some particular object which is understood by the speakers of that language. These signs thus function in a closed structural paradigm, where they are distinguished from other signs which mean something different. **Add from Film Language- semiotic theory**

### **Psychoanalysis**

It is a field of investigation related to the study of the Unconscious, conscious and subconscious states of the human mind and how they operate in relation to each other. This analysis is centered on symptomatic analysis of the dreams, actions, reactions, phobias, philia etc. It is relatively a new discipline of study as it is only a century old, but it is interesting that psychoanalysis developed around the time that the cinema was invented. They both signified the drifting away of a society from religious and traditional solace to a more materialistic and pleasure seeking approach. The films by Hitchcock and others have these psychoanalytic themes as their central plot and an excellent example of this is the movie- *Psycho*.

The psychoanalysis in film studies is known as cine- psychoanalysis and has continued to hold its sway in the film discourse. It is a predominant tool of analysis in the feminist film theories where the “woman” as a symbolic signifier of the dominant patriarchal system is studied through the psych analytic approach at every level of film making. This theory has now begun to come under a lot of criticism by non- formalist critics like David Bordwell who argue that psychoanalysis does not take the objective perspective but invents a theory to prove its own subjective hypothesis- thereby the analysis being a personal opinion rather than a scholarly criticism.

The Indian cinema too has given some seminal works which address the psychoanalytic issues like *Black*, *Guzarish*, *Taare Zameen Par* etc.

### **Feminist theory**

Feminism is the philosophy that critiques the subservient position of women due to the dominant patriarchal social system. It began as a political movement but has now become entered into discourse of almost every field. It challenges the social construction of gender

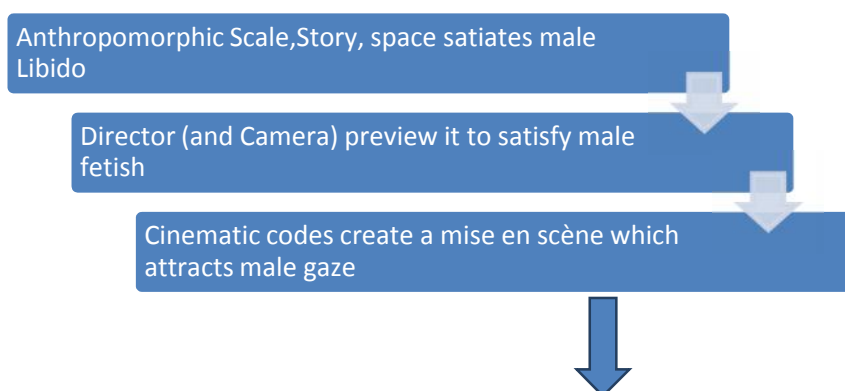
and the consequential oppression of women due to their secondary status, and enquires into ways through which this end is achieved.

In Film Studies, critics such as Laura Mulvey, Teresa de Lauretis, Claire Johnston, Kaja Silverman, Mary Ann Doane and others began questioning the position of Woman as Object of male fetish and how this dictum dictates the entire process of the film making- thereby defining the narrative of the film and the film audience.

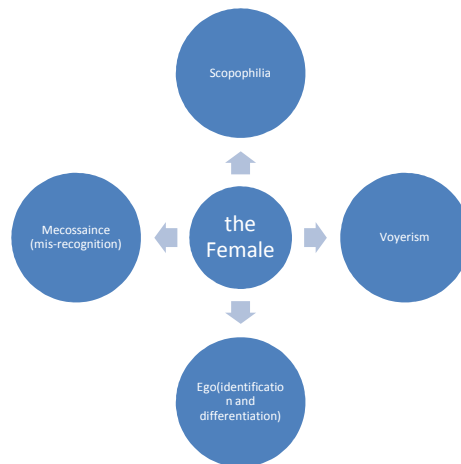
In her seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” Laura Mulvey made use psychoanalysis and gaze theory to explain this process of objectification of women. John Berger’s seminal work *Ways of Seeing* (1972) is considered to be the foundational text of the Theory of the Gaze. The work pointed how our perspectives are colored by our prejudices based on class, culture, sexuality etc. and how the object of our seeing is affected by this seemingly innocent activity. Laura Mulvey’s interdisciplinary essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (1975) conducts an analysis by enmeshing the theories of gaze and feminism with cinema studies and psychoanalysis. The same year witnessed the publication of Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* which adopted Jeremy Bentham’s idea of “Panopticism (all seeing)” and explicated how absolute self-discipline can be achieved only by instilling the sense of being under surveillance inside the mind- ‘Big Brother is Watching You’ concept.

Laura Mulvey in her essay, makes a psychoanalytic study of the entire ‘Male Only’ chain involved in the production of narrative cinema which centers on its Object-The Female. She analyses the entire trajectory of this objectification in typical Hollywood cinema step by step. Cinema as a cultural tool and construct performs a decisive role in creating stereotypes as well as demolishing the existing ones.

Mulvey explains how the entire creation of a movie and the placement of the female lead builds towards the commodification of the female lead.



The male audience identifies with the male (and his relationship as well as activities with the female) and views the female on screen in the following ways:



Mulvey argues that the relationship the male audience have with the on screen female is different from that experiences by the female audience because of the psychological inferiority complex the women are plagued with. Their castration (the lack of a penis symbolizing the power) makes them the 'passive female' audience as opposed to the 'active male' audience. Chris Strayer in her work *Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator* states that due to the pre-oedipal bond which is maintained between a woman and her mother, the female viewer is unable to establish the voyeuristic distance from the film and thus, "For the female spectator there is a certain over-presence of the image- she is the image".

If one were to apply Mulvey's theory closer home and bring in a case study of one of the few movies in Bollywood which actually try to turn the tables, in this case- *Lipstick under my Burkha*, I as a part of the audience begin the process of trying to fathom the gaze theory upside down. Beginning with the reaction of the majority of the audience, whenever a scene which showcases the sexual fetishes and desires of a woman in her fifties- Ratna Pathak Shah (Buaji) admiring the male form of her swimming instructor much younger to her and engaging in phone sex with him it is the haw-haa's (scandalous) and tittering of the female audience is what one hears, whereas the male audience are all stone faced, for no one wishes to be in the shoes of a man being made fun of by a woman. It is only when Buaji is exposed and rightly insulted for her desires that the movie ends, although it does leave the denouement of the other three females whose story are presented as well, hanging in the balance. The movie attempts to present a case for the consideration of the female gaze (and the desires inherent in it) by presenting the frustrated desires of four women who apparently are not the victims of the castration complex which Mulvey talks of. No sounds of encouragement- whistling, cheering, applause etc are to be heard in the theatre because these are not the women who talk like men, they do not seek protection from men and the men in their lives are replaceable, so men have no cause to feel satiated or empowered and women obviously cannot express their pleasure via such derogatory acts. The movie is all

about sorority between women, irrespective of age, religion, class and stature and so this is something not important enough to be celebrated or appreciated.