CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Performing Authorship: Self-inscription and Corporeality in the Cinema, by Cecilia Sayad
Authors	Busetta, Laura
Publication date	2014-06-01
Original Citation	Busetta, L. (2014) Performing Authorship: Self-inscription and Corporeality in the Cinema, by Cecilia Sayad. Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 7. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.7.09
Type of publication	Review
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.7.09
Rights	© 2014, The Author(s) - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Download date	2026-11-05 22:41:08
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/5850



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

alphaville
JOURNAL OF FILM AND SCREEN MEDIA

***Performing Authorship: Self-Inscription and Corporeality in the Cinema*. Cecilia Sayad. London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013 (208 pages). ISBN: 9781780760063.**

A Review by Laura Busetta, Sapienza University of Rome

The issue of authorship has been widely discussed in Film Studies. Through phases of critical idealisation, abstraction and even rejection, the figure of the author has attracted sustained interest in film theory debates, giving rise to, for instance, the well-known reflections of the French *politique des auteurs*, or Andrew Sarris's auteur theory; and it has survived until today, as evidenced by the recent publication of several contributions, including those by Paisley Livingston, Aaron Meskin, and Berys Gaut. If the "romantic model" looked at the author as the heart of the text, the poststructural revision has focused, to the contrary, on the author's absence; the theory of the death of the author seemed to establish a "desubjectification", which was deemed necessary to the analysis of every work of art, as in the contributions of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. Taking into account this long theoretical legacy, Cecilia Sayad's *Performing Authorship: Self-Inscription and Corporeality in the Cinema* returns once again to the topic. Summoning again a figure often consigned to abstraction, Sayad places emphasis on detecting the traces of the cinematic author within the text, while always bearing in mind the distinction between authors as real persons and their self-fictionalisations. The book thus addresses the filmic procedures of authorial self-inscription, rather than focusing on the extrafilmic systems of production, promotion and marketing. Sayad concentrates, in particular, on the textual representations of authorial identities and artistic processes. The construction of authors within the films is investigated through the analysis of their corporeality, and of those strategies that are able to place the author as a physically present and self-expressing figure within the filmic text. The book, therefore, looks at authors' impulses to assert not only their views, but also their bodily presence, their place in the space of the work and their relationship with the surrounding world. *Performing Authorship*, in fact, investigates authors' urges to stretch the borders of subjectivity, narrative, and frame, "always in the act of trying to express feelings and ideas, or at least register the impact of their presence on the surrounding world. In other words, *Performing Authorship* examines the authors' desire to become physically present, and for the most part as self-expressing figures" (xx).

In her book, Sayad refers to various modes of performing authorship, through selected case studies, which range from Orson Welles to Jean-Luc Godard, Agnès Varda, Woody Allen, Eduardo Coutinho, and Sarah Turner, among others. Many of the filmmakers considered are significant because their work reflects on the issue of authorship itself, and they therefore "assert their authorial presence in the film and somehow reclaim a voice in the critical discourses on cinematic authorship, repossessing a title relegated to abstraction" (7). Sayad, consequently, places emphasis on the authors' self-conscious reflection upon the procedure of self-representation within artistic processes.

The first chapter, "Performance, Corporeality and the Borders of the Film", focuses on the notion of performing authorship, which is defined by making reference to discussions of performance and of masquerade by Wayne Booth, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Richard Schechner, and also to the ideas of cinematic presence developed by Vivian Sobchack. In this section, Godard's invisible and disruptive presence in *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (*2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle*, 1967) and Guy Sherwin's film performance, *Paper Landscape* (1975) are taken as case studies of the relationship between author and text on the one hand, and author and the world on the other. The liminal notion of the author, and his or her position in relation to the diegesis, is investigated with reference to the spatial metaphor of the filmic frame. The figure of the frame is intended as a border that marks a spatial and metaphorical boundary between the world and its representation, and the author is found to is sometimes seen as a foreign element, "acting as a linkage positioning film and outside world in a relation of contiguity" (27). This reflection continues in the next section of the book, titled "The Author and the Frame: Writing, Painting and the Essay Film". In this chapter, essay film and self-portrait forms are investigated as practices that are useful to reflect on the notion of subjectivity, and on the self-reflexive elements at work in the process of performing authorship. The essay film and the self-portrait, which is to be intended as one of its subgenres, are texts that self-reflexively portray the authors' individuality and their meditations on the world. Through examination of explicitly self-reflexive and often metalinguistic works, such as *F for Fake* (*Vérités et mensonges*, Orson Welles, 1972), *JLG/JLG: Self-portrait in December* (*JLG/JLG: autoportrait de décembre*, Jean-Luc Godard, 1994), *The Beaches of Agnès* (*Les plages d'Agnès*, Agnès Varda, 2008), and *Perestroika* (Sarah Turner, 2009), Sayad places emphasis on two genres to which the notion of performing authorship is particularly relevant. Essay films examine the author's place in the surrounding world, while in self-portraits subjects are placed at the centre of a reflexive procedure, by which the film turns into a meditation both on the medium and on the filming process: "what they portray, always self-reflexively, is the author's experience of, and meditations on, the world" (37). The analysis of the aforementioned films leads Sayad to reflect on strategies that are able to incorporate the author's presence—body, voices, etc.—into the frame. Importantly, she also reflects on the authorial control over the filmic text, and on the role played by the name and signature in every work of art. Biographical elements are also recalled in subjective filmic practices, while memory and death play a fundamental part in every process of self-representation. Taking into account the recent reflections by Laura Rascaroli and Timothy Corrigan, essay films and self-portraits are investigated in this chapter as special texts, in which authors are explicitly considered as the principal objects of their self-investigation.

In the chapter titled "The Author in the World: Trance, Presence and Documentary Filmmaking", Sayad shifts the focus of *Performing Authorship* on documentary films, in which the authorial view is often embedded within cultural factors. The works of Eduardo Coutinho and Jean Rouch are investigated in this context, with a focus on the issue of self-expression. Here Sayad analyses the authors' role and presence when they are able to set events in motion and provoke reactions from the filmed subjects. The authorial function concerns not only issues related to subjectivity and self-expression, but also reflections on the "director's physical interaction with the world that surrounds them, a sense of their corporeal presence and the extent to which this presence shapes the realities they film", including relationships with people, culture and otherness (75). In this sense, the reflection touches on authorship and subjectivity as dimensions that are necessarily intertwined with alterity, and with social and cultural factors.

Chapter Four, "The Author In-Between: Fools, Stand-Ups and Fictional Narratives" focuses on the role of directors as actors, who do not disappear behind the characters' masks, but, on the contrary, evoke their authorial roles in fairly explicit ways. In this section, Sayad reflects on works by Jean-Luc Godard and Woody Allen, in which the directors often appear on the screen playing figures that remain external to the diegesis. Frequently, they comment upon the filmic world, somehow refusing to completely merge with it. It is in this section that Sayad introduces the relevant and productive notion of the fool, situating it within the tradition of the theory of the grotesque. Intended as a figure of marginality and misplacement, the fool is a borderless subject, carrying a subversive foreignness and endowed with a self-reflexive nature. The specificity of the figure of the fool, in fact, as Mikhail Bakhtin argued in his study of the fool in literature, is to be outside of the logical system, often unable to understand, and becoming easily confused. As a subversive and marginal figure, the fool is to be seen as an outsider, whose jokes can unveil an unofficial truth, free from rules and taboos. The figure of the author is often turned into a strange, inassimilable body, which lies at the margin of the fiction and thus articulates different connections between the filmic and the extrafilmic. As stated throughout the book, performing authorship often involves a certain amount of masquerade and divestiture, in a struggle between self-expression and self-fictionalisation. The author's image is therefore explicitly represented through a tension between fictional and real selves, biographical existence and screen personas. The author is thus perceived as a foreign element, often moving at the borders of cinematic texts, rather than being absorbed by them, and oscillating between affirmation and divestiture of authorial control.

Concerning a hybrid and multiform figure, the concept of performing authorship presupposes an author "who is neither a unified subject behind a discourse nor a vacuum waiting to be filled with multiple meanings, but instead a palpable human being entertaining (but not necessarily confirming) the notion of a definable identity, which this author may seek to reveal or mask, and which is in any case forever under construction" (142). Exploring a diverse body of work ranging from essay films and self-portraits to documentaries and fictions, Sayad investigates the physical appearance of directors on the screen, their bodies and voices, their relationship with the surrounding settings, and the effects resulting from their interactions with the world and with people involved in the filmic process. With insight and lucidity, the book introduces a particularly productive notion, which is capable of crossing the boundaries of various filmic practices and genres, and which demands to be considered when investigating the different strategies that underlie every filmic process.

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author". *Roland Barthes: Image – Music – Text*. Ed. Stephen Heath. London: Fontana Press, 1977: 142–8. Print.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U. of Texas P., 2001. Print.

Booth, Wayne. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983. Print.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York and London: Routledge, 2008. Print.

Corrigan, Timothy. *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, after Marker*. New York: Oxford U.P., 2011. Print.

Foucault, Michel. "What Is an Author?". *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*. Vol. 2, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*. Ed. James D. Faubion. New York: The New Press, 1994: 205–222. Print.

Gaut, Berys. *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*, New York: Cambridge U.P., 2010. Print.

Godard, Jean-Luc, dir. *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* [*2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle*]. 1967. Argos Films. Film.

---, dir. *JLG/JLG: Self-Portrait in December* [*JLG/JLG: autoportrait de décembre*]. 1994. Gaumont. Film.

Livingston, Paisley. "Cinematic Authorship". *Film Theory and Philosophy*. Ed. Richard Allen and Murray Smith. Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1997: 132–48. Print.

Meskin, Aaron. "Authorship". *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*. Ed. Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga. London and New York: Routledge, 2009. Print.

Rascaroli, Laura. *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film*. London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2009. Print.

Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.

Sherwin, Guy, dir. *Paper Landscape*. 1975. Film.

Sobchack, Vivian. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U. of California P., 2004. Print.

Turner, Sarah, dir. *Perestroika*. 2009. Sarah Turner. Film.

Varda, Agnès, dir. *The Beaches of Agnès* [*Les plages d'Agnès*]. 2008. Ciné Tamaris. Film.

Welles, Orson, dir. *F for Fake* [*Vérités et mensonges*]. 1972. Janus Film. Film.

Suggested Citation

Busetta, Laura. "*Performing Authorship: Self-Inscription and Corporeality in the Cinema* by Cecilia Sayad". Book review. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 7 (Summer 2014). Web. ISSN: 2009-4078.

Laura Busetta completed her PhD in Film Studies at Sapienza University of Rome in 2013 with a thesis entitled “The Self-Portrait Film”. She has published in academic journals such as *Imago*, *Fata Morgana*, *Cineforum* and *Alfabeta2*. She is now pursuing research on self-representation in digital film and media, and has recently co-organised a study-day on “The Self-Portrait in the Moving Image” at the Birkbeck College, London.