The global author: Control, creative constraints, and performative self-contradiction

by Thomas Elsaesser

DOI: 10.5040/9781501312663.ch-001

Page Range: 21–42

The author: Impossible and indispensable

There are many reasons why the concept of the auteur, as it applies to the film director, should not be carried over into the twenty-first century. First of all, because it has always been a contested notion, serving sometimes highly polemical and partisan agendas under unique historical circumstances (e.g. first in post-war Europe, then in 1970s Hollywood). Secondly, while it was strategically useful when helping film and cinema studies gain a foothold in the academy by modeling itself on literary studies and art history, this objective had been (over-)achieved by the mid-1980s, by which time the historical conditions of the original auteur theory (i.e. validating Hollywood's popular art by employing high-culture criteria) also no longer applied. Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, film-, media-, and cultural-studies programs were eagerly inaugurated everywhere in higher education, in order to come to the rescue of humanities departments and to provide training for the ever-expanding "creative" media industries.

Cultural studies in particular had little need of the individual author, having shifted attention from creation and production to reception and spectatorship: works of art as well as of popular culture (which meant art cinema and the mainstream) were assumed to be social texts carrying ideologically encoded messages, and thus had larger systems, e.g. capitalism or patriarchy, as their "authors." Such deconstructions (and "deaths") of the author were theoretically supported by no less authoritative authors than Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, who in turn provided models of analysis that supported close readings of specific texts without resorting to self-expression, intentionality, or individual moral and legal accountability.[1]

No doubt, there are even more pertinent philosophical reasons why authorship is such a vexing problem for a popular and collaborative art such as the cinema, and why it should be dropped from the list of important topics, quite apart from the industrial and capitalist context in which filmmaking has invariably taken place.[2] None of these critiques are new nor have they been laid to rest,[3] yet precisely because even art cinema has become thoroughly pervaded by market considerations, the author debate deserves another look. Given that the film director as author, and the author as auteur have survived even the most well-founded set of counter-arguments, one can only conclude that being philosophically problematic and conceptually vague merely reinforces the author's indispensability, both as a reality and as a concept. In fact, more

than ever, (film) authorship is taken for granted, filling an evident gap by fulfilling its "author-function" (Foucault), which at its most basic rests on the assumption that the work (the film) in question possesses a degree of coherence and purposiveness, which convention and the need for meaning like to attribute to a nameable instance and an origin—the author.[4] This author-function was initially more important to film critics and scholars than to the directors themselves (many Hollywood veteran directors were baffled and amused, before they became flattered and intrigued by the French *politique des auteurs*). Responding to such disconnect between person and function, authorship was redefined as implicit and inferred, rather than expressive and embodied. The author, famously, became an "effect of the text," a "necessary fiction," a projection and over-identification by the enthusiastic cinephile, requiring one to carefully (and ontologically) separate John Ford from "John Ford"—the latter the sum of the narrative structures and stylistic effects that the critic was able to assemble around a body of work "signed" by a given director. Yet in subsequent decades, as the director as auteur increasingly became a fixture of the popular media's general personality cult, the author began doing duty not only as the (imaginary or real) anchor for presumed, perceived, or projected coherence, but was actively deployed as a brand name and marketing tool, for the commercial film industry as well as in the realm of independent and art cinema.

Questions of access and control

Adding the word "global" to "author" reflects this shift of register which raises the stakes, and acknowledges that "global" applies to both Hollywood's global reach and coverage, and to world cinema and transnational cinema—terms that have all but replaced the labels "art cinema" and "independent cinema" (where the author as both function and person survived the longest without being either contested critically or seen as tainted by commercialism). Globalizing auteurism is therefore the inevitable consequence of art cinema now being part of the market, and of the urgent need to re-situate the old debates in an enlarged context. Concerning the latter, however, I follow the lead of those writers who have narrowed the question of authorship in cinema down to the issue of control:

> V. F. Perkins claims … that the "director's authority is a matter not of total creation but of sufficient control" … Bordwell and Thompson suggest that "usually it is through the director's control of the shooting and assembly phases that the film's form and style crystallize." … [Paisley] Livingston, who has argued that some studio films are singly authored, points to the "high degree of control" and "huge measure of authority" that some directors have …
>
> --(Meskin 2008, 22)

Control, of course, can be exercised in many different ways: organizational, financial, political, artistic, and intellectual, and many of these types of control are indeed involved in the making, marketing, distributing, and "owning" of a film. Not all of these forms of control need to fall to the same physical individual, or indeed any individual, given the abstract nature of some of the controlling forces and functions at work. I have elsewhere argued that contemporary Hollywood should be understood within

such an extended, "reflexive," authorial dynamic of providing "access for all" at the same time as "keeping control." Which is to say, Hollywood sets out to make films that are formally and intellectually accessible to as wide as possible a range of audiences, diverse in language, race, religion, region, and nationality, all the while trying to control not only legal ownership and property rights and the platforms of distribution and exhibition, but also steering the scope of interpretations and forms of (fan-)appropriation thanks to a combination of (textual) structured ambiguity and (paratextual) feedback loops.[5] By way of example, I examined the authorial persona of the director James Cameron and the narrative structure of his most successful film, *Avatar* (2009), arguing that both instantiate a convergence of these basically antagonistic forces of "access" and "control," under the intensified conditions of a global market and an increasingly polarized political world (dis)order.[6]

One consequence to draw from this situation is that the author in the global context is both a *construct* and a *person*(ality). Being a locus of agency (control) as well as a focal point of projection (access), he/she is positioned at the intersection of a theoretical impossibility and a practical indispensability. A figure of contradiction as well as a construct, the global author exists within antagonistic forces, whose effects need not work against each other, but can be harnessed so as to re-energize rather than block the different levels of circulation in play. It aligns authorship with other aspects of globalization, where multiple variables are simultaneously interacting with each other, where traditional categories of linear cause-and-effect chains have opened up to recursive network effects, and where our idea of autonomy, i.e. single source, rational agency is complicated by models of distributed agency, contingency, and mutual interdependence. These "rhizomatic" tendencies are reinforced by electronic communication and the internet, whose architecture is the very site of simultaneous, multi-directional, reciprocal, recursive, and looped interactions.

Similarly "distributed," antagonistic and yet interdependent forces are typical of today's cinema as a whole, thriving as it does between ostensibly incompatible identities of big-screen spectacle, digital video disk, and download file, with viewers effortlessly switching between online viewing and visits to the local multiplex, and with the culture at large treating "the cinema" as part of the urban fabric and "the cinematic" as part of our collective memory and imaginary. In these contexts and definitions the author does not seem to be crucial to the system, being only one of the pieces of information and markers of recognition by which audiences identify a film as worthy of their attention.

More significant and symptomatic is the author's place in that other network which competes with and complements global Hollywood: the film festival network. Its nodes are no longer merely in Europe (Cannes, Venice, Berlin, Rotterdam) but extend to North America (Toronto, New York, Sundance, Telluride), Africa (Ouagadougou), Latin America (Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo), and Asia (Busan, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Mumbai). As has been evident for some time, it is at these festivals that the auteur is the only universally recognized currency, yet this currency is stamped and certified at very few of the world's many festivals, with Cannes (and France) still the decisive place for authenticating internationally recognized auteurs.

The idea that auteur*s* are constructs of the festivals merely underscores and makes more historically specific the point made earlier about the problematic status of cinematic authorship, insofar as the discursive construct auteur is now doubled by an institutional construct under the control of the film festival system. In another sense, however, calling respected directors of great films "constructs" is both counter-intuitive and demeaning, yet it can also become subversively productive, if it opens up a number of otherwise unrecognized contradictions, which filmmakers themselves have recognized as challenges and (sometimes welcome) opportunities—having to do with autonomy and forms of agency that turn the question of control inside out. This is what I intend to illustrate by introducing two distinct but complementary notions—that of creative constraint and of performative self-contradiction, which together outline potentially productive counter-strategies from *within* the system, rather than continuing to pursue (increasingly ineffective) oppositional stances from without.

On the face of it, the extraordinary dependency of most of the world's non-Hollywood filmmakers on festivals for validation, recognition, and cultural capital makes a mockery of the term "independence." Yet it is a reminder that the festivals' increase in power does not sit easily on them either, since it contradicts the very purpose of the festivals, namely to celebrate film as art and to acknowledge the filmmaker as artist and auteur—all notions supposedly synonymous with autonomy. In other words, a dynamic of reciprocal dependencies is implicit in this relationship between auteur and festival, chief among these being that the festival, in order to fulfill its mission, has to encourage and even constrain the filmmaker to behave as if he/she was indeed a free agent and an autonomous artist, dedicated solely to expressing a uniquely personal vision, and thus to disavow the very pressures the festival has to impose. One such pressure, for instance, comes from the increasingly conflicted force field of schedules and dates, hierarchies, competition, and selection mechanisms into which the festival network places both the filmmakers and the festivals. With festivals being both portals and gatekeepers, both windows of attention and platforms for dissemination, a filmmaker has to plan and produce his/her film to fit the timetable of the respective festival, i.e. effectively making his/her film to measure, to order, and to schedule. In the case of established auteur*s*, the dilemma is aggravated by having to weigh loyalty against opportunity, when accepting a festival invitation: "What if I commit to Berlin in February and a month later, I hear that Cannes wants to show my film in May?" Festivals are in competition with each other over exclusive premieres, forcing filmmakers into yet another form of dependence.

Double occupancy, self-exoticism and "serving two masters"

Yet these examples may only scratch the surface of the kinds of controls and contradictory demands the global author is exposed to: festivals pride themselves on their internationalism, of transcending the boundaries of national cinema by providing an open forum for the world's films and filmmakers. But this openness can be a trap: it is an open invitation to self-conscious ethnicity and re-tribalization, it quickly shows its affinity or even collusion with cultural tourism, with fusion-food-world-music-ethnic-cuisine Third Worldism in the capitals of the first world, and more generally, with a post-colonial and subaltern sign-economy, covering over and effacing the new

economy of downsizing, outsourcing, and the relentless search for cheap labor on the part of multi-national companies. Because the cinema (as part of the creative industries) is not exempt from these pressures, but cannot avow them openly, there is a tendency of films within the festival circuit—whether from Asia, Africa, or Europe—to respond and to comply, by gestures that amount to a kind of "self-exoticizing" or "auto-orientalism": that is, a tendency to present to the world (of the festivals) a picture of the self, a narrative of one's nation or community, that reproduces or anticipates what one believes the other expects to see. It is the old trap of the colonial ethnographer, of the eager multi-culturalist who welcomes the stranger and is open to otherness, but preferably on one's own terms and within one's own comfort zone.

In order to highlight these asymmetrical, but reciprocal dependencies, I proposed the term "double occupancy." It was meant to draw attention, first of all, to some of the fallacies implicit in identity politics:

> rather than diversity or multi-culturalism, [double occupancy wants to] signal our discursive as well as geopolitical territories as always already occupied. It can convey right away a concrete [history of occupation, colonialism and globalization] as well as the need to reflect the reality of competing claims in the identity-wars, while also keeping alive the political and philosophical associations that the term may carry.
>
> --(Elsaesser 2008, 50)

Secondly, the term was meant to allude to and include contemporary theories of the subject:

> in Lacanian psychoanalysis it is language that speaks us, rather than the other way round; for Foucault, religion and social institutions inscribe themselves as discursive regimes and micro-politics on our bodies and senses. [Double occupancy] also calls to mind Jacques Derrida's practice of putting certain words "under erasure," in order to indicate the provisional nature of a text's authority, and the capacity of textual space to let us see both itself and its opposite.
>
> --(Elsaesser 2008, 50, 52)

I shall come back to the philosophical implications at the end, but first want to refocus the political aspects, as they apply specifically to the global auteur, whose double occupancy is perhaps best characterized as the state of constitutively *serving at least two masters*. These masters can be a government exerting censorship, versus the master embodied by the international film festival whose director expects dissidence and resistance from the filmmaker (think China, think Iran); one master can be public service television which in Europe acts as the major producer and exhibitor, versus the other master, the big screen as endorsement of the director as auteur (an accolade not available on television). Yet the split can also be on the side of audience address: trying to satisfy a domestic critical establishment, while hoping to seduce an international audience that expects exoticism either in the form of gritty realism or picturesque squalor (international successes such as *City of God* (2002) and *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) provide the relevant examples). For instance, Matteo Garrone's *Gomorrah* (2008) and Paolo Sorrentino's *The Great Beauty* (*La Grande Bellezza*, 2013) may not at first glance have much in common, but both carefully balance biting criticism of

contemporary Italy with a seductive allure of "crime and violence" in the former, and "glamor and decadence" in the latter. Each film is also very conscious of its national cinematic lineage (neo-realism, spaghetti Western, and Pasolini in one case, Fellini and Antonioni in the other). It is a heritage that the films performatively enact, which is one reason why European cinema in the age of globalization should be called "post-nationalist," in the sense of "performing nationalism."

Also servants of two masters—another meaning of the term "double occupancy"—are auteurs such as Krzysztof Kieślowski and Michael Haneke, Abbas Kiarostami and Hou Hsiao-Hsien, when they make films outside their home country, while still "representing" it, by associating its national stereotypes. This double occupancy can also be proven negatively, when directors throw in their lot with one master only, as in the case of Kim Ki-duk or Cristian Mungiu, who have more or less given up on their domestic Korean or Romanian audiences and now make films mainly for the Cannes and Venice festivals, after having been ignored or vilified in their own country.

In the same vein, the Russian director Alexander Sokurov would be another telling case of a film auteur "serving two masters." Targeted by film censorship during the Soviet period (all the while producing films that were almost systematically shelved), he became heralded as one of the major figures representing his national cinema, as it was being showcased abroad, at the time of Perestroika in the mid-1980s. But with film funds dwindling during the late Soviet period and through the 1990s, Sokurov had to utilize Western European subsidy infrastructures and production funds in order to continue to make films, while still identified with (sometimes clichéd) Russianness, even in cases where his films dealt with non-Russian topics and even when shot in foreign languages, such as German or Japanese. Benefiting from finance obtained through both local and foreign (mostly German, but also French) production companies, the director famously reached out to Vladimir Putin himself when trying to find additional money for his *Faust* (2011), or, more confidentially, obtained funding from the Wolff-Metternich estate for his latest film, *Francofonia* (2015), which lo and behold, portrays Count Wolff-Metternich in a rather positive light. A sign of his own awareness of his dependency on a variety of non-commercial, "art cinema" funds and investors is Sokurov's consistent habitus of rebellious insubordination in interviews, "performing" the radical free spirit and independent auteur, both on and off film sets. It seems to have served him well on the festival circuit:

> after being lionized (or "leopardized") at Locarno in the late 1980s, he was later "upgraded" to Cannes award-winner (with *Moloch* [1999]) and the prestigious off-festival screening, both in 35mm and digital, of *Russian Ark* (2002). He later sternly criticized the festival for its commercialism, including in major interviews and in his book *V Tsentre Okeana* (2012), and has since found a new home at the Venice film festival (where he took the Golden Lion, to everyone's astonishment, for *Faust*).[7]

A third kind of double occupancy or multi-servicing can be noted when filmmakers turn gallery artists, which has been the case with directors like Harun Farocki, Wim Wenders, or Chantal Akermann from an earlier generation, and more recently, applies to Isaac Julien and John Akomfrah, but also to Apichatpong Weerasethakul from Thailand, and Kiarostami from Iran. The reverse is also becoming more common, when established contemporary artists undertake major film productions, as in the case of Julian Schnabel (*Before Night Falls* [2000], *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* [2007]), Steve McQueen (*Hunger* [2008], *Shame* [2011], *Twelve Years a Slave* [2013]), and Sam Taylor-Wood as Sam Taylor-Johnson (*Nowhere Boy* [2009], *50 Shades of Grey* [2015]).

Such transitions from the gallery to Hollywood are still relatively rare.[8] Most film directors continue to lend their talents to the festival circuit as their lifeline for cultural capital and recognition. In this respect, European auteurs are not exempt from being part of the globalization of creative labor more generally, which positions them in proximity to the creative precariat of the art world, unless they are able to craft and maintain a suitable self-image that can support the festival brand. Cannes is very jealous of "its" directors, and so are Venice, Berlin, Rotterdam, and Toronto. One way to account for the paradoxes of such "enabling dependency" or "master-slave dialectic" that binds the auteur to the festival and vice versa, is to also invoke—besides the second-order performed nationalism just mentioned—a sort of second-order performed auteurism, where films are not the self-expression of a uniquely gifted individual or the expression of the moral conscience of a nation(al cinema), but rather the products of "specialists" working within conditions of possibility—the festival circuit—that are also limiting conditions and structural constraints.

The much invoked but still under-defined "typical festival film" may be a case in point.[9] If I am right in suggesting that certain non-Hollywood films are made with festivals rather than audiences in mind, then this would go some way to explain why not only European but also Asian directors (e.g. Wong Kar-wai or Hou) tend at some point to make films in and for France, using iconic French actors. Juliette Binoche is typical in this respect, having provided Frenchness and festival credibility to directors as diverse as not only Kieślowski, Haneke, Kiarostami, Hou, but also Anthony Minghella and David Cronenberg. While these auteurs are transnational filmmakers who have sometimes been co-opted as additional creative labor into the ranks of French film art, European directors such as the Dardenne Brothers, Mike Leigh, Ken Loach, and Wenders have become Cannes favorites (or even "mascots") also helping to confirm France's strategic role as a regional power with global reach in matters cinema, banking on Paris and the French language as a luxury brand. A counter-tendency should also be noted: in the past, French filmmakers were careful not to dilute this Frenchness into a transnationalism over which they might lose control, yet France is now also producing films, stars, and a number of directors that successfully establish themselves as internationals, with Binoche playing a Swiss-German with perfect English in *The Clouds of Sils Maria* (2015), Marion Cotillard playing Edith Piaf for the global market in *La Vie en rose* (*La Môme*, 2007) and directors such as Jean-Pierre Jeunet (*Amélie* [*Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*, 2001]), Michel Hazanavicius (*The Artist* [2011]), and, above all,

Luc Besson (*La Femme Nikita* [*The Woman Nikita*, 1990]), *The Professional* [*Léon*, 1994]), *The Fifth Element* [1997], *Lucy* [2014]) "exporting" Frenchness into Anglophone films, not always to the liking of their critics back home.[10]

Creative constraints

The moves by filmmakers in the face of the pressures of globalized authorship, which I identified above as auto-exoticism, becoming a festival talent for hire, or outsourcing oneself to Hollywood, are by and large "adaptive" strategies. They implicitly accept the conditions of the market in cultural capital, reputation, and recognition, and acknowledge the asymmetrical power relations that auteurs find themselves in *vis-à-vis* the global film business, film festivals, their international audiences, and national governments or funding bodies. Yet there may also be other ways of confronting the "antagonistic mutualities" which keep the system going (i.e. arrangements that on the surface are antagonistic, but hide mutual benefits, or conversely, situations that appear mutually beneficial but hide hidden conflicts), and not necessarily by the kind of outright challenge, sabotage, or refusal that Jean-Luc Godard has made his forte.[11]

Control from an external source, whether individual or institutional, is usually experienced as a constraint—constraint on one's freedom: of expression, of action, of movement. If we follows Lawrence Lessig, four sorts of constraints both "regulate behavior in the real world" and are the levers for bringing about change: the law, the market, social norms, and what he calls "architecture": the technological infrastructure which has increasingly replaced "nature" as the regulating and constraining force in human lives.[12] Much the same constraints operate in an activity like filmmaking, except that the schema takes no account of the areas of freedom and autonomy we call "art." In one sense, it would be the appeal to the autonomy of art that acts as the counter-force, but as already pointed out, it is the very notion of the unfettered freedom of the imagination and the claim of being in control which defines the auteur and sustains the authorial myth *within* the system rather than being an effective defense *against* the system by resisting its constraints or destabilizing its mechanisms.

Whichever way one looks at it, effective counter-strategies or subversion have to come from within rather than without, and they do so in the form of *additional constraints*: these, however, must be *freely chosen* rather than submitted to under protest, or adopted by way of compromise. The name for such a freely chosen constraint is *creative constraint*, a term I borrow, for the present context, from the sociologist Jon Elster, but naming a practice with a longer history, usually in the context of addressing a contradiction, without pretending to resolve it. The purpose of imposing a constraint on oneself is to master a situation, by first making it worse: to aggravate it, turn it against oneself, and to internalize it, as a way of regaining some form of agency and control.

The auteur as Ulysses

In *Ulysses Unbound: Studies in Rationality, Pre-commitment and Constraints* (2000) where he develops the idea of creativity and constraint most fully, Elster initially distinguished between *essential* and *incidental* constraints. Essential constraints are

chosen for the sake of expected benefits, while incidental constraints may turn out to have benefits but are not chosen for the sake of these benefits: "When the constraints are imposed from the outside, [the artist] may or may not benefit. If he does, we are dealing with incidental constraint … Sometimes, an incidental constraint may turn into an essential one, if the artist chooses to abide by the constraint even when it is no longer mandatory" (176). In the chapter on the arts, entitled "Less Is More" Elster also introduces the idea of local maximization, by which he means that such constraints can be a trade-off between the fullness of possibilities (e.g. daydreaming) and the parsimony of means (e.g. conceptual art), but that they can also have economic benefits, insofar as constraints create scarcity, which in turn maximizes value.[13] An example of external constraints leading to local maximization, discussed by Elster, would be the Hays Code, often said to have been a boon for sexual innuendo in classical Hollywood movies, e.g. in films like *Casablanca* (1942).[14] More generally, the Code was a training ground for the kind of structured ambiguity mentioned earlier, but Elster's argument regarding the Hays Code also engages with the well-known but not uncontroversial notion that (political) censorship is beneficial to literature and the arts, because it forces writers to become more oblique, more allusive, and indirect in their means of expression, and therefore more subtle and profound.

The part of Elster's theory relevant to the present argument is his claim that artists "self-bind" themselves (hence the reference to Ulysses in the title of his book, tying himself to the mast, in order to resist the Sirens' song) not only by accepting *imposed* (hard) constraints, and learning how to turn them into *chosen* (soft) constraints (Elster cites the Lubitsch touch, which works by innuendo and inference). Artists also self-bind themselves by a third type, the invented constraint, the most often-cited example being Georges Perec's novel *La disparition*, written without the vowel "e," which thereby disappears.[15] Artists may invent constraints in the face of unlimited time and means ("For a movie director, an unlimited budget may be disastrous. For a TV producer, having too much time may undermine creativity" [Elster 2000, 210–11]) which is to say, faced with a situation where there is not sufficient pressure present in their primary environment (i.e. when there is too much "freedom," and when "everything goes"). But a filmmaker may also invent constraints when a new technology comes along that allows for so many options that the very notion of a mistake disappears, because it can always be put right afterwards, or as Elster puts it "the artist deliberately increases the cost of making mistakes, in the hope that fewer mistakes will ensue" (2000, 196). In other words, when the problem of expression through form (as opposed to self-expression) has not been redefined clearly enough.

To translate the condition of not sufficient pressure present in the environment into the terms of "independent" filmmaking, one could argue as follows: the fact that European filmmakers receive much, if not all the funding for their films from non-commercial sources, and mostly via the taxpayer, effectively deprives them (or liberates them) of the constraint of the box office. How to compensate for this in the environment of the festival? As indicated, even national representativeness that once acted as both incentive and constraint for directors like Bergman or Fellini, Bresson or Chabrol, Antonioni or Bertolucci began to wane in the 1990s, making some form of self-binding artistically, but perhaps also politically necessary in order to mark the shift

from national cinema to global. Fassbinder, beginning in the 1980s, deliberately chose "commercial" producers (a major constraint for an auteur), because they gave him access to international distribution, but also because they allowed an escape from the bureaucratic constraints of the governmental film funding system. Given that at the time the national audiences preferred American films by more than three to one over films made by their own directors, one can see why a filmmaker might want to raise the bar for him/herself in order to be in touch with some kind of generic (i.e. external) constraint coming from the popular medium or the melodramatic story material: Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (*Die Ehe der Maria Braun*, 1979) or *Lili Marleen* (1981) may have owed their existence partly to the director not sensing sufficient constraints present in the art-cinema of his day.

The second reason cited by Elster why creative constraints are necessary—when a new technology turns artistic skill into automated effect and an abundance of stylistic options oblige the filmmaker to redefine what the relationship is between expression and form—would take us to the situation with which I started: the fact that the art cinema is now part of the market, under conditions of globalization and that digital tools and platforms have made self-expression the very opposite of autonomy. The binaries that once divided Hollywood from the rest have been replaced by asymmetrical and heteronomous forces whose effects I tried to describe with "double occupancy" and "antagonistic mutuality." This creates not a level playing field, but an uneven and spiky one, with porous boundaries between Hollywood and independent cinema, independent cinema and festival films, and between festival films and artists' cinema.

Modifying Elster's terminology in order to make it applicable to the state of cinema authorship, I draw a distinction between *external constraints* and *creative constraints*, with the external constraints being the ones named by Lessig as enabling humans to engage with their lived environment and to effect change, and creative constraints being the ones that renegotiate a different kind of autonomy and freedom. To these distinctions one should add the further difference between the *classic auteur* (of Hollywood cinema) and the *romantic auteur*, the latter more relevant to the *European auteur*, but also to be found on the margins of the studio system, and championed by the French nouvelle vague as *auteurs maudits*. These apparent outsiders or misfits (Orson Welles, a notorious "enemy of promise," Nicholas Ray, or Sam Fuller) were regarded as rebels against the system—if necessary at the cost of failure—and their authorship would indeed have been celebrated by defining it as that of the creative exception, giving expression to his/her vision, his beliefs or inner demons through the medium that he has chosen, or that has chosen him.

By contrast, an example of the classic auteur would be the already mentioned John Ford, who famously introduced himself by saying "My name is John Ford, I make Westerns." His identity and self-image was that of a craftsperson and professional, not an artist with a personal vision: the same goes for Alfred Hitchcock (at least before he was interviewed by François Truffaut and turned into a "great artist" and "master of pure cinema"). A classic auteur welcomes the external constraints of genre (the Western or the thriller), can cope with the pressures of the studio-system (interference

by the producer; the stipulations of the Hays Code), and accept the verdict of the box office ("You're only as good as your last film's gross"). It may seem as if the classical auteur merely accommodates him/herself to the system, but in the examples given (and one would want to add directors like Howard Hawks or Clint Eastwood), the external constraints become inner resources, leading to the kind of *mise-en-scène*, staging, dialogue, or generating suspense that made these directors into auteur*s* in the first place. As with meter and rhyme in poetry or the formal constraints of the sonnet or the sonata, "genre" in classical Hollywood could become an incentive for invention.

European auteurs from the 1960s to 1980s faced a different set of constraints: they were often regarded as representative of their particular "national cinema" and even their nation: think of Bergman as the archetypal gloomy Swede, or the New German Cinema, whose directors—especially Hans Jürgen Syberberg, Werner Herzog, or Wenders—had to be romantics, rebels, dissenters, or outsiders: e.g. they had to be both cliché Germans and critics of Germany. Fassbinder, for instance, became the representative anti-representative of Germany in the 1980s by making of himself the epitome of the "ugly" German: no one in Germany recognized themselves in him, nor did he want to be a representative of anyone, and yet these very contradictions were the condition of a director's international representativeness in post-war West Germany until "unification." Berating their government for not facing up to the country's horrible past, Fassbinder and his fellow New German Cinema directors were seen, mainly abroad, as representatives of a "better" Germany. However, *the more critical they were, the more credible they became as representatives*—an irony that did not escape the West German government and its cultural institutions, which subsidized and sponsored such dissidence because they realized the benefits for the country's international image.[16] It confirms the well-known dilemma of dissenting art, insofar as it can be co-opted or recuperated by the system—a mechanism also observable in an auteur's relation to the film festival system, which needs his/her dissidence and values transgression as proof of its own integrity and authenticity.

Creative constraints and the author-function: Beyond self-expression and genre

Now that filmmaking has become as popular, inexpensive, and the results as easy to diffuse as is the case with digital tools, equipment, and platforms, self-expression can no longer count as a reliable touchstone of a work's meaning and value. When YouTube is the very name of self-expression-as-self-exhibition ("broadcast yourself") and the selfie of the sovereign Me rules social media, the author-function must also change. Rather than a guarantor of authenticity, or the last autonomous subject in an alienated and reified world, the contemporary filmmaker is an auteur only to the extent that he/she accepts the inherent anachronism of the label, as and when conferred by international film festivals. Thanks to Cannes and other A-festivals, European auteurs—like their Asian counterparts—are part of a star-system of world cinema, assuming they possess the requisite attention value in the marketplace of reputations. Under conditions of overproduction, and lacking agreed standards of value, the auteur as quality brand secures a stable horizon of expectation, with the director's image

functioning like a "genre," a notion often consolidated via "trilogies," as in the case of Bergman (the Faith Trilogy), Antonioni (the Alienation Trilogy), Polanski (the Apartment Trilogy), Fassbinder (the BRD Trilogy), and Haneke's so-called Glaciation Trilogy.

For a long time, roughly from Rossellini in the late 1940s to Jean Luc Godard in the early 1980s, the European director could still assume the mantle of the modernist artist, responsible only to his work and answerable only to his own inclinations. Shielded from the full force of the market either by patronage (i.e. commercial producers like Pierre Braunberger or Carlo Ponti who liked the prestige that came with investing in art cinema) or taxpayers' subsidy, their autonomy was a given, and, indeed, it was what made the auteurs valuable for the complex cultural politics of the country or nation ("cultural nationalism") whose critical conscience they were called upon to embody. No such protection or mission for the next generation: Haneke, von Trier, Aki Kaurismäki, or indeed, for their American counterparts: David Lynch, Quentin Tarantino, Steven Soderbergh, Richard Linklater, Wes Anderson. They are obliged either to craft a self-image—the rebel, the cinephile, the eccentric, the slacker, the whimsical geek—and manage this image like a commercial brand, or they have to invent for themselves forms of resistance or paranoia, when the system no longer generates the friction conducive to creativity that a hostile society or an offended public used to provide.

Since the 1990s, one of the key figures of European auteur cinema in the global context has been Lars von Trier. A credible representative of his country (he put Denmark back on the map as not only a filmmaking country but as an internationally important and intriguing one), he is also wholly non-representative of a national cinema, insofar as his films are mostly in English and only rarely set in Denmark. His early ones camouflaged themselves as German films: *Element of Crime* (1984), *Epidemic* (1987), *Europa* (1991), while the later ones were either Scottish (*Breaking the Waves* [1996]) or, more often, American (*Dancer in the Dark* [2000], *Dogville* [2003], *Manderlay* [2005], *Antichrist* [2009]). He, too, established his personal genre identity via trilogies (first the Europa Trilogy, then the Golden Heart Trilogy), but these designations were invoked by von Trier ironically because the practice had become a cliché. Following Fassbinder, von Trier courted negative epithets such as "enfant terrible," "controlling," and "chaotic," but he too deployed them knowingly and strategically. Energizing the Nordic filmmaking infrastructure, he built up state-of-the-art studio capacity in Sweden's "Trollhättan" with structural funds from the European Union for distressed manufacturing regions. He also, for a period, provided the international independent filmmaking community with a legitimating discourse, the Dogme manifesto. To this day it is not clear whether Dogme is a pastiche of a manifesto or was to be taken at face value. What is certain, however, is that the Dogme members' "vow of chastity" is an outstanding example of a set of creative constraints put in place in order to stimulate talent and competition.[17] Unlike Bergman who cast a long shadow on Swedish cinema, for much of the time stifling new talent, von Trier encapsulates the transition from the idea of the auteur-artist to that of the auteur as entrepreneur, as brand name, as well as facilitator and enabler.

Von Trier was also one of the first to practice an explicit poetics of creative constraints, giving them the name of "obstructions" or "mind-games." So far, he has defined and redefined these obstructions several times: 1) the Dogme rules (as applied in *The Idiots* [*Idioterne*, 1998]); 2) *The Five Obstructions* (*De fem benspænd*, 2003), signed by Jørgen Leth, his former mentor, the film is effectively von Trier's meta-film about his own creative method; 3) directing by remote control a television feature called *D-Day*, about the last day of the previous millennium (2000); 4) using a computerized camera and so-called "Lookeys" in *The Boss of It All* (*Direktøren for det hele*, 2006); and 5) making a close adaptation of *The Hammer of Witches*, the *Malleus Malificarum*—an anti-women tract of the Inquisition, i.e. about Christianity at its most fundamentalist and paranoid, in *Antichrist*.[18] Elsewhere I have tried to demonstrate how von Trier's poetics of creative constraints fits into a broader overall strategy of re-establishing rules by first breaking them, and to show how the principle of arbitrary rules as creative constraints is fully on display also in *Nyphomaniac* (2013).[19] They are present in the competition of how many men Joe and her friend can have sex with on a single train journey, and the Little Flock's vow to have sex but no boyfriends also counts as a creative constraint. Constraints are once more foregrounded in the way Joe's narrative is triggered by the objects (and evolves from the cues) she notices in Seligman's room. Taken together these instances of breaking social norms by setting up arbitrary rules are so prominent in *Nymphomaniac* as to qualify it as a meta-film, where von Trier explores his own formal and narrative preoccupations, at least as much as exorcizing his personal demons or "therapizing" his traumas. Besides von Trier's self-imposed obstructions, one could cite Wes Anderson's highly stylized, hyper-symmetrical visual compositions as similarly motivated creative constraints.

Performative self-contradiction

This brings me to the second move by which some European auteurs try to counter the system from within, rather than accommodating themselves to their servitude of double occupancy, accepting it covertly and with ironic knowingness, or denouncing the golden cage of contemporary auteurism by refusing to inhabit it. Approximating what philosophers call "performative self-contradiction," this alternative strategy has emerged among filmmakers whose aim it is to carve out a kind of negative autonomy specifically under the capitalist conditions of the creative industries. Besides Fassbinder, who was my first prototype of performative self-contradiction, I have identified it in the film work and self-presentation of Haneke, one of the most militant—and seemingly unreconstructed—defenders of the film auteur as autonomous artist.[20] Here I want to extend the concept more broadly by showing that, far from being a logical error (to be avoided in rational argument), it can become a risky but efficient tactic when trying to stand one's ground in situations where one's mutual entanglement with an adversary allows the latter to absorb and recuperate all forms of protest and critique. Just as the move toward self-imposed rules or creative constraints becomes necessary when the problem has not been defined clearly enough, so performative self-contradiction is part of the same set of counter-intuitive, dynamic, but also potentially destructive strategies, all designed to regain or retain agency and control under complex, contradictory, or in other ways adverse conditions. It adds a

further, more aggressive or provocative layer, by exacerbating the hidden contradictions and exposing the ideological blind spots of the outwardly so mutually beneficial symbiosis between film directors and film festivals: even as one dissents and resists, one is part of a market (of promotion and self-promotion) and its written and unwritten rules.

What is a performative self-contradiction? Briefly put, one enacts a performative self-contradiction when one makes a claim that contradicts the validity of the means that are used to make it, i.e. which contradicts your performance of the claim. One of the best-known examples goes back to the logical or semantic paradoxes of the Greek philosopher Epimenides, who famously claimed "all Cretans are liars," while being himself a Cretan. In other words, in a performative self-contradiction, there is a conflict between one's presuppositions and one's conclusions. One affirms something, knowing that there are no grounds that could validate it, but doing so tries to put the addressee or adversary in a cognitive double bind, thus retroactively creating a space for oneself (where there is none) by putting oneself as the enunciator under erasure, i.e. negatively securing an enunciative presence. It is thus a strategy that tries to control forces you cannot control, to find a way out of moral or metaphysical deadlocks, without merely "destabilizing" the categories or binary options, but aggravating their inherent contradictions.

As it happens, von Trier is one of those directors most acutely aware of this dilemma. A master of the performative self-contradiction, he had adopted it as his preferred counter-strategy, seen in action most provocatively in his public appearances at film festivals. A poster ahead of his appearance at the Berlin Film Festival in February 2014 to promote *Nymphomaniac* showed him with duct tape plastered over his mouth, signaling the fact that he had been "silenced" by the Cannes Festival, and was now "vowing silence" after the disastrous press conference for *Melancholia* in May 2011. Yet the very gesture is so eloquent that it contradicts the assertion that he has been silenced. The same goes for his "Persona Non Grata, Official Selection" t-shirt display at the photo-call also in Berlin.[21] There, von Trier was wearing his rejection and ejection from Cannes as a badge of honor, turning himself into a spectacle of abjection: his way of asserting autonomy as an artist within the untranscendable horizon of commodification and the discourse of advertising and branding. Using the Cannes logo (a festival proud of being only about "art") as the enunciator (and "brand") of the utterance adorning his chest, von Trier entangles Cannes in a simple self-contradiction (Cannes makes "art" its commercial "brand"), which allows him to carve out for himself a performatively self-contradictory space between "Persona Non Grata" and "Official Selection," and to show himself at his most independent when being taken hostage (or "hosted"), by the very institution to which he owes his reputation and fame.

From double occupancy to performative self-contradiction: The philosophical turn

This last conundrum returns me to the philosophical context in which performative self-contradiction can function as a further stage and possible response to the global auteur's state of double occupancy, as discussed above. Performative self-contradiction

came to prominence in the late 1980s, when Jürgen Habermas leveled a thoroughgoing critique against, among others, Jacques Derrida, feeling compelled to defend the "unfinished project of modernity" that began with the Enlightenment, against post-Nietzschean, Heidegger-inspired anti-humanism and deconstruction. In his *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987), Habermas tries to prove that postmodern philosophers—he has in mind especially Derrida, Foucault, and Bataille—are taking apart Enlightenment reason and post-Kantian philosophy of the subject, while unwittingly relying on the philosophical concepts they are critiquing. He even includes Adorno:

> Adorno's "negative dialectics" and Derrida's "deconstruction" can be seen as different answers to the same problem. The totalizing self-critique of reason gets caught in a performative contradiction since subject-centered reason can only be convicted of being authoritarian when having recourse to its own tools. The tools of thought, which … are imbued with the "metaphysics of presence" (Derrida), are nevertheless the only available means for uncovering their insufficiency.[22]
>
> --(1987, 185)

In other words, according to Habermas, Derrida remains trapped within the theoretical framework against which he is writing, so that his performative self-contradiction consists in sawing off the branch on which he is himself sitting. Clearly, for Habermas, this is a serious shortcoming, one that he would expect a philosopher to avoid.

Yet, as many commentators have pointed out, Habermas may be misunderstanding the very project of deconstruction, which is not to critique or dismantle reason from a position outside, but to offer an immanent critique, a form of argument that acknowledges this trap, this necessary self-binding of philosophy. To go a step further: what from the point of view of logic or analytical philosophy might seem a grievous error, may turn out, from a rhetorical or poetological perspective, to offer another way of reading, another way of looking and thus a space of freedom, of movement that loosens the shackles even if it does not remove them. As Seyla Benhabib puts it:

> It is not difficult to show that any theory which denies … the possibility of distinguishing between [truth] and sheer manipulative rhetoric would be involved in a "performative self-contradiction." This may not be terribly difficult, but it does not settle the issue either. For, from Nietzsche's aphorisms, to Heidegger's poetics, to Adorno's stylistic configurations, and to Derrida's deconstructions, we have examples of thinkers who accept this performative self-contradiction, and who self-consciously draw the consequences from it by seeking a new way of writing and communicating.
>
> --(1998, 488)

This, then, would be the stake: if for the many reasons I have indicated, the global auteur is only an auteur as long as he/she is inside and part of the system, then the self-binding creative constraints, exacerbated to the point of performative self-contradiction, become, unavoidably, the only possible enunciative position, and thus the only form of authenticity and autonomy. While the hidden antagonisms, the unforeseeable contingencies, and the asymmetrical power dynamics that make creative constraints necessary seem to speak of the auteur's dependency and

weakness both *vis-à-vis* the market (of reputation and revenue), and *vis-à-vis* the auteur's chief benefactor (the film festival circuit), in actual fact, any acts of performative self-contradiction would signal a more properly philosophical turn or gesture. It would begin to grant filmmakers as auteurs the place and value that film philosophy has long tried to bestow on their films, namely of putting forward philosophical positions in their own right. We seem to have come full circle: the anachronism or obsolescence of the auteur as a representative of art against commerce and commodification, with which I started, now turns out—under conditions of globalization and the film festival circuit—to be the very precondition for a paradoxical kind of autonomy and agency that has the potential to help to reinvent the cinema, not as an art form, nor as a life form, but as a form of philosophy: the *politique des auteurs* has never seemed more urgent, and never seemed more timely.

Works cited

Benhabib, Seyla. 1998. "A Rejoinder to J. F. Lyotard," in Victor E. Taylor and Charles E. Winquist (eds), *Postmodernism*: *Disciplinary Texts*. New York: Routledge.

Elsaesser, Thomas. 2008. "Real Location, Fantasy Space, Performative Place," in T. Trifonova (ed.), *European Film Theory*, New York: Routledge.

Elster, Jon. 2000. *Ulysses Unbound*: *Studies in Rationality, Pre-commitment and Constraints*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1987. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Meskin, Aaron. 2008. "Authorship," in Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*. New York: Routledge.

[1]

Roland Barthes, *S/Z An Essay* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1970);

Michel Foucault, "Ceci n'est pas une pipe," *October* 1 (Spring 1976): 6–21

.

[2] There is no shortage of essays problematizing the notion of the author or auteur. Among the best-known collections are

John Caughie (ed.), *Theories of Authorship* (London and New York: Routledge, 1981)

Virginia Wright Wexman (ed.), *Film and Authorship* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003)

David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger (eds), *Authorship and Film* (New York: Routledge, 2003)

and

Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Auteurs and Authorship*: *A Film Reader* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008)

.

[3] For a philosophical discussion of the cases for and against film authorship, see

Aaron Meskin, "Authorship," in Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 12–27

.

[4] For Meskin most of the authorship debates revolve around "evaluation, interpretation, and stylistic attribution." Meskin 2008, 18–19.

[5]

Thomas Elsaesser, *The Persistence of Hollywood* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 319–40

.

[6]

Thomas Elsaesser (2011), "James Cameron's *Avatar*: Access for all," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 9 (3): 247–64

.

[7] I owe much of this information and the quotation to a personal communication from Jeremi Szaniawski. For more information about Sokurov, see, among others, his book

The Cinema of Alexander Sokurov: *Figures of Paradox* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2014)

.

[8] See

Melis Behlil, *Home Away from Home*: *Global Directors of New Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016)

.

[9] See

Cindy H. Wong, *Film Festivals*: *Culture, People, and Power on the Global Screen* (New York: Rutgers, 2011), 145–8

.

[10] Luc Besson has fared especially badly in this respect, with critics deriding his international success: "Besson thinks he can buy himself the title of auteur, but all he attains is a parvenu's vulgarity." Cited in

Jamie Wolf, "Le Cinéma du Blockbuster," *New York Times*, May 20, 2007. Available online: http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/20/movies/20wolf.html (accessed July 31, 2015)

.

[11] Jean Luc Godard's battles with Cannes date back to 1968, when along with other filmmakers of the *nouvelle vague*, he forced the festival to shut down. In 2014, when his thirty-ninth film, *Adieu au Langage*, won the Jury Prize at the festival, he refused to attend the press conference sending a video letter instead. Available online: http://www.indiewire.com/article/watch-jean-luc-godard-explains-why-he-is-not-at-cannes (accessed July 31, 2015).

[12]

Lawrence Lessig, "The Laws of Cyberspace" (Draft 3, 1998), 2–3. Available online: http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/works/lessig/laws_cyberspace.pdf (accessed July 31, 2015)

.

[13] Elster defines maximization as follows: "The process of artistic creation is guided by the aim of maximizing aesthetic value under constraints," and adds in as footnote: "(1) The idea of a maximum implies that in a good work of art, 'nothing can be added and nothing subtracted' without loss of aesthetic value. The idea of a good work of art as embodying both fullness and parsimony seems naturally captured by the idea of a maximum. (2) By arguing that artists aim at producing a local maximum rather than 'the' best work they can make, I believe I can make sense of several properties of works of art and their creation, (a) Many artists experiment with small variations before they decide on the final version, (b) The notion of a 'minor masterpiece' has a natural interpretation in this framework, (c) The notion of a 'flawed masterpiece' also receives a natural interpretation" (Elster 2000, 200).

[14] See

Richard Maltby, "A brief romantic interlude: Dick and Jane go to 3½ seconds of the Classical Hollywood Cinema," in *Post-Theory—Reconstructing Film Studies*, David Bordwell and Noel Carroll (eds) (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 434–59

and

Slavoj Žižek's commentary, "Shostakovich in Casablanca," Lacanian Ink, 2007. Available online: www.lacan.com/zizcasablanca.htm (accessed July 31, 2015)

.

[15] See Elster 2000, 196.

[16] Artists in West Germany had to be sages, the conscience of the nation, the upholders of values, but also the rebels against conventions, the avant-garde artists and international icons. Many were perceived as the nation's moral compass as well as modern masters: Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer, Gerhard Richter, or they were public intellectuals: Heinrich Böll, Günter Grass, Christa Wolf, Heiner Müller. Today, as even these artists' and writers' subsequent reputations prove, things have become more complicated, and nowhere more so than for filmmakers.

[17] For a discussion of constraints in reference to the Dogme movement and manifesto (citing Jon Elster), see

Mette Hjørt, "Dogme 95," in Paisley Livingstone and Carl Plantinga (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film* (London: Routledge, 2009), 487

.

[18] See

Bodil M. Thomsen, "Antichrist—chaos reigns: the event of violence and the haptic image in Lars von Trier's film," *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 1 (2009): n.p

.

[19] See

Thomas Elsaesser, "Black sun and a bright planet: Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*," *Theory & Event* 18 (2) (2015): n.p

.

[20] See

Thomas Elsaesser, "Performative Self-contradictions: Michael Haneke's Mind Games," in Roy Grundmann (ed.), *A Companion to Michael Haneke* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 53–74

.

[21] "For the world premiere of the director's cut of *Nymphomaniac, Vol. 1* von Trier maintained his vow to refrain from all public statements, and did not attend the press conference. But he had a message, nevertheless. At the photo call preceding the *Nymphomaniac* panel, the helmer sported a t-shirt emblazoned with the Cannes Film Festival logo followed by the words 'Persona Non Grata, Official Selection.' The sartorial choice was a nod to 2011 when von Trier was dubbed a *persona non grata* by Cannes for Nazi-flavored comments he made at a press conference for *Melancholia*" (Nancy Tartaglione, *Deadline Hollywood*. Available online: http://deadline.com/2014/02/berlin-lars-von-trier-sports-persona-non-grata-t-shirt-shia-labeouf-abruptly-exits-nymphomaniac-press-conference-680154 [accessed July 31, 2015]).

[22] Translation modified.