Is There an “Implied” Author in Every Film?

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Since this is only the second time I’ve ever tried to do film criticism, I decided that I must read up on it. And as I read painstakingly, page by page, through all seven hundred and thirty books on my library’s list, I was a bit discouraged to find five books that actually had exhausted everything I could conceivably say: Henri Agel’s Poétique du cinéma: Manifeste essentialiste, Guido Aristarco’s Il dissolvimento della ragione: discorso sul cinema, Francisco Ayala’s El escritor y el cine, and one without an author: Verband der Film—und Fernseharbeitsgemeinschaften an den Deutschen Hochschulen. (Actually the one that came closest to my dubious level of understanding was Edgar Dale’s Manual of Motion Picture Criticism Prepared for High School Students.)

Leaving aside my ignorance of cinema studies (and most foreign languages), what about the implied author in literature? Any account of modern quarrels among literary critics about what the word “author” means could fill scores of books. In The Rhetoric of

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Fiction I concluded—it now seems to me a bit pompously—that the author makes his readers (of course I didn’t bother, in 1961, to say “his or her readers.”)

If he makes them badly—that is, if he simply waits, in all purity, for the occasional reader whose perceptions and norms happen to match his own, then his conception must be lofty indeed if we’re to forgive him for his bad craftsmanship. But if he makes them well—that is, makes readers see what they have never seen before, moves them into a new order of perceptions and experience altogether—he finds his reward in the peers he has created.

(Booth, 1961, 397-98)

Some readers have misread that statement as if it were about the flesh-and-blood author. Not long after my book came out, some postmodernist stars began to proclaim not only that the author does not make his or her readers; the author is dead. There is no such thing as an authoritative voice, since we all know that each reader makes whatever text gets made: the reader, not the author, makes the reading.1 Others made a case that I had acknowledged but understated—that whatever author we think we find in a text is inescapably a complex association of many contributing forces, including the very fact that we are all social selves, not totally autonomous, atomized in-dividuals.2 The flesh-and-blood author is already full of conflicts, and in the process of writing most authors find themselves changing the work according to suggestions from friends and editors, and even, as in the case of James Joyce, reprinting printing accidents. The printed text still implies that one author wrote the book; yet it’s undeniable that many voices are present in every published work.

When we turn to films the case against the claim for a single, autonomous creating author is obviously even stronger. Most novels are published as if a single author had done the work, and individual authors do usually have the final decision about most points. In contrast, every film results, as the long tailpiece lists of credits remind us, from innumerable voices. It’s no wonder that most film studies avoid the claim that the author, or the director, or the producer was finally totally responsible. Even the “auteur” movement seldom hinted that one creator did it all.

What I would like to see more of is criticism that acknowledges why, even with all the multiplicity of voices, every successful film does have what might legitimately be called an “implied author,” or if you prefer, an “implied center”—that is, a creative voice uniting all of the choices. That virtual author, that voice, that center, will never be identical with what any one of the crew could have created. But whenever a movie is fully powerful for any viewer, what that viewer has received is a unified voice. The movie has made its viewer, and has made that viewer either well or badly. Even in movies that are deliberately confusing, like Run Lola Run, the deliberateness is real if the
effect is real: a group of voices have finally surrendered to one another in a single direction (“you are to feel confused!”), and any spectator who is fully hooked, who comes away sobbing or cheering or feeling “that was great,” has joined that virtual “author”—the conglomeration of choices that have at least seemed finally to come together.

To make my point briefly, let’s take a fairly close look at one challenging example, American Beauty. I choose it because its multiple interpretations dramatize our problem of finding a center. As the director Sam Mendes said he felt after reading the script three times—and falling in love with it:

Each time it seemed to be something else. It was a mystery story, [it was] a kaleidoscopic journey through American suburbia, [it was] a series of love stories. No it was about imprisonment in the cages we all make for ourselves and our hoped-for escape. No, it was about loneliness, about beauty. It was funny; it was angry, sad. One thing I was certain of, the script, like its characters, wasn’t at all what it first appeared [to be]. (American Beauty 1999, xii)

If like Mendes one can’t find any single focused implied author in the initial script, how can one hope to find any clear center in a movie that adds scores of other voices—the music, the lighting, camera angles—and so on, ad infinitum.

Even before I had begun pursuing the differences between Alan Ball’s original script and the finished movie, I had naturally predicted that it did not finally become precisely what Ball intended. I did know that, unlike many screenwriters, he had been present and strongly influential throughout the production. But no movie author ever gets the last word on everything, and the same is true of directors. No reader here would expect that Sam Mendes was totally responsible for every choice. But anyone who has not studied the production, or viewed the DVD with Mendes dominating the conversation with Ball, would be greatly surprised, as I was, by some major changes, reflecting shocking shifts in the true center of the movie. They dramatize the problem in any search for an “implied author.”

Here is the most striking change that Ball could never have dreamed of, the cancellation of his intended narrative frame.³

Listen now to how the uncut version opened with scenes that were to be repeated at the end, as frame. Just imagine yourself now viewing the movie for the first time.⁴ We begin inside a jail cell. We see an “extreme close-up on a drop of water, at the tip of a faucet, a flash of light refracting through it just before it falls”—then another drop of water, then another, as we view beautiful concentric circles, drip drip drip, with Rickie, still off camera, singing in time: “I’m fixing a hole . . . where the rain gets in. . . .”

We break to see Rickie: he’s twenty but his eyes are much older. Underneath his zen-like tranquility lurks something wounded . . . and dan-
gerous. He sings softly: “And stops my mind from wandering” as he sits in his jail cell, staring intently at the metal sink. We then break to a TV channel, portraying the inside of a courtroom.

“A sullen teenage girl sits at a table, surrounded by lawyers.” At bottom of screen we read, “Teenage girl accused of hiring father’s killer.” We then focus on Jane, the daughter, for a moment, hearing a district attorney questioning Angela, Jane’s former “sexy” girl friend, with Jane’s face revealing fierce hatred. Angela, with only slight reluctance, tells about hearing Jane talk of wishing her father dead. After a full minute reporting that conversation, we go to a police station where the Colonel, the actual murderer, is presenting the tape Rickie filmed of his conversation with Jane about killing her dad—then back to Rickie singing softly, “I’m filling the cracks that ran through the door.” Then we break to a TV anchorperson, on the program The Real Dirt: “Lester Burnham. Brutally murdered in cold blood, allegedly the victim of a teenage psychopath hired by his own daughter, Jane. . . . Tonight on The Real Dirt, we’ll show you . . . an astonishing videotape in which Jane and alleged killer Fitts actually make their unholy pact.” Then we witness their conversation—I remind you that so far we’ve not seen or heard anything at all from Lester, the revised movie’s central hero. And then, before finally turning to Lester’s dead fantasy about life and death, we once again hear Rickie staring up at us, a dreamy smile on his face, singing softly “I’m taking the time for a number of things, that weren’t important yesterday.” Then we hear Vic Damone singing “I’m nobody’s baby” as a message fades in and out: “One year earlier, one year earlier.” Only now do we finally go to Lester’s voice-over about life and death, the actual opening of the movie we all have seen.

The shock is not just that our two most sympathetic characters are now seen from the very beginning as probably sentenced to death. The frame at the end makes the death sentence decisive: they’ve been convicted, first degree: they may die. And we now know not only that the Colonel is willing to have his son executed, in order to escape conviction, but that Barbara, his wife, has discovered, doing the laundry, the shirt with the blood on it: she knows the full truth about the Colonel—and simply tucks the shirt away, destroying evidence that would have proved her son innocent. The full awfulness underlying American Beauty in that uncut version—the culture that produces people like that—really screams at us.

The director and most others felt, at the time of final editing, that that framing had to be cut: it seemed clever, Mendes said, but a mite cynical and at odds with Lester’s spirit affirmatively taking wing at the end. Alan Ball did try for a while to keep the frame, and lost—not feeling miserable about it but giving up his original intent.
In contrast to most film making—as we all know, authors feel furious about how their work has been abused behind their backs—Ball was in on the production day by day, and is reported as saying, “Oh, my God, that is so much better than what I wrote.” But he often fought back, and usually won: they had decided that “Alan would not be replaced as the writer, that we would keep his voice, that the movie would go into production” with his voice steadily there. In fact, Bruce Cohen said “This script you could give to anyone and it would be a great movie. So they understood it: that the writer was what American Beauty was about.”

But who is that “writer”? Not really Ball, who lost his hope to retain that depressing frame. Since he had conceived of the movie from the beginning as a bitter one about ‘how the world sucks,” his framing came much closer to his original intention. Yet he did decide at the end that the revised movie was better than the one he had envisioned. And anyone who goes through the DVD will get the impression that the decisions were almost all by director Mendes.

“I saw what the movie was becoming,” Ball said, “Once you get the film into the editing machine the movie starts to let you know what it needs to be. . . . So the movie became what I was trying to write about—something completely different than what I thought it was.”

So where’s the implied author? It’s not Alan Ball, though he buys almost totally into the new version. Yet it’s not Mendes, who still claims that the true voice is that of Ball.

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There were of course many other significant changes. For example, in Ball’s intended version, Lester and Angela go ahead with having sex. There was thus to be much less of a hint of Lester’s moral illumination because of his refusal. After discussion Ball decided that to have Lester draw back, with a sense on his face of his moral illumination, was a genuine improvement. And I think he was right.

We could obviously add innumerable other changes: language additions and cuts produced by actors (Ball is reported as having usually jumped on them when they changed his wording, but often he said, “Oh my God, that’s so much better!”); emotional heightenings by cinematography and musical score (if you want to have some fun, play the final version through just listening closely to how the music is shifted scene by scene). Even sheer chance had a role, as when Lester’s toy red car accidentally bumps into Carolyn, just after she’s cursed the real red car outside. They decided to keep that genuine accident in.
So, as every student of cinema knows in advance, we have innumerable voices intruding on the original author’s voice—less so than in many movies but still immensely complex. And we have a movie about which critics are more divided than about most—not about its high quality5 but about what it’s about. One critic, a professor of philosophy, went so far as to suggest that nobody except a few elite thinkers would understand it: most viewers, he said, “will never explore the wealth of philosophical themes deposited beneath the surface.”

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Is there, then, anything that could be called an implied author, a unified creative center? Since the answer is so elusive, why is the question even worth asking?

My main reason is the same as it was when I preached about the implied author in fiction: only if viewers learn not to identify uncritically with some one plausible voice in a work—this or that narrator or protagonist, mistakenly assuming that that character is the true center—only then can we avoid radically destructive misreadings. Naively sucked into this or that point-of-view, viewers and readers simply miss the subtleties that the creators have implied. In criticism of fiction we still find critics naively identifying with this or that unreliable narrator, overlooking ways in which the implied author has provided clues about how to place the narrator’s faults in relation to other characters and the overall structure.

Though I’ve read only one-tenth of one percent of the books on film criticism, I’m willing to bet that most of the misreadings any reader here has objected to, about any film, have resulted from uncritical identification with this or that explicit voice—for example, total identification with either Lester or Rick. The interpreters have forgotten to probe for the elusive center, a center where each voice is in effect criticized or modified by the other voices. For me, there is a center to American Beauty, a center that can never be adequately formulated in words: it is found in the creative energy that hundreds of people put into its production, agreeing and disagreeing, inserting and cutting. It cannot be adequately summarized as “here is a satire on what’s wrong with American life”; that plays down the celebration of beauty. It is more tempting to summarize it as “a portrait of the beauty underlying American miseries and misdeeds”; but that plays down the scenes of cruelty and horror, and Ball’s disgust with our mores. It cannot be summarized with either Lester’s or Rickie’s philosophical statements about what life is or how one should live; though Alan Ball clearly has a commitment to some form of Taoist or Buddhist religious perspective, many of the clues to that deep view have been cut or reduced in the released version.
I think it is extremely unlikely that the phrase “implied author” will ever catch on widely in film studies. Even the vocabulary of “auteurism” has dramatically faded. What’s more, even the cheapest, most commercially focused crowd grabber, even the most pornographic film, has no single creator—only a central intent. So I can conclude with only three forlorn hopes.

First, I hope that film studies will pay more attention to the quest for the center, including the moral or intellectual or political judgments at that center, rather than succumbing to this or that peripheral voice. This is a major requirement for effective film studies, as it is for the study of fiction.

Second, I hope that critics can persuade more producers to provide, in their finished work, more effective clues, implicit and explicit, for interpreting how the created viewer is intended to judge what’s there. We read complaints every day from producers and directors about how audiences or critics have misread the work. Often the complaints are justified, but too often the fault is in the production.

Third, I hope that we can find ways to reduce the role of corrupt, cheaply commercial voices—the “production committees”—that too often shout down the voices of serious artistic authors and directors. When committees worrying only about size of audience shout down the voices of authors like Alan Ball and directors like Sam Mendes, artistic disaster results. The implied author has been ignored or destroyed.

Notes

This essay is a slight revision of a talk given at the Modern Language Association of America conference, December 28, 2000.

1 Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault are the heroes of that movement, especially the latter in his “What is an author?” (1969, 141–60). The best full-scale effort to reveal the absurd exaggerations of some of the author-assassins is Burke (1998).

2 The bibliography of arguments for the social construction of multiple selves would take more space than this whole article.

3 When giving the talk, I asked the audience how many had encountered the original frame that I’m coming to here. Only two hands were raised—to my relief.

4 The material here was derived from a website on the movie, labeled “For Educational Purposes Only.” http://www.geocities.com/ankostome5/Americanbeauty.html.

5 Chatting with viewers, I do find a surprising contrast of opinions about quality. Many have said they hated it. A majority have praised it, and a minority have said they were certain that it deserved the Oscar.
Works Cited


