Identity, Auteurism, and Indigenous Cinema

by Erika Yang

I. Introduction

The landscape of Indigenous cinema has dramatically changed since its inception. What started with the Indigenous people being reduced to stereotyped side characters and plot devices has shifted to the reclamation and retelling of their narratives into much more nuanced and complex portrayals and stories. The people behind the camera have shifted from the settler to the Indigenous people. As a result, the depiction and question of identity arises as a common theme in Indigenous works. Identity in the cultures, identity in the individuals, identity in the narratives, and in the realm of cinema, identity in the filmmakers themselves. The latter draws a correlation to auteur theory, a concept that deals with what it means to be an author in film. In the scope of Indigenous cinema, there has been a pushback against the foundations of auteur theory, notably Sambu's argument that the application of auteur theory is harmful to Indigenous works. I argue, however, that rather than pushing back against the traditional notion of auteurism, it would be more conducive to build upon its existing foundation to create a repurposed and more inclusive definition of the auteur due to the relevance of authorship in relation to identity.

II. Origins of Auteur Theory

Auteur theory originated among the French critics in the film criticism journal, *Cahiers du Cinéma,* including François Truffaut who presented the *politique des auteurs*. Despite it's popularity, the definition of an auteur has remained relatively abstract and ambiguous. For simplicity, we'll operate on the definition of auteur theory as translated by Andrew Sarris from

les politiques des auteurs in his *Notes on Auteur Theory,* deferring to the director as the author of a film.

Auteur theory then falls under three key premises: 1) technical proficiency, 2) personal style, and 3) interior meaning[1], with the latter demarcating the difference between a simple *metteur en scene* and an auteur, but it is also the most abstract (Sarris). It is a concept for which it is difficult to construct a rigid definition, yet when you see it, it would seize you with an absolute certainty that a particular work came from a particular director. The most defining tenet to auteurism is also its most ambiguous because it captures an idea that is singular to each auteur, formulating their identity.

Auteurism sets a standard of cohesion among a filmmaker's body of work, establishing an filmic identity to their filmography. It is the ability to be able to look a piece of art and recognize it as belonging to a specific artist. The fundamental premise of auteur theory champions the idea of personal voice and unique identity.

II. The Argument Against Auteur Theory

In the context of Indigenous cinema, film critic Girish Sambu raises several points as to why auteur theory is harmful to marginalized filmmakers: 1) auteurism places a greater emphasis on aesthetic choices rather than content 2) it requires a body of work, and 3) it opposes collaboration among filmmakers. While each of these points highlight flaws in the current state

[1] Sarris describes it as the "élan of the soul."

of auteur theory, they also indicate areas in which the definition of auteur theory can be reworked without sacrificing its basic principles.

II.A. Aesthetic vs. Context

Sambu claims that auteurism prioritizes text over context, emphasizing "formal/aesthetic analysis over serious consideration of all the contextual factors - such as those related to representation, production practices, or reception - in the appreciation of a film." There's an immediate focus on the aesthetics of a film because it is first layer of the film audiences see and process - the aesthetics are often the most accessible aspect of a film, which is a reason why the contextual often seems to be overshadowed.

Context in relation to Indigenous cinema holds a greater importance because of its historical underrepresentation. Contrasting with common tentpole topics in auteur films ranging from the political (commercialization/consumerism, war, etc.) to the philosophical (existentialism, nihilism, etc.), the topics explored in Indigenous works are much more personal. The stakes become higher as the material becomes closer to the filmmaker. Indigenous films tackle issues that continue to be present outside of the production - they are commentaries and critiques on their sociopolitical issues (prejudice, repression, etc.), but they are also depictions of their own cultures and communities, furthering the emotional depth of the stories.

However, context alone is not enough to fully realize the impact of a story. There are an endless number of ways for a story to be told, but there's a stark difference between a simple story and

an effective story, which is where aesthetics become significant. How a story is told is just as important as what story is being told especially when that story has a greater purpose outside of the basic plot as is often the case for Indigenous films. If a certain film's aesthetics are what captivates the audience's initial attention, a filmmaker can then capitalize on that captivation to bring attention to the underlying themes and narrative.

Taking a scene from Alanis Obomsawin's *Incident at Restigouche*, where she juxtaposes an interview with one of the Mi'kmaq people with clips from a second raid. The interview is a woman recounting how her wedding was supposed to have taken place the day of the raid, and the narration begins at the end of the first clip of the raid rather than beginning with the interview footage. It's a subtle but powerful editing decision. Obomsawin deliberately creates a jarring contrast by overlaying the auditory narrative of a wedding with the visual narrative of a raid, simulating the disruption of the raid on the community through the audiovisuals of the scene. Obomsawin then takes over the narration herself when she switches the scene back to the raid, ending the story with the gathering of the Mi'kmaq people and surrounding Indigenous groups not in a celebration of the wedding as it should have been, but in the the defense of their community against the Canadian government. Obomsawin could have began the wedding narration with the clip, but she chose not to. She could have positioned the wedding interview elsewhere instead of sandwiching it between footage from the raids, but she chose to not. Her decisions in the editing process are clearly conscious of the effect of these seemingly small but largely impactful choices.

Similarly, Taika Waititi's decision to employ a 720 degree shot in *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* creates a dialogue of time and space between its characters, effecting an idea of an aimless stasis. The entire shot is one of a visual compositional stagnancy, contradicting the physical rotation of the camera. The camera rotates clockwise to the right, a direction that is usually indicative of progress, yet there is no tangible progress being made. The setting remains the same, the characters remain the same, there is no real change occurring, yet the child welfare officers continue their pursuit of Hec and Ricky who continue their escape. Waititi creates a never-ending loop that calls attention to the lack of real purpose in what is taking place across the screen, a realization that is emphasized through Waititi's decision to shoot it for 720 degrees instead of the more conventional 360 degrees. The extra revolution seems superfluous - the audience could recognized the purpose of the scene without it - but the entire motivation for the chase that has allowed this scene to take place is superfluous. Through his manipulation of pure aesthetic (the scene has no dialogue only music), Waititi is able to spotlight the problematic nature of New Zealand's child welfare system. A shot like this is more powerful than a direct condemnation of the system because it makes the viewer feel the elongation - he traps the audience in the same time and space as the characters.

Aesthetics and context do not have to be mutually exclusive. The aesthetic qualities of a film more often than not, support and elevate the contextual qualities, highlighting the importance of reconciling the aesthetic with the context. Context can exist on its own, but it becomes increasingly more prominent and powerful when it is framed with a film's aesthetic.

II.B. Individual vs. Community

Because of auteur theory's apparent assignment of a singular auteur, Sambu makes the claim that auteurism goes against idea of collaboration, and furthermore community, an aspect that is key to Indigenous cultures. There is a difference between collaboration and community, however, that is important to understand in the context of Indigenous cinema.

The identity of the Indigenous filmmaker is rooted in the identity of the community to which they belong - the stories that are being told are not only representative of the individual filmmaker but of their entire community. This representation of Indigenous stories falls under Barry Barclay's definition of a Fourth Cinema - the realm of cinema where Indigenous films have the potency to change the narrative perspectives from the 'Boat' (settlers) people to the 'Shore' people. The Indigenous communities are an omnipresent force in the production of these films so to make the claim that a Fourth Cinema film is the result of a single director does trivialize both the film and the production behind it. However, the individualism of auteur theory does not have to negate the community behind a film. Rather, the individualism allows the community's stories to be told in greater multitudes, creating a rich and diverse repertoire of films. For example, both Taika Waititi and Barry Barclay have made films about the Maori people that can be classified under Fourth Cinema, but *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* and *Ngati* are two entirely different films in almost every other aspect. This diversity can also increase visibility to wider audiences if some viewers prefer one filmmaker's style over another's.

In terms of collaboration, whereas traditional auteur theory privileges the individual over the whole[2], Indigenous stories prioritize the whole over the individual, making the two directly at odds with one another. We've simplified our definition of auteur theory to identify the director as the author of a film, however, the position of the author in filmmaking has long been the source of debate in auteur theory (Morari). Unlike a novel where there is only a single author, a film is comprised of the work of not just the director, but also the screenwriter, editor, soundtrack composer, cinematographer, etc, complicating the decision to elect a singular author of a film. Yet, the insistence upon auteur theory has led to the director as the commonly accepted author of a film. The director is seen as the "unifying force" among all the roles in a film's production, a term that is central to understanding and expanding the definition of an auteur with regards to collaboration. A point of unification is indicative of a common ground that everyone shares. It is the conglomeration of the cast and crew's work that the director pieces together into a whole, and we can rethink the role of the auteur to incorporate the idea of the auteur as a unification point to where collaborations converge.

Contrary to Sambu, I believe it is still important to maintain the individualism of the auteur especially for Indigenous filmmakers in order to create a diverse array of art. Expanding the role of the auteur to incorporate an idea of unity can also allow space for the internal collaborations to be acknowledged as part of the canon as well.

II.C. Corpus requirement

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[2]Foucault described auteurism as "a privileged moment of individualism."

The concept of an auteur heavily relies upon patterns found throughout a body of work, which unintentionally creates a barrier for filmmakers who are unable to build up a robust filmography. To Sambu's point, marginalized filmmakers face many funding struggles that make it incredibly difficult to produce even a small collective of work. The requirement for multiplicity is the most difficult aspect of traditional auteur theory to reconcile because it is difficult to identify discerning qualities from small samples of work. This high barrier of entry into auteurism marks the main reason why auteurism is seen as a highly exclusive and elitist concept. By the time one has a prolific body of work, they've likely already established themselves to be a prominent filmmaker - the term 'auteur' becomes just an afterthought label at that point, commemorating their achievements rather than being symbolic of any deeper meaning. The title of auteur becomes a reaffirmation of an already formulated identity when it could perhaps be more beneficial to have it promote a continuous exploration and growth of identity. People in general are constantly evolving, so trying to set a rigid definition of a identity could do more harm if it creates a semblance of needing to follow those definitions instead of exploring new areas.

Going back to Sarris' emphasis on interior meaning for an auteur, the body of work requirement becomes less of a requirement and more of an easier method to discern this abstract interior of the auteur. If someone makes a film without any outside influences, a film that is wholly their own, then that quintessential identity should still be in there, it's just not as obvious as it would be if there were ten other films to also examine. Creating a film corpus then becomes a way to further reveal that identity, shifting from an obstacle to motivation.

III. Repurposed Auteur Theory

Given the issues raised by Sambu, we can construct a new definition of auteur theory from the existing foundations. Preserving the core principle of auteurism as a proponent for unique identity, we can expand the definition of auteur to one that is inclusive of collaboration and change.

We can examine two notable Indigenous filmmakers who could already be considered auteurs by the traditional standards, Taika Waititi and Alanis Obomsawin, through this new lens.

III.A. Taika Waititi

Waititi has become one of the most prominent filmmakers even among mainstream audiences. His filmography has expanded to incorporate more than just Indigenous works from black comedies like *Jojo Rabbit*[3] to international blockbusters with Marvel's *Thor* movies. Despite the breadth of genre and topic in these films, each of them are still distinctly his from his irreverent comedy to affinity for sprawling nature shots.

While it may seem like Waititi has deviated away from Indigenous films, when we examine his work taking collaboration into account, we see that he continues to work with his Maori community, bringing them over to his mainstream sets like *Thor: Ragnorak*. His insistence on working with the Maori people indicate the impact his community has had on him even if it is not immediately apparent in his works that don't center around Indigenous people.

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[3] A film that relates to Waititi's Jewish identity

Waititi is an example of an Indigenous filmmaker who is constantly exploring his filmic identity through the variety of films he makes while keeping his Indigenous roots close to his filmmaking process.

III.B. Alanis Obomsawin

Obomsawin's classification as an auteur is unconventional by traditional standards as the title of auteur has typically been reserved for narrative filmmakers. Documentary work presents a different argument to Sambu's issue of aesthetic over context - in that there is a greater warning of context over aesthetic. Documentaries proudly display their arguments, valuing the depiction of facts and figures first and foremost. Aesthetics can become secondary here, but Obomsawin reconciles the two to create potently powerful pieces.

Even though she is not the sole camera operator in her works, frequently engaging in the use of found footage and collage work, she controls her stories through meticulous editing. The thoughtfulness behind juxtapositions of certain scenes in order to create the most heightened contrast, when she starts a voiceover narration, if it's her voiceover or someone else's are all contributing factors to what makes a work so distinctly Alanis Obomsawin's.

Unlike Waititi, Obomsawin's work has remained centered around Indigenous cultures, more strongly relating her filmic identity to spotlighting the underrepresented stories, lending her unique voice to them.

IV. Conclusion

Auteur theory possesses a number of inherent flaws, and we could abandon the concept entirely, however, its emphasis on identity is what makes it essential to any form of art. The art is a reflection of the artist, their ideals and values, their background, etc. Auteurism should be recognized not as an elite badge of success in a field, but as a proponent of this unique identity.

Specifically in relation to Indigenous cinema, this increased visibility and priority of the filmmakers' identity creates a richer and more varied portrait of Indigenous filmmaking that is crucial to creating a deep repertory of Indigenous films. Strengthening the identity of Indigenous filmmakers in turn strengthens the impact of their stories, drawing more attention and nuance to their works.

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