

## **Feminism Echoed in the World Cinema: A Discourse**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Andre Bazin claimed that cinema 'is reflection of reality'. Love, death, (and 'rebirth') – are the main protagonists of this paper which also becomes the intrinsic part of cinema in general. Says Jean-Luc Godard, 'A story should have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order.' So, cinema if taken as reflection of life (or reality/Reality), it need not keep the order of birth, life, love, death (and 'rebirth') in the chronological fashion; the order is re-shuffled to give you the wisdom that 'the mysteries of facts are stranger than absolute fiction'. Though cinema is defined as an art-form that is gesamtkunst in nature to which Arnheim said that this brought about the death of the film as art form. But, is it true?

Considering the above-mentioned ideas of film theorists, Cavell had something specific to say, "(Film) A world complete without me which is present to me is the world of my immortality." (The World Viewed, 160). This whole discourse will be further elucidated in the paper by selecting some of the films of authorial directors like Satyajit Ray's Apu Trilogy, Rainer Werner Fassbinder's The Marriage of Maria Braun, Aparna Sen's 36 Chowringhee Lane, Deepa Mehta's Fire and Michelangelo Antonioni's L'Avventura. Along with love and death, the vital role that is played in these films is 'a female' or 'females'. They may be present on the silver screen or absent but; the three protagonists – love, death and female(s) – may be not in the same order - shows the immortality of this mortal "life". These films have been potent enough to scream loud the 'feelings' of love, death, and its female-hood.

**Keywords:** *Feminism, Auteur(s) of World Cinema, real, Real, realism, dream, surrealism*

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*"The hour of departure is arrived, and we go our separate ways, I to die, and you to live; which of these two is better only God knows."* - Socrates

*"One is still what one is going to cease to be and already what one is going to become. One lives one's death and dies one's life."* - Jean-Paul Sartre

Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D* strongly propagated realism in film and the concept of "love" (not between two human beings but between an animal– a dog and a man – Mr. Umberto Dominico Ferrar) comes to the forefront making a statement about paradigm of "love". Andre Bazin claimed that cinema "is reflection of reality". Though for Rudolf Arnheim 'talkies brought death of film as an art form'; Bazin is clear in his ideas about film as portraying realism. Though montage was the prime instrument in silent films, the use of it – when producing realism – can be accepted according to Bazin. In *The Evolution of Language of Cinema*, Bazin explains 'that montage, although necessary in many cases to make a film work, can be heavily overused. From the start he makes a distinction between "those directors who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality" (Braudy and Cohen, 1999: 43).

Love, death (and rebirth) are the main protagonists of this paper which also becomes the intrinsic part of cinema in general. Says Jean-Luc Godard, 'A story should have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order' (*Brainy Quote*). Therefore, the above-mentioned quote by Sartre ('*One is still what one is going to cease to be and already what one is going to become. One live one's death and dies one's life.*') - becomes very valid at this juncture, so is Bazin. Cinema if taken as reflection of life (or reality/Reality), it need not keep the order of birth, life, love, death (and 'rebirth') in the chronological fashion; the order is re-shuffled (as it is in reality) to give you the wisdom that 'the mysteries of facts are stranger then absolute fiction.' As Godard says, 'Art attracts us only by what it reveals of our most secret self.' (*Brainy Quote*).

Though cinema is defined as art-form that is *gesamtkunst* in nature, the get-together of many art forms – to which Arnheim said that 'this brought about the death of the film as an art form' (as seen earlier); as Arnheim did not believe in choices. He says, "A great artist has no choice; arbitrary choices exist only for mediocre artists." (Kleinmann and Duzer, 1997) But is it true?

Deleuze says that the visual ability is an ongoing narrative that which is inbuilt in humans much before the films were made; he gives an example that though one sees a running man on the screen, suddenly it is cut off from that point; our mind has the image-building power that the man continues to run in our mind. The camera of the mind has already taken the visuals and starts building scenes even when stopped. The mind wants to complete the character. So, he gives the analogy of water;

the way water flows, our image-building is a flow too. Once a movie is set in motion, like water the flow continues. So, for him the movement on the screen leaves a powerful impact on the mind of the audience then the story itself (Scriptcastle.com).

Considering the above-mentioned ideas of the film theorists, Cavell had something specific to say, “(Film) A world complete without me which is present to me is the world of my immortality” (Cavell, 1979).

Bazin draws a line between ‘pseudo realism’ and ‘true realism’. And according to him, unfortunately the medieval era in the realm of art could never recover from pseudo realism that which dealt with illusionary world. But, according to Bazin, the medieval era did not come across the technical development in art that brought about ‘true realism’. This is because, according to Bazin, “Perspective was the original sin of Western painting” (Wartenberg and Curran, 2005: 59).

Bazin continues in the same chapter *Cinematic Realism*, “In achieving the aims of baroque art, photography has freed the plastic arts from their obsession with likeness. Painting was forced, as it turned out, to offer us illusion and this illusion was reckoned sufficient unto art. Photography and the cinema on the other hand are discoveries that satisfy, once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism” (Ibid: 59).

Photographs may bring standstill element of space and time in its authentic state; Bazin gives an analogy of an insect mummified in amber. But cinematic realism has its upper hand to photography. And that is, “The film delivers baroque art from its convulsive catalepsy. Now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were. Those categories of resemblance which determine the species photographic image likewise, then, determine the character of its aesthetic as distinct from that of painting.” (Ibid: 60).

So, is this ‘existentialistic realism’ or ‘realistic existentialism’? Reading Bazin, one feels that realism in cinema gives the knowledge of existence plus the essence, which other art forms – (apart from photography) like painting, sculpture, classical dance and music may not do. From the epistemic point of view, they do give knowledge, but it is knowledge of ‘essence only’. But by

itself is out of their framework as existence is considered non-spiritual, material, raw and devoid of “essence”. But cinema as an art form gives the knowledge of the essence as well as existence. Bazin indeed is thankful to Muybridge, (1877 and 1880) – who created the image of a galloping horse (as seen earlier while discussing Gilles Deleuze); and creating a cinematographic visual. And rest is history – Marey, Lumiere brothers, silent films, the talkies, from black and white to Eastman colour to Technical colour films; now the virtual reality – still ‘a reality’; ultimately the ‘revolution in language of the screen is accepted.’ So Bazin concludes, “[.....] Today we can say that at last the director writes in film. The image – its plastic composition and the way it is set in time, because it is founded on a much higher degree of realism – has at its disposal more means of manipulating reality and of modifying it from within. The filmmaker is no longer the competitor of the painter and the playwright, he is, at last, the equal of the novelist.” (Ibid: 68).

At this juncture it is high time to introduce the Auteur Theory, and the auteur(s) selected for this paper. It is said that ‘it takes a village to make a movie.’ “Given the fact that filmmaking is inherently a joint venture with many participants, does it make sense to see just one or perhaps two individuals as the real creative source of the film, those to whom we can trace all the film’s virtues and vices? This is the central issue posed by the question of whether films have authors. And the answer suggested by the auteur theory is that the director(s) is (are) the controlling intelligence behind the making of a film.” (Ibid: 91).

Auteur theory has its three basic existential questions related to it:

1. The Ontological: Who or what is responsible for the existence of a film?
2. The Interpretive: The basic co-operative venture of film, should it be considered a singlehanded one?
3. The Evaluative: Who is responsible or what is responsible for the success and failure of a film?

In connection to above mentioned discussion, Cavell in *The World Viewed* denies the “natural connectivity or relation to movies; but he tries to establish ‘a new philosophical connectivity to films in relation to ourselves and others.’ As he declared in *The World Viewed* ‘that it is not possible to think seriously about film apart from philosophy, and that philosophy cannot avoid the subject of film.’ Whereas Bazin talks of hardcore realism; Cavell accepts realism in films but not

representative realism, where a mysterious relationship is developed between film and objects and people in that film. This ontological difference he finds in a painting and film. Cavell writes (in the chapter *Cavell on Film, Television and Opera*), “Apart from the wish for selfhood (hence the always simultaneous granting of otherness as well), I do not understand the value of arts.....The objects and persons projected on the movie screen are real. Yet they do not exist (now) (Eldridge, 2003: 207). Therefore, the statement “(Film) A world complete without me which is present to me is the world of my immortality” (*The World Viewed*, 160) becomes relevant. The faithful auteur(s) of the world cinema has reincarnated and manifested the take of Bazin and Cavell in their films.

I have confined myself to some authorial directors, say, Satyajit Ray (1921-1992), Aparna Sen (1945), Deepa Mehta (1950), Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1945-1982) and Michelangelo Antonioni (1912-2007). Along with love and death, the vital role that is played in the selected films of these directors (auteur[s]) is ‘a female’ or ‘females’. They may be present on the silver screen or absent but the three main protagonists of this paper (indeed along with rebirth counted now as part and parcel of death) – love, death and female(s) – may not be in the same order – shows the immortality of this mortal “life”.

The first auteur – Satyajit Ray (from West Bengal, India) and his *Apu Trilogy*; *Pather Panchali* (*A Song of the Little Road* [1955]), *Aparajito* (*The Unvanquished* [1956]) and *Apur Sansar* (*The World of Apu* [1959]) is a landmark in world cinema. *Pather Panchali* deals with a small boy named Apu growing up together with his sister Durga (meaning of the name: Shakti, the Eternal Power) in a small village in West Bengal. The family is comprised of mother, father, old cousin of Apu’s father (the widowed aunt) and Durga. Durga’s death devastates Apu and it seems that love of Durga completes Apu’s world; and death of Durga – the non-existence of Durga portrays the complete relationship between Apu and Durga. In short, “Durga and Apu share an intimate bond. They follow a candy seller whose wares they cannot afford, enjoy theater, discover a train and witness a marriage ceremony. They even face death of their aunt – Indir Thakrun. Durga is accused of theft. She falls ill after a joyous dance in rains of the monsoon. On a stormy day when Harihar (the father) is away on work Durga dies.” (Satyajit.org) The story is based on Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay’s 1929 Bengali novel which created a stir in world cinema. The film placed Indian

cinema and Indian filmmaker (Ray) at par with world cinema's great auteur(s) of the time. The death of Apu's grandma and especially his sister Durga – leaves a deep impact on Apu's psyche.

The second in *Apu Trilogy* is *Aparajito* which is a sequel to *Pather Panchali* by the same author, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay. *Aparajito* depicts Apu as a young teenager boy who moves to Banaras (Uttar Pradesh, North India) with his father and mother. One morning he confronts the death of his father and Ray's depiction of Harihar's death signified on the screen – cut to a shot of a flock of pigeons flying off and whirling in sky as if the soul of Harihar is freed from all the worldly chores that comprises of pains and sufferings. Apu's mother waits for Apu who is studying in a city; but cannot frequently visit his mother. His mother Sarbajaya hallucinates that Apu is visiting her, comes out in the veranda one evening, sees the blanket of fire-flies and dies. According to Bazin, "*Aparajito* was adapted, like *Song of the Road*, from Bengali novel by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay. *Song of the Road* was the first novel written by the author to be published, in 1929; it was followed in 1932 by the sequel of *Aparajito* (itself influenced by Maxim Gorky and Romain Rolland and consequently written in the grand international tradition of Socialist fiction). This picture is almost impossible to summarize for its narrative is dreamy, relaxed, and highly subjective." (Bazin, 2014:182). Though not on the screen, the death of his mother is another pain intrinsically felt by Apu. Pigeons flying and fireflies in the dark night on the night of his mother's death are sort of metaphors. Ray uses in his film to show the release of the soul from this dark world and achievement of enlightenment of the soul of Apu's father and mother respectively.

The third in the series is *Apur Sansar (The World of Apu)*. An adult Apu, by default getting married to a friend's cousin, Aparna; and her death during child delivery leaves Apu fragmented. Living the life of a recluse seems to be the life of an ascetic, where in the end he is united with his son. So says Ray, "*Apur Sansar* thus grew out of situations conceived by the author himself. I, as the interpreter through the film medium, exercised my right to select, modify and arrange. This is a right which every film maker, who aspires to more than doing a commercial chore – to artistic endeavor, in fact – possesses." (Ray, 2011:13).

All the important women in Apu's life leaves him forlorn and that has deep impact on his psyche; also realizing the worthlessness of life. But the element of "love" plays a pivotal role in his life,

especially in the end when he is united with his son. Love and death are central to Apu Trilogy; and though Apu being at the central point, we find the women in his life keep him in the centre. Ontologically speaking – if not ‘love’, ‘death’ and ‘women’ in Apu’s life, Apu cannot be thought of as an ‘existential being’.

Coming to Aparna Sen, another Bengali director from India, who has a list of films to her credit, those that have strong women protagonists. Her film *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981) revolves around a schoolteacher who enjoys teaching Shakespeare; but most of her students are least interested in what she is teaching. Her brother is in a nursing home quite in a psychotic state. Her only biological connection, her niece now is married and lives abroad. To say her “own” there is no one; except for a cat called Sir Toby (fascinating name). Her former student and her boyfriend befriend her and use her apartment for writing his novel. But the place also becomes their rendezvous spot. After their marriage they leave her and deceive her to keep her away from the Christmas party (which they find it as a burden). She realizes that she was just used when she visits their place without informing them. In the end, alone on the street she recites from *King Lear* with no audience except for a roadside dog.

This is highly well-crafted film by Sen. Ms. Violet Stoneham (the teacher) was in love when she was young, who gets killed in a war. Also, her brother’s death breaks her completely. The dream sequence, though surrealistic, is actually taking us through the levels of existence mentioned by Soren Kierkegaard – the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. The lovers (her student and her boyfriend) and her love for her boyfriend – it seems that student Nandita is only living at aesthetic level, while Ms. Violet Stoneham (the main protagonist of the film, the teacher) moves from the aesthetics to ethical to religious level by ‘leap of faith’ (in Kierkegaard’s terminology). The ascending moment is shown by her love for Shakespeare and readings from Shakespeare. According to Richard Burt in the chapter *All that Remains of Shakespeare in Indian Films*, “*36 Chowringhee Lane* is not, strictly, a play-within-a-film but involves readings from *Twelfth Night* and *King Lear* in performative scenes.....My interest in *36 Chowringhee Lane* as a Shakespearean play-within-the-Indian-film is in using the genre to understanding how Shakespeare functions as a vanishing mediator when disseminated internationally and transnationally on film.” (Kennedy and Lan, 2010: 89). Therefore, Shakespeare is used in such

profound manner that the concepts of ‘love’, ‘death’ and ‘being-ness’ (of a ‘female’) is brought on a screen with absolutely subtle moral concern. According to Wimal Dissanayake, “The film portrays the plight of a lonely woman in a society that cares little for questions of female subjectivity and self-fulfillment.” (Dissanayake, 1989).

The third film *Fire* by Indo-Canadian film director Deepa Mehta in a way glorifies love and femininity (in fact gender and preferential sexuality and sexual love’s journey to spiritual and mystical loverelationship). First of its kind in Indian cinema homosexuality was taken as a theme, that too lesbians in love. (But are they actually lesbians or inventors!?) Radha and Sita (names also of Indian Goddesses in popular Hinduism) are caught up with typical joint family, where both their husbands – one living a monastic life and other having extra-marital affair. The women discover the love between them and plunge in the ocean to discover and rediscover love for each other. Ultimately leaving the family they move out of the house to widen their horizon of love.

Sensual love is only an instrument to move towards the unending horizon of love. It’s not the mirage that they are pursuing but actual “Real” love. Deepa Mehta has done a fantabulous job of glorifying “love” prima facie and femininity. This reminds of Susanne Langer for giving analogy of dream for film. According to Daniel Frampton, “In her 1953 essay, ‘*A Note on the Film*’, Susanne Langer realizes that film is free from spatial and temporal restrictions, and quotes approvingly from R. E. Jones’ 1941 book *The Dramatic Imagination*: ‘Motion pictures are our thoughts made visible and audible. The flow in a swift succession of images, precisely as our thoughts do, and their speed, with their flash backs – like sudden uprushes of memory – and their abrupt transition from one subject to another, approximates very closely the speed of our thinking. They have the rhythm of the thought-stream and the uncanny ability to move forward or backward in space or time. They project pure thought, pure dream, pure inner life’” (Frampton, 2006: 17, 18).

This pure inner life that Sita and Radha explore is taboo to the outside world of theirs, but for them the “becomingness” is more important than “being”. This existential viewpoint is also clearly seen in Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s film *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979). Though Susanne Langer speaks cinema as dream – it reminds me of importance of the ‘real’ moving to the ‘Real’ – which is reflected in Bazin and Cavell’s philosophy.



*The Marriage of Maria Braun* had put German cinema on the new pedestal in world cinema. The story is about Maria Braun who marries a soldier Hermann Braun in a ‘cannot be imagined situation’. But Hermann had to go on the battle front in World War II. Maria, like ‘survival of the fittest’, accepts the reality and becomes the mistress to a wealthy industrialist. But up to the end Maria remains faithful to Hermann. But when the time comes when Maria can finally be united to Hermann, she dies of an explosion of gas which she had by mistake kept on lighting her cigarette. Fassbinder brings a surrealist story to ‘real’ life; and as mentioned earlier, that the mysteries of facts are stranger than absolute reality!! It seems in the movie the demolished Germany on the way to prosperity and so called “rapid progress” frustrates and retards the love between Maria and Hermann. Also, the film from the beginning to the end shows how Maria grows as a “Woman” – a self-confident, self-reliant and self-motivated individual, though she meets the end disastrously. But Fassbinder, as a true auteur, takes one to unbelievable circumstances to hardcore reality which seems to be mysterious and mystical. In the climax, what the audience can at best do is – “OH!” According to Derek Malcolm, “His (Fassbinder’s) movies are generally about the oppressor and the oppressed. But *The Marriage of Maria Braun* was less about Hollywood’s familiar idea of redeeming nature of love than the fact that love is often the worst oppressor of all. In Fassbinder’s own life, as in his art, which was certainly true.” (Derek, 1999).

As a true auteur, Fassbinder makes the audience realize the hard reality as against sentimental idealism of 19<sup>th</sup> century German Romanticism. “As a filmmaker, he saw his task to be the awakening of his middle-class audience to the destructive implications of their own unexamined values. By the time he made *Maria Braun*, Fassbinder had found the means to engage his audience with such material without openly attacking their values. This development helps to explain the popular success the film enjoyed” (Rheuban, 1986:6).

Coming to the last film of this paper, *L’Avventura* directed by Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni. The film was made in 1960. This film revolves around the character Anna who is missing in an island in the Mediterranean when a group of rich Italians are on a yachting trip. Sandro who is a boyfriend of Anna, and Claudia who is close friend of Anna start extensive search for Anna. They get attracted and the love of Sandro switches towards Claudia, who up to the end

is in dilemma that how fast people change and she herself also is scared about losing Sandro if Anna is found. Has Anna committed suicide? No, it seems, as Anna's father discovers that she was reading a novel, but also *Bible*. Then where is she? She has disappeared. But in the search Claudia seems to go on an endless journey of discovering and rediscovering herself. Antonioni may seem to be a formalist filmmaker, especially with regard to this film. But I find him a thorough auteur who presents reality in a highly mystical way. And this realism Vs mysticism is completely dissolved as life seems to be "like this!" As mentioned by Peter Brunette, "Antonioni himself has said that he began making films in this manner in order to "rid myself of much unnecessary technical narrative, eliminating all the logical narrative transitions, all those connective links between sequences where one sequence served as a springboard for the one that followed. The reason I did this was because it seemed to me – and of this I am firmly convinced – that cinema today should be tied to the truth rather than to logic." (Brunette, 1998: 29). So 'love', 'death' (in this case disappearance) and the 'female-hood' – constantly takes the audience on a roller-coaster ride of emotional dwellings. I was confused while watching this film– at whose side am I – morally speaking or existentially? Anna, Claudia, Sandro or..... It was the unconventional way the film was shot and that came on the screen. In the review (of this film) Roger Ebert says, ""Tell me you love me. I love you. Tell me you don't. I don't love you." By the time this exchange takes place, deep inside Michelangelo Antonioni's "*L'Avventura*", the conversation has nothing to do with love. It is more like an attempt to pass the time – like a game of solitaire or flipping a coin. There is not even the possibility that the characters are in love, can love, have loved, will love. "Too shallow to be truly lonely", Pauline Kael wrote, "they are people trying to escape their boredom by reaching out to one another and finding only boredom once again" (rogerbert.com).

So overall like *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, *36 Chowringhee Lane* and *Fire*, *L'Avventura* shows the bourgeoisie mentality, and especially the adventure of discovering loneliness in a love-relationship.

In conclusion, I would like to say, along with love and death, the vital role that is played in these films is 'a female' or 'females'. They may be present on the silver-screen or absent but, the three protagonists – love, death and female(s) – may be not in the same order – shows the "immortality of this mortal life". In *Apu Trilogy*, the death of females who occupied a prominent place in Apu's

life; in *36 Chowringhee Lane*, love denied to Ms. Violet Stoneham and isolation and loneliness brings forth to her the realization of harsh reality of life – by intervention of Shakespeare’ King Lear; in *Fire* – the female protagonists – Radha and Sita climbs the ladder of life to seek a view of “love” in all its aspects; in *The Marriage of Maria Braun* – Maria discovers that she can “love” up to the end of his life and in *L’Avventura* – Claudia is trying to understand different types and layers of “love” and “relationships”.

These films have been potent enough to scream loud the feelings of “love”, “death” and its “female-hood”. And this is due to the true authorial behavior of the directors those who have been complete faithful auteur(s).

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#### **Web Resources**

1. [www.rogerebert.com](http://www.rogerebert.com)
2. [www.satyajit.org](http://www.satyajit.org): *Life, films and film making of Satyajit Ray*.
3. [www.scriptcastle.com](http://www.scriptcastle.com). *Is Deleuze's Film Theory Useful?* Department of Film Theory.