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STORYTELLING, THE DEVELOPMENT OF MOVIE GENRES AND THE IMPACT OF SURREALISM ON “AUTEUR THEORY”

Abstract. Surrealism had a great impact on contemporary cinematographers, and, while cinema has undergone theoretical and technological changes, the connections Surrealism has with cinema did not change, and are obvious in the “author cinema” genre. Surrealism brought to cinema its changed reality, in which the world of the unapparent, of dreams, the lack of logic, and the appetite for the metaphysic remained intact.

Cinematography has known, as it has developed as an art form, a seemingly larger growth into genres and sub-genres. Its two main forms, the documentary and the fiction film are terms that stand for hundreds of ways of audio-visual storytelling, classified by means of structure and content. This structure, this definition of cinematography’s main forms, became necessary once it has developed as an artistic expression and has entered, in time, in the movie-goers lingo: “The cinematography genre is a notion that is known by every movie-goer that wishes to choose what film to watch, describe a film in a few words to a couple of friends, or identify, characterize, distinguish between different types of movies with common traits. It is also a central concept in cinematography and in the history of film. There’s nothing more usual between movie-goers, then the habit of classifying by means of generic

categories – from western to science fiction, from the melodrama to the musical – in order to position and rank recurring stories, ideology, aesthetics, and all other elements of cinematography as a whole.”¹

Borrowed from the French language, where it means “kind” or “type”, the genre notion is used for the first time (regarding cinematography) around the 1890’s, crossed over from literature and adapted to the audio-visual opera: “During the earliest years of film production, individual films were most often identified by length and topic, with genre terms applied to film in only the loosest of fashions (“fight pictures” in the late 1890s or “story films” after 1904). When around 1910 film production finally outstripped demand, genre terms were used increasingly to identify and differentiate films. Whereas literary genre was primarily a response to theoretical questions or to practical large-scale classification needs (such as library organization), early film genre terminology served as shorthand communication between film distributors and exhibitors.”²

In his book, “Cinema Genre”, Raphaëlle Moine, talks about the five different

levels of differentiation that can be utilized to build genre categories. The base level is the level of function. This level refers to the differences between the documentary and fiction approach to cinema – the documentary, with its informative nature, relies upon a truthful representation of reality in hopes of portraying truth, while the rest of the genres are fictional representations, as a result of imagined situations.

The second level is destination. This is used to distinguish between audio-visual works that have a clear target audience (cartoons and other children films for instance) and those whose audience cannot be fully predicted, beforehand.

The level of function applies to determining the function that a certain film wishes to hold. Here, a separation takes place, between the films with illocutionary function – that have the purpose of transmitting the information selected by the opera and the author (the documentary presenting things “as they are”), and the films with perlocutionary function, which have the goal of changing the spectators state of mind, or feelings – from the sought-after laughter in comedy films, to the fright and scare on which the horror film so heavily relies.

The semantic level refers to the differences between semantic elements in the genres, like themes, motifs and topics: “The western is characterized by spaces (mountains ranges, deserts, canyons, etc.), locations (saloons, banks), characters (cowboy, horse, communities of farmers, saloon singer, sheriff, etc.),

1 Raphaëlle Moine, *Cinema Genre*, translated by Alistair Fox and Hilary Radner, Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2008, Introduction, p. 12 (t.m.).

2 Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996, p. 276 (t.m.).

objects (wagons, coaches, colts and shot-guns), situations (confrontation between hero and villain, river crossings, Indian attacks on the wagons, gunfights, etc.), all of which belong to the American West at the end of the nineteenth century [...] Fantasy and horror films contain supernatural beings or inhuman creatures (devils, spirits, livingdead, giant monkeys, hybrid creatures of all sorts) that behave in an unnatural manner (sorcerers, mad scientists), and populate disturbing spaces (crypts, cemeteries, castles in ruin, haunted homes, isolated houses, ancient buildings, etc.).”³

The last and perhaps the most unclear is the syntactic level. On the subject of this level, R. Moine says: “The technical aspects of filmmaking provide criteria that operate at this level, giving rise, for example, to the cartoon (which we have already encountered) as a generic category. One can also view the alternation between realistic scenes with dialogue and scenes with singing and dance numbers as being a formal element that distinguishes the musical. One might, if need be, enlarge the syntactic level to include narratological features that partially characterize certain genres, such as the flashback – a favored narrative technique in film noir – or the use of focalization from the perspective of the viewer, which often generates the

effects in comedies, or in suspense genres such as the thriller.”⁴

This is not the only classification of possible analysis and comparison approaches when dealing with cinematography genres, but it stands as a good example of the system that is used in determining the specific traits of films. Today, classifications are blatantly common, as the usual movie-goer is familiar with terms that became used at a very large-scale. We no longer see a movie falling into one single category: “The number of films that draw upon several genres are legion. Abel Gance’s “Napoleon” (1927) is both a historical film and a biopic; “Seven Brides for Seven Brothers” (Donen, 1954) relies on the musical and the western; “Some Like It Hot” (Wilder, 1959) is a comedy, but also borrows from the gangster film; “Dance of the Vampires” (Polanski, 1967) is both a fantasy film and a comedy; and so on.”⁵ Another good example comes in the form of a more recent title – “Wall-E”, the animation feature produced by the Pixar studios and directed by Andrew Stanton, winner of the Oscar in 2009, is classified as a part of the following genres: “Animation, Adventure, Family, Romance, Sci-Fi.”⁶ Amongst the classifications of this sort on various websites, there is no word on the author film.

The author film is not considered a genre. It is actually in opposition to genre

3 Raphaëlle Moine, *Cinema Genre, op. cit.*, p. 34-35 (t.m.).

4 *Ibid.*, p. 35 (t.m.).

5 *Ibid.*, p. 39 (t.m.).

6 *Wall-E (2008)*, IMDB.com, Inc., 14.02.2009, <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0910970/>>.

movies. Even the genre determining criteria that we talked about earlier, requires the presence of a recipe applied to the audio-visual creation, and it's indexing alongside other similar works. The auteur film is different in just that – it lacks a precise recipe, and all commercial traits: “...from an economic perspective, there is general agreement that genres (which exploit a convergence of narrative, iconographic, and stylistic conventions through a play of repetition and variation) should be seen as a rational system for producing and exploiting images, with Hollywood providing a canonical example, especially during the classical era. This common ground allows schematic contrasts to be made (especially in French film criticism) between two different types of cinema: on one hand, a “genre cinema” that is commercial and formulaic, and on the other hand, an “auteur cinema” that is liberated from the institutional, economic, and ideological constraints of other genres that it avoids, borrows from, or transgresses..”⁷

The term “auteur film” was coined by French director and film critic François Truffaut, who used it for the first time in 1954: “In his 1954 essay “Une certaine tendance du cinéma français” (“A Certain Tendency in French Cinema”), François

Truffaut coined the phrase “la politique des Auteurs”, and asserted that the worst of Jean Renoir’s movies would always be more interesting than the best of Jean Delannoy’s. “Politique” might very well be translated as “policy” or “program”; it involves a conscious decision to look at films and to value them in a certain way. Truffaut provocatively said that “(t) here are no good and bad movies, only good and bad directors”.⁸ But the term, as we know it, did not constitute solely on François Truffaut essays, but also on the writings of a group of french film critics: “Both the Auteur theory and the Auteurism method of film analysis are frequently associated with the French New Wave and the film critics who wrote for the influential French film review periodical *Cahiers du cinéma* [...] who argued that films should reflect a director’s personal vision. They championed filmmakers such as Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock and Jean Renoir as absolute ‘auteurs’ of their films.”⁹, and the “caméra-stylo” notion, developed by the french director and critic, Alexandre Astruc. This notion, as its name implies it, refers to the use of the film camera in a free manner: “...directors should wield their cameras like writers use their pens and that they need not be hindered by traditional storytelling.”¹⁰

7 Raphaëlle Moine, *Cinema Genre*, op. cit., p. 12 (t.m.).

8 *Auteur theory – Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., 15.02.2009, <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auteur>> (t.m.).

9 *Idem* (t.m.).

10 *Auteur theory – Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., 15.02.2009, <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auteur>> (t.m.).

In his theory, François Truffaut argues that both the very talented authors and the very bad ones have such a high personal touch (or they usually make use of the same motifs, themes) that their influence is apparent in everything they do. Alfred Hitchcock was one of the directors held in great esteem by Truffaut for his unmistakable visual style, whilst Jean Renoir was appreciated for his human themes.

The perspective of the author film as a film that has nothing to do with pre-made structures and recipes, with the need to create a commercially viable product, with ideological influences that can damage the artistic content, is at the same time optimistic and gloomy. Once technology became more liberal and the boundaries between the technical aspects of cinematography disappeared, – more precisely, once everyone could access a video camera, a computer and an editing program – the artistic audio-visual universe was in danger of becoming suffocated with mediocre, obscure creations, the self-entitled “auteur” films, creations that prove themselves no more than imaginative dejection void of any coherence. Obviously these “niche” productions are destined to be shown in various festivals, be catalogued as “experimental projects” and disappear afterwards just as fast as they were created. The risk arrives when this kind of project is encouraged. The reason for the existence of these “successions of moving images” is a simple one. They can be created, disseminated and viewed with

a speed unknown to any historical period. The Internet and the exponential curve of technological development are partly to blame. As far as ideas go, these movies are mostly boring and incoherent. They stand mostly as a proof to the fact that more and more people want to “speak”, but have truly nothing to say. There are various forms, but not enough content.

The “auteur” movie, as treated in this paper, is on the border between narrative, filmic, consecrated structures and the realm of exploration, experimentation, without it being void of a logical, rational integrity. It represents a new concept, well “dressed” in audio-visual, using the available technology just enough to show, in a faithful way, the creator’s vision. This exposure of the creator’s own vision does not exclude a referential system. In my opinion the “auteur” film derives from: borrowing the positive ways of already consecrated works, at least on an ideal level, along with a profound knowledge of filmic mechanic, audio-visual discourse and, last but not least, a consistent bag of artistic knowledge. Even if it’s not part of any specific genre, and cannot be exactly catalogued in one, the “auteur” movie can sum-up, as I stated before, the “peaks” of any genre, culminating in a “mélange” of audio-visual elements, strongly leaning towards the artistic side, profoundly attached to the creator’s own vision.

The “Fantasy” genre is, today, one of the most revered genres of modern cinema, having 5 of the 7 most successful box-office movies of all times, surpassed only by “Titanic” – which is part “Drama”

part "Romance" – witch earned no less than 1.835.300.000 dollars worldwide. On second place we have "The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King" (directed by Peter Jackson, 2003), earning 1.129.219.252 dollars worldwide, followed by „Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest" (directed by Gore Verbinski, 2006)¹¹. But the history of the Fantasy genre was not a glorious one if we are to look upon the productions between the 1900' and 1990'. The lack of technical support and high production costs are mostly to blame.

The "godfather" of directing is also the creator of the first Fantasy movie. Georges Sadoul talks about him: "Characteristic for the genius of Georges Méliès is the fact that he was the first – if we are to use his own expression – who launched cinema on the spectacular, theatrical way."¹² The 30 year old Frenchman, owner of the "Robert Houdin" theatre for almost ten years – where he practiced his vocation as a prestidigitator, specializing in scenery tricks – exercised his fascination for cinema even from the first projections of the Lumière brothers in the "Grand Cafe": "At one time he tells Antoine Lumière – a famous anecdote – that he wants to buy his son's camera. But the industry worker responds that the cinema trend will be short-lasting and that he wishes

to keep the benefit of investment. [...] A couple of weeks later, Georges Méliès buys a projection camera from William Paul, and from Kodak he buys a virgin film strip worth a thousand and four hundred napoleons."¹³ Méliès' first movies prove unsuccessful. But from the moment he starts using "special effects" and invests a huge sum for the purpose of building a studio on his private lands in Montreuil in the year 1897, the situation changes completely. Still, as is the case of all great discoveries, chance and not money play the crucial role: "While he was playing a recording filmed in the Opera Plaza, he was surprised to see how an omnibus, heading on the Madeleine-Bastilia route, suddenly transforms into a carriage. Reflecting on this, he finds the cause of this transformation: the film strip jammed, and, restarting after a short period, the camera's view continued as normal. But the small delay did not stop the normal flow of parisian circulation."¹⁴ This incident can be called "the zero moment" in movie editing. Georges Méliès is responsible not only for "inventing" this procedure, but also for introducing cinema to all the consecrated elements of theatrical production: the script, the actors, costumes, make-up, props, splitting a movie into scenes and acts.

11 *All-Time Worldwide Box office*, IMDB.com, Inc., 22.06.2009, <<http://www.imdb.com/boxoffice/alltimegross?region=world-wide>>.

12 Georges Sadoul, *Istoria Cinematografului Mondial*, Ed. Științifică, București, 1961, p.24.

13 *Ibidem*.

14 *Ibid*, p. 26.

The high-point of his directing career is the movie “Voyage dans la lune” dating from the year 1902, the first movie considered part of the “Science-Fiction” genre. “The success of “Voyage dans la lune” marks the victory of a complete directing system over the “Lumiere” style of filming in open-doors.”¹⁵ The movie, drawing inspiration from two of the most popular novels of that time: “From Earth to the Moon”, by Jules Verne, and “First Man on the Moon”, by H.G.Wells, shows the journey of a group of explorers, who are in fact astronomers disguised as astrologists, from Earth to the Moon and back. Even though he used “special effects” in the movies created before “Journey to the Moon”, this is the first of Méliès works in which animation and special effects are presented not only to confuse the audience, or provoke admiration and curiosity, but they also have a clear narrative role, beyond that of props ambience, making possible veritable metaphoric associations.

Opinions are split regarding the status of “Voyage à travers l'impossible”, directed by Georges Méliès in 1904, as the first Fantasy movie ever created. George Sadoul briefly mentions this movie, only to analyze the way in which Méliès composes a frame, but also mentions: “In Méliès faeries events are not unfolding as in real life, but strictly respecting Theatre conventions. [...] These are Theatre conventions that, after 1908, stopped being used in cinema.”¹⁶

The status of the Fantasy genre changed recently, thanks to the critical and commercial success of works such as J.R.R. Tolkien’s “The Lord of the Rings” or J.K.Rowling’s “Harry Potter”. The last movie of Peter Jackson’s “The Lord of The Rings” trilogy is also the first Fantasy movie to win an Oscar for “Best Movie”. This “box-office” success of the Fantasy genre only confirms the fact that the moviegoer wants to do more than just observing human destinies. He wants to explore different universes that are beyond his grasp, witnessing events possible only on a cinema screen. It is exactly these worlds, skillfully created, first by a novelist, then adapted for the big-screen, that draw us in because they are the only ones that offer a veritable escape from reality, an escape in which “imagination”, “dream” and “game” are the key-words. The vast majority of genres, except the “Science-Fiction”, are anchored in the perpetual need of conveying a certain amount of realism to the stories, to keep the unfolding events in a realistic context, even if heroes with superhuman traits do appear in genres such as “Action”, “Adventure”, “Crime”, etc.

But the “Fantasy” genre, as opposed to the others – making the same exception out of the “SF” – is, both in film and literature, a hard to perfectly define genre. One attempt at defining it, albeit vague, belongs to John Clute and John Grant in the book “The Encyclopedia of Fantasy”: “a fantasy text is a self-coherent narrative which, when set in

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 28-29.

our REALITY, tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it; when set in an OTHERWORLD or SECONDARY WORLD, that otherworld will be impossible, but stories set there will be possible in the otherworld's terms. An associated point, hinted at here, is that at the core of fantasy is STORY. Even the most surrealist of fantasies tells a tale.”¹⁷ The approach in placing a film in this genre differs from one critic to the other, disagreements appearing when themes, narration and other film structure elements are in question. Lacking a generally accepted definition, one can mention a myriad of relatively permissive sub-genres – taking into account that every film that features supernatural or magical characters, fantasy based creatures or mythological ones, placed in a medieval setting (but not necessarily), can be considered as being part of the Fantasy genre. A relevant example in this case is the super-hero movie: “Superhero films also fulfill the requirements of the fantasy or science fiction genres but are often considered to be a separate genre. Some critics, however, classify superhero literature and film as a subgenre of fantasy (Superhero Fantasy) rather than as an entirely separate category.”¹⁸ Two of the sub-genres have distinct traits. These are “High Fantasy” and “Sword and Sorcery”:

“...both categories typically employ quasi-medieval settings, wizards, magical creatures and other elements commonly associated with fantasy stories.”¹⁹

2. Surrealism in cinema

As the third stage in the artistic “avant-garde” of the XX-th Century, surrealism effectively follows Dadaism, as one of the most important spiritual manifestations between the two great wars. Dadaism, “in which some have seen a violent emotional reaction to frustrations and the destruction of moral values caused by the First World War”²⁰ can be considered a turning point between art forms, by some extent it being considered the first step of surrealism. One of the most important co-founders of the dada movement is a Romanian writer of Jewish heritage, that goes by the name of Samuel Rosenstock, better known by his alias Tristan Tzara. The actual birth of the movement takes place in 1916's Switzerland, in Zurich, where Tzara: “was joined at first by the writers Hugo Ball and Richard Hülsenbeck and the artist Hans Arp, and then by painters such as: the Romanian Marcel Iancu, Francis Picabia, Marcel Duchamp (USA), Max Ernst, Kurt Schwitters (Germania), etc. Associating a declared negativism and some elements from the French

17 John Clute and John Grant, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, St. Martin's Griffin, 1999, Introduction, p. 8 (t.m.).

18 *Fantasy film – Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.,

15.03.2009, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fantasy_film> (t.m.).

19 *Ibid.*, 18:40 (t.m.).

20 Al. Husar, *Izvoarele Artei*, Ed. Meridiane, București, 1988, p. 255.

cubism and German expressionism to Italian futurism, Dadaism (cf. Tristan Tzara, *La première aventure cèleste de M. Antipyrine*, 1916 and the series of “Dada” I-VII manifests) cultivates total randomness, the unforeseeable, the banishment of ordinary shapes, thus provoking disorder and stupor, and by organizing scandalous shows aimed against art and the aesthetic, traditional morality, programmatically placed under question.”²¹

Dadaism bridged the gap between abstract modern art and the anti-abstract art, being a short term movement (1916 – 1923). Tristan Tzara, will also adhere to surrealism once his interest for nihilism disappears. As far as the beginnings of the surrealist movement are concerned, they are tightly connected to the Parisian “Literature” (1919) magazine, led by André Breton, Louis Aragon and Phillipe Soupault, “which – breaking away from the artistic tutelage of Arthur Rimbaud, Lautréamont and Stephane Mallarmé – captures more and more of the boldness of Dadaism’s renewing and invigorating (especially after it moved its headquarters from Zürich to Paris, in 1919). In *Littérature* (where Breton publishes “Magnetic Fields”, the first surrealist text, alongside Philippe Soupault), as well as in other magazines, the Dadaist writings alternate

between the newest of orientations, that will later be called surrealism.”

Surrealism is: “A rebellion against a reality with which the old, traditional forms of poetry and art have accustomed us, a “regaining of profound life, of feelings and sensations in a brooding stage [...] the will of a new incidence with reality, the projection of new art goals, summoned to directly participate in everyday life, to transform it through spiritual revolution, that is not possible without social revolution (André Breton)”²³.

The term “*Surréalisme*” first appeared in 1917, due to a last minute change of a theatre play’s title. The poet Guillaume Apollinaire, before printing his “*Tyresias Breasts*” play, changes its title from a “supernaturalist drama” to “surrealist drama”. In his 1920 article, entitled “For Dada”, André Breton takes over and uses the term.

Later on (in 1924), André Breton writes the first “surrealist manifesto”, in which he sets the movement’s standard and sets its artistic course, proclaiming imaginations supremacy over imitation, the idea that no limit may be forced upon the human psyche and postulating the dream: “as a value of self-certitude [...] the dream world and the real world are one”²⁴. Amidst the written standards

21 *Dadaism* – Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., 17.03.2009, <<http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dadaism>>.

22 *Suprerealism* – Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.,

17.03.2009, <<http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suprerealism>>.

23 Al. Husar, *Izvoarele Artei*, op. cit., p. 254.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 263.

of the manifesto are: the exploration of the subconscious, anti traditionalism, complete freedom of expression, removing the act of spiritual premeditation in the act of artistic creation, anti academic protest etc. Built with the goal of reaching a "supreme point" – which is on one side the total vision over the universe and the source of this universe on the other, surrealism is: "access vehicle towards that point, which represents the living synesthesia between the real and the unreal, the immediate and the virtual, the mundane and the fantastic"²⁵, exploring the unconscious universe, regarding art as a manipulator of images and a means of communication with the ineffable.

Surrealism implies a super reality in which the world of the unapparent, of dreams, lack of logic, the metaphysic, that lies beyond what we come to know through our senses and rationality in the real world. In this sense, the similarities between Breton's conceptions and those of Freud's are noteworthy. Freud establishes our subconscious as a basis for our psychic life. Beyond it, the world is nothing more than: "the symbol of unconscious desires, of unspoken tendencies, and, by deciphering it, man reaches integral self awareness. The purpose of art is to reveal the content of the unconscious, to uplift the unconscious into consciousness, so that the unconscious may determine its course"²⁶.

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²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 261.