Film Director Essay, Research Paper

Film 295F Essay

“As the term suggests, an auteur is an author, someone whose aesthetic sensibilities and impact are most important in the creation of a text. With literary texts, discerning authorship is usually no problem. But with collaborative art forms, such as film, deciding on authorship is much more complicated. Generally speaking, film theorists have concluded that it is the director of a film who is the auteur, the most important creative figure.

But auteur theory is concerned with more that one film; it is concerned with the work of a director – with his or her whole corpus of films, and with certain dominant themes and stylistic aspects of these films. The text in auteur criticism is not one film, but the body of work of the director.”

Although both Akira Kurosawa and Robert Zemeckis have made many successful films there is a distinct difference in the filmmakers works. The authorship of the film is what creates the distinction between Kurosawa and Zemeckis films. Examining authorship is a challenge; critics and writers have been attempting to do it for years. The most comprehensive definition that I have found is the one quoted above from Berger’s Cultural Criticism. In non-technical language, authorship is looked upon as an unknown distinct element that one of the film’s cast or crew brings to it. Always changing, this unknown element may be derived from, an actor, director, editor or even a cinematographer.

In the past there have been two distinctions made by critics regarding authorship. There is the claim that there is an elitist group of filmmakers who have a distinct definable quality to all of their films regardless of whether they are considered good or bad quality films. In essence, the caliber of the film itself seems to be irrelevant to the theory. This group is categorized under the much sought after term of auteur. This said, a bad film made by an auteur is alleged to better than the best film made by a metteur en scene. This brings us to the idea of what can be considered when examining a metteur en scene. The definition seems to take on exactly the opposite quality than that of an auteur. A metteur en scene may make decent or even good films, but there seems to be a link missing when comparing all their works as a whole.

When regarding the works of an Auteur, we must examine their films as a whole; to greater understand the thought process in film creation. This is where we are able to make the distinction between Kurosawa as an auteur and Zemeckis as a metteur en scene. The unknown consistency that is present in an “auteurs” film seems to be lacking in the films of a metteur en scene. While there may not be a consistent feeling present in the films of a metteur en scene, this is not to say that their films are not quality ones. Zemeckis may be considered to be a successful director in the eyes of the viewing public, however, that is not to assume that he is also an auteur.

The distinguishing differences between the concepts of auteurism and metteur en scene will be demonstrated throughout this essay using the examples of Back to the Future and Forrest Gump for Zemeckis and Rashomon and Dodes ‘Ka-Den for Kurosawa respectively. With these films we will examine the use of reoccurring themes or lack there of in each directors work: Themes illustrated by the directors include the director’s use of social themes and attitude towards his audience.

To fully understand any film, we must try to understand the ideas which the director was attempting to portray to his viewers. One of the ways that auteurism has been defined is the consistency of ideas portrayed to the viewer over the scope of a directors career. A film early on in a director’s career has the same running themes and attitudes as a later film and thus we see a thematic bridge that links his/her films together. The uses of thematic bridges are found in all of Kurosawa’s films. Regardless of the plot structure of the film, there are common elements found in each one. A director’s attitude regarding his films is very important when examining it as a viewer. Primarily Kurosawa’s attitude regarding his films was how he could make the audience intereract with the characters in his stories. Arguably this is the attempt at most films; there is a different feeling regarding this concept in each directors works. There exists an informal consistency in Rashomon and Dodes ‘Ka-Den that is not found between Zemeckis’ films Back to the Future and Forrest Gump.

Rashomon and Dodes ‘Ka-Den share many of the same social themes. This would seem unlikely to find because the films are set over 300 years apart. Much of the connections in Kurosawa’s films are linked to the Japanese concept of bushido. Viewing Kurosawa’s films as a western viewer, this principle has much different implication that it might for a Japanese viewer. The concept of bushido is a Japanese cultural element, which although one can study its difficult to understand until fully immersed in the culture. Bushido is loosely defined as the unwritten code of moral principles regulating the actions of the Japanese knighthood, or Samurai; the chivalry of Japan. The use of this element is somehow present in all Kurosawa’s films. It is not always at the surface, and often it is suppressed. This idea of bushido is a large part of the shared social themes in the films.

Rashomon is a period piece set in the tumultuous time of the Japanese civil wars, just before the Tokugawa shogun period. Although the credit of authorship of this film goes to Kurosawa, the writer, Ryunosuke Akutagawa had a strong hand in the social construction of the story. Donald Ritchie states in his book The Films of Akira Kurosawa; “He [Akutagawa] is ‘Western’ in the same way as Kurosawa: he is concerned with truths which are ordinarily outside pragmatic Japanese morality and, being concerned with them, he questions them.” This statement sheds much insight into Kurosawa’s use of social structure in his films. He is very concerned with the behaviour of humankind in relation to each other. Rashomon’s main plot shows Kurosawa’s interest with the goodness of humankind from one person to another. Rashomon’s story is the compilation of the same story told by many different sources. The focus of this idea is that there is never the absolution of truth and although we would like to believe in the good of humankind, there is always more than one side to every story; in this case, seven sides to one story. Coupled with those ideas we have the concept of redemption for the characters that have displayed traits worth redeeming. We see throughout the film there are a number of characters who have redeemable qualities, namely the woodcutter, the woman and even the priest. These characters are granted salvation by Kurosawa in the film whereas in the original text they were not. This shows us that although there was an original story, Kurosawa used the possibility of authorship to create a personal stamp on his film.

Zemeckis is a filmmaker that has had many hits and although his films are enjoyable and successful, it is difficult to find a common theme the way an audience is able to in Kurosawa’s works. Zemeckis’ films harbor some similar elements, however that is always going to happen on some level when viewing a filmmaker’s works all together. Much of the inconsistencies that we witness have to do with Zemeckis’ inconsistency in social themes. Early on in Zemeckis’ career the much of his focus concentrated on social and political concerns. This is clearly evident in Back to the Future; more specifically when Marty (Michael J. Fox) is sent back into the 1950’s. The way that Zemeckis decides to portray society in the 1950’s of Back to the Future is very different then the way that he decides to portray it in Forrest Gump. While Back to the Future was interested in social and political concerns, Forrest Gump was more highly focused on philosophical ramifications due to social pressures. We see in Back to the Future a world full of social and political constraints. While character is a large focus of this film, the main theme is the world in which our characters habitate. This is highly contrasted with the world of Forrest Gump. The world that Zemeckis presents to us in Forrest Gump is one where we intently focus on the characters and not the surroundings.

His uses of transitions are a large part of his works as a whole, however there is not a consistent use of one type. His use of time lapses, good and evil and day and night are all present in his works.

As well as the theme of bushido found in Kurosawa’s films there is a strange element involving the viewer of the film and the characters within the setting of the film. Easily spotted in earlier films as the characters watching each other and reacting to each other and their behaviour, this gives the audience a certain attachment, involvement into his films. Later films still present the same ideas, however they are more suppressed. These ideas are loose links in which we can tie together Kurosawa’s films. This not withstanding, not every one of these elements will be found and or addressed in each of his films. The missing elements from certain films often have caused them to be regarded as lesser films by critics, however seem to just show a development through an auteurs career. Much like any other artist, a filmmaker’s works will change with time and experience. Much of this is not found as overtly in Dodes ‘Ka-Den, however it is still present, verifying the authorship of the film. The connection that an audience feels to the characters within a film while watching it greatly contributes to the feeling that we have about what the director is trying to say to us.

While an audience is unable to be sure what a director is thinking, reading interviews and watching a number of films by the same author lends insight into what they may be thinking regarding their films. Often when broached regarding the ideas of what they were thinking while making a film, filmmakers become philosophical, offering insight rather than answers.

Many auteurs make films without the knowledge that there will be parts analyzed in a certain way. This can be said for Kurosawa who explains his view of his films and an overanalyzation of such, in a candid interview near the time of his death.

“Critics take my work and say things about it, such as: This scene in the film means such and such. It’s not true! I am not thinking of that at all! Really, the films are just created totally naturally, I just film it as I go along. It may turn out affecting people in a certain way, but I don’t create films by rationalizing my thoughts. It’s something I was born with that comes naturally, so it must be full of my ‘style.’ On the other hand, its not something I am overly aware of while I do it, I don’t force it to be a Kurosawa film. I tell the actors just to be honest to themselves and to their feelings, not to think about unnecessary things and to let it flow naturally. This is my philosophy in life and something I hold close to my heart.”

Our first insight into a director’s attitude is how he creates his film; much of this is the level of control that a director exercises upon his body of work.

Throughout Kurosawa’s career, he worked hard to repeatedly present the themes, which were important to him. This is not always the case in Zemeckis’ films, as we do not see Zemeckis using the same themes consistently throughout his works. Using subjectivity, Kurosawa was able to bring the audience into the minds and hearts of the characters involved. Thus, Akira Kurosawa’s work is clearly superior to directors who presented their stories more objectively.

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