

**CINEMATIC LANGUAGE: AN ONTOLOGICAL INTROSPECTION****Certified as
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Science and Commerce (Autonomous),
[Affiliated to University of Mumbai]
Mumbai – 400086**ABSTRACT:**

The paper concentrates on the concept of 'cinematic language' that is what the ontology (the nature of being) of cinema is all about. Film theories though established themselves as independent branch as Philosophy of Film, philosophizing cinema has been almost from the beginning of film making; from silent to talkies, from black and white to technicolour to Eastman to digitalized film making. There are many theories of film that elaborates on cinematic language, I have chosen four theories of film, namely, the Auteur theory, the Feminist theory, the Genre Film theory and the Marxist theory. And indeed, all are connected, still the difference of essence in ideology of the film-maker is clearly exhibited in a particular film. Though cinematic language differs from theory to theory and place and time as well, the universality of cinematic language makes the audience participate in a particular film, though the film may be in any language, Hindustani, German, English or Japanese! In this paper some major film theorists' views are elucidated, namely Stanley Cavell, Andre Bazin, Gregory Currie, Pauline Kael, Noel Carroll etc. The paper is a dip into the realm of cinema that has its own universe, an independent art form with a distinct cinematic language.

"Bazin's 'Evolution of the Language of Cinema' concludes by suggesting that the new realist impulse in cinema has made the filmmaker the 'equal of the novelist': the ability to carve stories out of complex space invites the spectator to view the world as inflected – but not utterly dominated – by the consciousness of the artist." – Andrew Dudley¹

"When one speaks of cinematic language system, one sometime has in mind the conception of a total and unique code which would regulate all the elements of all films, which would consequently, be directly linked to their physical nature." – Christian Metz²

The above quotes definitely indicate that cinema speaks a language; and precisely it does not speak the ordinary language. Cinematic language has its own existential status and its own ontological realm. The paper is an attempt to discuss the language of cinema and its existential status quo. Film theorists all over the world, especially during almost from 1920s onwards have concentrated on the issue of 'cinema as art form' and on 'the language of cinema' or 'cinematic language'. But philosophizing and theorising films is completely an

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avant-grade of late 19th century. It is fascinating to see in the history and philosophy of cinema that theorists from different parts of the world initiated the movement of progressive essence. Ontology of cinema deals with language of cinema. [‘Ontology is a particular theory about the nature of being or the kinds of things that have existence.’]³ Therefore ontology of film means nature of films or the kinds of films.

Robert E. Wood notes, “Though as esteemed a philosopher as Stanley Cavell [film-theorist] has disputed it, it seems clear to me as to many others that film is “the” contemporary art form. 1. Erwin Panofsky notes that ‘it is the movies that mould, more than any other single force, the opinions, the taste, the language, the dress, the behaviour, and even the physical appearance of a public comprising more than 60 % of the population of the earth. 2. Film is a new artform that came into being through ‘the wonders of modern technology.’⁴ So he calls cinema as *Gesamt Kunst* (German, meaning ‘total art work’). That means it comprises of all individual art forms, like literature, music, theatre, dance etc. And the concept of *Gesamt Kunst* makes cinematic language and cinema as such a unique and exclusive art form. This finds its parallel in Medieval Cathedral and Opera (of the 19th century). Therefore ‘cinematic language’ consists of various art forms and artists (like painters, theatre artist, literature-writers) and houses an individual to flourish individually but in group as a teammate ‘artist of genuine kind’. Therefore, when a cinema is viewed from a particular angle, say, phenomenological, existential, realistic or idealistic; or when a cinema is compared with other forms of art, it is what ontology of cinema is all about. Therefore, ontology of cinema that highlights cinematic language bases its existence on many theories through which the language of cinema is interpreted in hermeneutical terminology.

There are many theories of film, while the paper will concentrate on few of them. These theories define cinematic language through which a particular film is being interpreted. So, in a way the theories are more or less ‘hermeneutics of cinematic language’. Hermeneutics, the art of interpretation helps define, articulate and clarify the language of a film. The most impressive theory of film that has allured me the most as a film-buff is the *Auteur Theory*. *Auteur* is the French word for author. “*Auteur* theory, theory of film making in which the director is viewed as the major creative force in a motion picture.”⁵ The way an author is for the piece of literature, the director is the *auteur* (author) of a particular film. S/he is the whole and sole of a movie; can we call the director than a dictator? Well, yes, both in a positive and negative sense. Positive sense is that a film is concept and work of an individual artist; not the amalgamation of various artists. Therefore, a particular film is shaped in that particular manner and not in any other manner; the complete credit goes to the filmmaker, a director who conceives and delivers the film. The negative aspect of *auteur* theory is, it may undermine the other contributors in a film making process. De facto the film uses only director’s language which is too subjective and personal. But film is, as we have already noted earlier, is the product of synthesis of many art forms, therefore requires many artists; which probably is denied in the *auteur* theory. Pauline Kael argued that *auteur* theory miscalculates and underrates other contributors in film making process; since cinema is ‘collaborative event’ and not individual activity.⁶ But the dynamic *auteurs* of the film-world has bestowed to humanity such imaginative and incredible films that one tends to overcome all its defects. To name few film auteurs from Indian cinema, for instance, Satyajit Ray (take

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his *Apu Trilogy* [1955, 1956, 1959 respectively], *Jalsaghar* [1958], *Kanchenjunga* [1962] or *Satranjke Khiladi* [1977]); or Jabbar Patel (take his *Samana* [1974], *Jait re Jait* [1977] or *Sinhasan* [1979]); or Shyam Benegal (take his *Ankur* [1974], *Nishaant* [1975], *Bhumika* [1977] or *Trikaal* [1985]); these film makers could give only 'these' types of film and not of any other type since they are the master *auteurs*. Therefore, the mammoth advantage of *auteur* theory is the film of this particular director turns out to be often a master piece, an exclusive art form with its distinct mark. Swedish director Ingmar Bergman's films like *Wild Strawberries* [1957] and *Cries and Whispers* [1972] or German director Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Stationmaster's Wife* [1977] and *The Marriage of Maria Braun* [1979] or French director Jean Luc Godard's *Pierrot le Fou* [1965] or *Detective* [1985]; these films have marked a niche in the world of cinema. As noted by Andrew Exley, "The advantages of an *auteur* is that they turn film making into more of an art form which takes time and precision to perfect to a standard the director is happy with, this generally means much more care is put into film making and because of this the film is regarded as being much better."⁷ Thence, though not documentary, the language of cinema in *auteur* theory is realistic which represents events on the silver screen that is true to life; but the nuances of these events which are not noticed, become a creative produce of the director. Therefore, along with the actors, the props too hold equal and significant value. These refinements and nuances are left out by ordinary sight, that comes on silver screen with creative nicety.

At this juncture I would proceed to another film theory that is close to my heart, that speaks the language of 'womanhood' - the *Feminist Film Theory*. The theory by name itself suggests that the theory upholds 'feminism' as a philosophical language of particular film. Women, often portrayed as second graded and marginalized, the feminist theory opens up the layers of a woman and tries to sensitize the populace with regard to 'her issues'. These feminist critiques often attack film as a medium where women are portrayed in dull light or in no light at all. As defined in the book *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, "It is now twenty-five years since the American journal *Women and Film* launched its passionate attack on behalf of the women's movement on 'women's image in film'. And vowed to 'transform the derogatory and immoral attitudes the ruling class and their male lackys [sic] have towards women and other oppressed peoples' through the agency of feminist criticism and film-making [1972, 5][But] Finally, of course, 'women's image in film' can no longer be seen as a simple matter of 'misrepresentation', to be corrected by the more 'realistic' portrayals to be produced by an emerging group of women film-makers."⁸ Therefore the feminist film language portrays in the film strong female protagonist, either explicitly or subtly. For example, Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* [1957] in contrast to Bimal Roy's *Bandini* [1963]. [Fact to be noted that both Mehboob Khan and Bimal Roy being males could render quite wonderful job.] Though both the films are too bold for their times; but in *Bandini* ultimately men help women to get liberation, that proves the first part of the quote mentioned above; but *Mother India* portrays complete women empowerment. This proves the second half of the above-mentioned quote. Recent "female film-makers" have shown tremendous 'woman potentials' and their women protagonist literally rebel to the suppressive and oppressive conditions comprising especially from the world of men. For instance, films by Aparna Sen, her films like *Paroma* [1984] or *16 Park Avenue* [2005] are apt example. Though films like *Lajja* [2001] directed by Rajkumar Santoshi or *Gulabi Gang* [2014] directed by Soumik Sen are strong feminist

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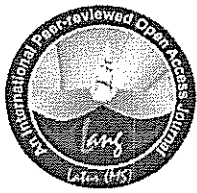
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movies, but how much the cinematic language is explored and is creative in nature is highly debatable. So here it requires for the *auteur* theory to intervene and produce a desired creative cinematic language for which Aparna Sen can be exemplified. Also, Deepa Mehta's *Fire* [1996], *Earth* [1998] and *Water* [2005] are apt feministic *auteur* examples. Therefore, the question is – is it necessary to be a woman to make feminist films? Well, this would be another debate paper altogether.

Coming to *Genre Film Theory* - obviously from literature point of view, is highly significant film theory. While adapting a literary, artistic, linguistic or rhetorical works of the master writers or categorizing film into thriller, science fiction, dark-comedy, musical, American cow-boys, social or political is what genre theory represents. As explained by Daniel Chandler, "The word *genre* comes from the French (and originally Latin) word for 'kind' or 'class'. The term is widely used in rhetoric, literary theory, media theory, and more recently linguistics, to refer to a distinctive type of 'text'. Robert Allen notes that 'for most of its 2,000 years, genre study has been primarily nominological and typological in function. That is to say, it has taken as its principal task the division of the world of literature into types and the naming of those types - much as the botanist divides the realm of flora into varieties of plants' (Allen 1989, 44)."⁹ Therefore the film has to maintain the high standard of creativity; otherwise will not be doing justice to any piece of work or form of art. For example, Vishal Bhardwaj adapted William Shakespeare's plays for his films *Maqbool* (from *Macbeth*) [2003], *Omkara* (from *Othello*) [2006] and *Haider* (from *Hamlet*) [2014]. Since he is the latest *auteur* of Hindustani cinema (adopting to Urdu and Hindi in simultaneity), his films belong to *genre* film theory and the way he camouflaged the Western scenario to the adapt in Indian context is remarkable. *Jane Bhi do Yaaro* [1983] by Kundan Shah belongs to dark-comedy *genre*, a social-political satire that awakens the audience's sensibility of finding tragedy in comedy; likewise, another stalwart *auteur* Charlie Chaplin's most of the movies, to name few, *The Gold Rush* [1925], *Modern Times* [1936], and *The Great Dictator* [1940] are excellent example of comic-tragedy. The psycho-thrillers/suspense credited to the master *auteur* Alfred Hitchcock where he displayed the ideology that horror is a psychological concept and most of his movies opened up the layers of an individual sub-conscious. Can 'birds' be horrific and scary? The film *Birds* [1963] directed by Hitchcock (adopted from a story with same name by Daphne du Maurier) is unique *genre* film that explores the fear for those loveable creatures, birds as they suddenly start attacking people in a town in California. His film *Psycho* [1960] is another horror/thriller that explores Freudian analysis of human mind – the id, the ego and the super-ego.

The last theory that I have chosen for this paper is the *Marxist Film Theory*. The cinematic language and cinematic quality uphold Marxist ideology that goes on being reflected, either overtly, sometimes blatantly or tenderly in a subtle manner. The 'masses' become prominent in such films. According to Mike Wayne, Marxist film portray the language that has radical ideology, clear political stance, so called socialist in nature that shows reality of the capitalists and upholding anti-capitalist ideology.¹⁰ Therefore from India the most popular film-makers have been Mrinal Sen (his films like *Bhuvan Shome* [1969] taken from the story by Balai Chand Mukhopadhyay; and *Mrigayaa* [1976] on the tribal issues) or Saeed Akhtar Mirza's all film (like *Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyun Aata Hai?* [1980] or *Mohan Joshi Hazir*

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Ho! [1984] or *Naseem* [1995] reflects the social activism and rebelliousness towards the existing socio-economic-political structures) or I would even mention M. S. Sathyu (his film *Garm Hava* [1973] or *Kahan Kahan Se Guzar Gaya* [1981] featuring Anil Kapoor in the lead, prominently depicts and emphasizes Marxist ideology). In fact, this theory is often markedly seen among the 'new wave cinema'. The artist's agony for the subalterns and the oppressed community is prominent in most of the new wave film makers, from Bimal Roy to Guru Dutt to Jabber Patel to majority of parallel film-makers. The trend became popular as *French Nouvelle Vague* movement of the 50s and 60s.¹¹

To conclude, cinema as language, this idea became very prominent at least by 1920s. Indeed, it transcended the boundaries of our day-to-day spoken language. Precisely for this reason it was called 'cinematic language'. The question that crops up is – why? Because it was no talkies but 'silent era'. So, film did speak a language, but this language was meta-language that went beyond the boundaries of ordinary language.¹² Such film-makers thought that cinematic language is analogous to ordinary language but the asset of this cinematic language was, 'it is accessible to all'; this medium is achieved with film-editing. Gregory Currie is a prominent name who said 'film is a language'. No doubt for him, film does not represent or convey through ordinary language as ordinary language has a structure and its own exact grammar which film as language transcends. Ultimately this makes it clear that there is an obvious discourse between ordinary language Vs film as language. (Therefore, there is complete possibility of dis-analogy between ordinary language and film as language.)

To end, I would say let us flaunt with the cinematic language and the vistas of cinematic language is so vast that it creates and opens the avenues for further expansion of human sensibilities.

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