



THE 'I' OF THE FRONT CAMERA: WHERE EVERYBODY IS AN AUTEUR

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Abstract:

Identity construction in the post digital revolution era has taken a futuristic narrative, where the role of technology in capturing the nuances of daily life has been downplayed by factors such as legitimacy and accountability. One such gradation is the emergence of the idea of Instant sharing through vlog channels. To avoid ambiguities of terms, a vlog is typically an audio visual clip that brings the viewer closer to a certain experience of lifestyle, traveling, clothing, eating, or even daily life that is highly specific to the vlogger's point of view. This paper aims to highlight the problems in theorising the concept of vlogging as a media object. The author of this paper attempts to highlight the dynamism involved in the field of vlogging and offers a critique of its demystifying nature. The idea of a vlog as a self theorising media object and its role in the conception of the "I" is traced through the understanding of vlogging as a *mundanely extraordinary* experience with a wide network of *sinthomatic* expressions that define what is personal and private. This paper questions the applicability of the postmodern notion of "we are all auteurs" and the possibility of experiencing vlogging as a scope providing medium and not as a self-theorising entity.

Keywords: Identity, Legitimacy, Digital, Vlogs, Media object, Demystifying, Self Theorising, Mundanely Extraordinary, Personal and Private, Auteurs, Scope Medium.

The dynamism of the front camera, both as an equipment, and as a media object is transitional in nature. For what lies on the frame of the screen (digital interface) is what constitutes as the end product, with little or no modifications. The front camera brings into being the need to recount the transformation in its full existence. A transition that is easy to spot and develop, the continuity is what gives it the authenticity. In recent times, there has been an extensive usage of front camera as a media object in video blogs or vlogs, a term that came to be included in the Merriam Webster's dictionary innocently along with "webisode" (which are still flagged as misspelled by the very same digital interfaces).

A certain kind of a *mundanely extraordinary* experience is merchandised and familiarised in

vlogs. For instance, consider what the description provided in one of Roman Atwood's daily vlogs suggests, "Thank you so much for being a massive part of our daily life. Thank you for the support over the years and for growing with us. Thanks for liking the videos and always sharing with friends and family. THANK YOU!!" (Atwood, 2010). The viewers are being thanked for merely watching the content, while making the fourteen million viewers to believe that they have been included in the daily life of the Atwoods, the experiences that form the content of the vlogs are mundane and extraordinary at the same time, their vlogs such as "We Put Jet Skis In Our Pool" and "Worlds Dumbest Backyard Rope Swing" extends to several travel vlogs where even the Atwood children act and react.

For vlogging efficiency, the capturing of an experience is of utmost importance, this instantaneous and personalised capturing comes at the cost of alienation from the immediate surroundings. In a vlog called, "Crazy Coffee Ceremony", Louis Cole captures the experience of travelling in and around Ethiopia, with little or no interaction with the people giving him a ride or with the hotel staff. Whereas, in travel vlogging that caters to capturing the natural environment of a location, like Ben Brown's "Wild Camping Paradise", it matters very little as to the presence of direct human contact, what is rather emphasised is the 'being stranded' experience and the triumph of how the vlogger found his/her way back. In this regard, Jon Olsson's "This Changed My Life" vlog, which marks the completion of a staggering hundred posts, where he shares the experience of helping in setting up a school in Colombia, is an accurate example of the importance of direct human contact devoid of heavy equipment.

It is imperative here to locate the act of vlogging in a setting that can accentuate its difference from other audio visual experiences. Typically speaking, a scene in an audio visual representation incorporates elements of action, lighting, camera angles and colors, the impact of which is reliably based on the deliberate choices made by the individuals involved in producing the effect.

In his connection to the auteur theory and the nature of self-theorising media, Nicholas Rombes states that, "Roland Barthes's famous prediction about the death of the author has come to pass, but not because the author is nowhere, but rather because she is everywhere" ("The Rebirth of the Author," 2005). He claims that the dismissal of the role played by the author can be reinstated by the upheaval of personalised blogs, if a blog itself is personal, then personalised blog can only refer to vlogging as a form of auteur-ship. Where the cult of the author is directed to have an all encompassing presence, Rombes calls this phenomenon - a tyrannical authorship presence, where the personal and the private are playing their parts in creating what is personal and what is private. If a beauty tip can be personal for vloggers such

as Zoe Sugg and Gabriella Lindley and hence create a market for their disposal, then growing up, which is expected to take place in a public sphere becomes private for bloggers like Tanner Fox where the viewers can literally trace the trajectory of growing up, the vlogger accomplishes such a stunt in several ways that requires the space of a whole different network.

For what Barthes claims in the "The Death of the Author" is what Rombes tries to revert by calling it ironic that the very work that is aimed to thoroughly deconstruct the notion of the author and call it a myth, is widely circulated by the name "Roland Barthes" and is provided to theorists as a manifesto to develop the scope for further application. The contention here is that, the application of the Barthean *jouissance* of the author's death to prose made the readers want to believe their conveniently reaffirmed status. Where Barthes's essay ends with a reassuring statement about the role of the reader that, "Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature... we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes, 1968), there forms a poststructural *bricolerean* locus for Foucault to discuss the 'author function'.

As a consequence of which, Rombes notes that, the attack on Andrew Sarri's auteur theory through the means of a rationalist rhetoric promotes a self-deprecating stand point to a wide array of film theorists. For Rombes, the auteur cannot and will not die an author's death, rather, "the rise and hegemony of digital technologies and culture have only reinforced the author concept, and have in fact helped to create new forms of authorship that are being acknowledged in the broader public" ("The Rebirth of the Author," 2005). With new forms of authorship, vlogging has a dynamism of the ability to convince the already subscribed and 'waiting patiently for content' viewer to *go to* a new platform to see the same thing yet again. For instance, life style vloggers such as Casey Neistat, Jenna Marbles, and Tess Christine's trendsetting lifestyle choices compel the viewers to become their *followers* on social media networks by default.

Mathew Clayfield responds to Rombes's claims relating to the rebirth of the Author and vlogging as a self-theorising media that helps in demystifying popular culture (conceptualised in Rombes's 2004 essay "Self-Theorizing Media"), and explains that the assumption that, everyone is a theorist, even if media objects theorise themselves, becomes a standpoint that is problematic because the author's intention and the form of the work itself can be mutually exclusive. And according to Clayfield, this tension between the form and the intention of the author creates an aperture in the '*vlogosphere*' of the vlogger's content. The vlogger creates boundaries which familiarises the viewer's experience, the room where a vlog is created (usually a house set up), the people that are included in it and excluded from (Pre informed)

and the objects that are vlogged about (promoting and merchandising).

Clayfield notes that, the notion of a self-theorising media, of an art form or an art medium speaking for itself, is not unique to the cultural productions of contemporary media, he states that, "all media objects - not just contemporary ones - are self-theorising media objects. The ability of a media object to speak for itself - to offer itself up as an artefact, bespeaking the various technological, socio-economic and aesthetico-ideological conditions of its production - is undoubtedly one of the most persistent and fundamental characteristics of all cultural productions" ("Rethinking the Rebirth of the Author", 2007) and offers to solve the current problem that forces theory to the the practice of contemporary mediascape.

It is nugatory to confuse the transformation which is so often spoken about, while addressing the nuances of digital revolution with that of the transitional transformation that the front camera brings about. If a camera is considered as the eye of the 'I', then the object that is gazed upon through the means of the front camera in order to develop a transition forms a superimposition of the subject from where the meaning originates forming a never ending loop of signification. A vlog is a combination of a traditional blog and subversive camera techniques. By that logic, it wouldn't be incongruous to say that the individual or group of individuals creating the content for the vlog are both authors and directors at the same time, which is to say that they are - auteurs.

But, it is at the same time problematic to call them either, as the terms 'author' and 'director' encompass the idea of the existence of texts in any given form (here, the idea of the text is more important than the text itself). Whereas, an auteur brings into being the instrument of mass appeal that surpasses the actual text succeeding in propagating certain ideological preoccupations while muting multitudes of others. And vlog channels as media objects are not devoid from such characteristics, rather they turn the mass appeal inwards. To say that, the characters of a film are mimetic and a microcosmic delineation of the society, induces the same level of curiosity as to proclaim that - I am popular as a vlogger because I could bring you closer to "I" and still retain some of the "I" for myself.

Which is the reason why vlogging as a form fails from being a self-theorising entity with demystifying characteristics. Even while demystifying other genres, it mystifies something fairly simple, the mundane extraordinariness of the life it portrays. In willing to lift the mist off its ambiguities, Clayfield attempts at defining what self-theorising media means, he states that, "A truly self-theorising media object is truly *self*-theorising, in the sense of it being a relatively autonomous entity that walks to beat of its own drum, allowing the traces of its material history

and ideological constitution to speak for themselves, with or against authorial discourse” (“Rethinking the Rebirth of the Author”, 2007). Vlogging is anything but autonomous, it relies heavily on what is *en vogue*, it is not entirely the creation of the vlogger, it is immediate, hence temporal.

Much of what is portrayed in a vlog is hidden, it is important to identify the difference between an author's work from that of a director's, apart from the obvious difference of form, style, and content. The former deals not so much with action, as with the intention and motivation to act, whereas, the latter attempts to represent action (even in its inaction) where there might or might not be an intention. It is left to the viewers to decipher the intentions that are hidden, the faculties of psychoanalysis lies in this particular field of analysing the covert content in cinema.

In this sense, an author can exist without transforming into a director, whereas, a director cannot exist without the author function (either in the “I” of the director, or through outsourcing). This is probably the reason why the auteur theory is most keenly observed while discussing the work of directors and not authors. Besides, such juxtapositions in theory and convergence of various fields of studies is a fairly recent phenomena. Similarly, the etymology associated with video blogging is different and recent as compared to its textual counterpart, but the purpose remains intact, which is to be able to bring the reader/viewer as close to the everyday cultural patterns of the vlogger as possible. These patterns correspond to a mundanely extraordinary events of the vlogger's experience. A blogger has the luxury of waiting for the 'event' to come to an end in order to respond and reflect upon it, for a vlogger, however, the process of capturing is almost always instantaneous. For what is instantaneous to the vlogger is legitimacy and accountability to the viewer.

Similar to the means with which a blogger maintains a certain tone and register while theming the blogs, a vlogger uses *sinthomatic* expressions such as an opening line that is recurrent, references to familiarised comic reliefs, or a *go to* link to provide information about further relevant vlog content, which becomes self-referential in nature. An author and a director converges to form an auteur, someone who has a huge role to play in the way the narrative is structured, who owns certain signature styles. With respect to vlogging, no two vloggers have the same style of expressing a *mundanely extraordinary* experience, (so does

that mean that everybody who claims to be a vlogger is an auteur? If so, what are they representing, familiarising, and demystifying? What is the role of technology in allowing for such a conception to take place?)

The claim “Where everybody is an Auteur” is nearly identical to what Rombes’s essentially means that, “we are all *auteurs*”, but in this case, it is only nearly identical. For the latter is a declaration that has an author-theorised tone to it, whereas, the former refers to the medium as providing the scope for the possibility and not the medium itself existing as an authorised self-theorising entity. For example, when the vlogger carries the equipment as a body part and eventually the viewer assumes that the equipment is no longer a part of the scene, but a mode through which the footage is being shot. Then overtime, the equipment is body and the body coordinates itself to accommodate it. In this manner, the medium is no longer self-theorising, rather, it leads to a state of a scope providential existence.

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