
THE CREATIVE PROCESS AND SELF-CRITIQUE AS A FILM MAKER'S GESTURE

MARTIN PALÚCH

Institute of Theatre and Film Research, Slovak Academy of Sciences

Abstract: This study attempts to trace the elements of self-critique that are connected with reflections on film and bases its findings on three examples. The first example discusses novice film makers from The French New Wave who initially started their careers as film critics for the *Cahiers du Cinéma* magazine. Only later did they proceed from critical thinking about films to self-critiquing new work wherein past mistakes should not be repeated anymore. As future film makers, they wanted to avoid such things in their own works. The second example has to do with the functioning of self-critical authorial reflection, wherein the film maker examines his work from a certain distance in time, as can be seen in the book of dialogues *Truffaut versus Hitchcock*. The third sample is a film by the Korean director Kim Ki-Duk called *Arirang* (2011), which describes a self-critical situation the film maker himself happened to be in and how he tried to present this to the audience through the communication medium he knew best.

Key words: self-critique, film, author, critic, method of creating

Seldom does an author become a critic of his own work. Much more often we come across a tension between professional critique and the work of art, and between critics and authors, where the bridge separating these two areas is only crossed with much effort, or not at all in the majority of cases. In particular, there is no level of self-critique as an external reflection on one's own creative acts to be spoken about. But from our own experience, we all know that self-critique is a part of every method of creating. Permanently present in an author's work, it exists and it is hidden. Only occasionally does it make its way to the surface on behalf of the author himself. This applies to every type of art as well as (self)-critique in the fine arts.

In the history of film, we can find many critics who later on became directors. In many cases, they had been taught a lesson on the historical development of the means of expression and were armed with ideas about how new films should (or should not) look. In a critical negation of previous stereotypes, they tried to come up with something new with their self-critical gestures. The most aggressive stands against outdated creative methods (in terms of form, style and content) in the field of film critique and in subsequent film making experience are thought to be the harsh critiques that started being published in the 1950s in France. These were initiated by a group of young and active critics, and later distinguished directors, who gathered around a film theoretician called André Bazin and the *Cahiers du Cinéma* magazine of film critique. While still critics, Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, C. Chabrol, J. Rivette and E. Rohmer strongly condemned the contemporary aesthetics and direction of French film. In 1959 Godard wrote an article in *Arts* magazine called "Truffaut, Last Year's Unwanted at Cannes, is Going to Represent France This Year with the Film 'Nobody Likes Me'", where he stated:

It is going to be our films that will prove that France has a beautiful face, poetically said. Do not doubt it! Fifteen new films, new brave, honest, prospective and beautiful films, are going to stand in the way of conventional production. We may have won one battle, but the war is not over yet.¹

The work of these French critics from the new wave could be interpreted as an example of a period when critical thinking became a successful creative act.

Another member of the "wave" who in a unique way instigated the transition from critique to self-critique was the above-mentioned Truffaut. From 1962 to 1967 he chronologically registered his conversations with the English film maker Alfred Hitchcock. These were first published in France in 1967. The systematic recording of these conversations was triggered by a negative American critique of Hitchcock's film *Rear Window*. This is what Truffaut had to say about the situation:

It hasn't been long since the time was devoted to critique, so until now I have carried a desire to convince myself, which was the common feature for all the young people at *Cahiers du Cinéma*. So it crossed my mind that Hitchcock, whose sense for advertising can only be compared to Salvador Dali, has in the end become a victim of all of those interviews of his in America, where he intentionally made fun of people and ridiculed everything. When looking at his films, it was clear that this person was thinking about means of expression more than any of his colleagues, and if he agreed to answer a systematic set of questions, which would be the first time in his life, a book capable of changing the minds of the American critics could come to life.²

Such admiration for this great English director was a common thing among all the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics, and is evident in many articles. Truffaut's admiration led to a detailed inventory of personal observations where Hitchcock not only reviews his own work but also shows his self-critical face to the readers. Given the extent of his work and the richness of his directorial skills, his personal self-critical observations cover a wide spectrum of problems in the creative and production aspects of his work. During the discussions, he discusses the motif, script, stage setting, narrative structure set-up, acting, editing, camera, movement on screen, lightning, commercial success and response from the audience. This is no surprise as at the beginning of these discussions he had already made 48 films and several television shows, and he continually directed until he died in 1980. He had successes as well as disappointments (some films were hits while others were not), and he faced both positive non-critical admiration as well as negative critique from aficionados. It is distance in time which allowed Hitchcock to balance his relationship to his creative work and form new professional expectations. Truffaut states that Hitchcock:

... was telling anecdotes and was having fun at first, but since the third day he has seemed more serious. Honestly and really self-critically, he was telling me about his path in detail, including pleasant and also unpleasant coincidences, problems, attempts, doubts, hoping and trying.³

¹ GODARD, Jean-Luc. *Texty a rozhovory*. Jihlava : JSAF, 2005. ISBN 80-903513-6-0, p. 87.

² HITCHCOCK, Alfred – TRUFFAUT, François. *Rozhovory*. Praha : ČSFU, 1986. MK ČSR 59-227-83, p. 7.

³ Ibid., p. 10.

In this case, verbalised self-critique initiated from the outside became one of the most complex examples of authorial self-reflection put on paper. Summarising views like this may appear from time to time, but they are rather rare. They are shallow and we come across them rather sporadically.

Therefore, it is very rare for a film maker within the scope of the present study to film a self-critical movie on his own without any external assistance (e.g. from a critic). A precedent in this regard is a unique piece of work by the world's most well-known Korean director, Kim Ki-Duk, who presented his full-length feature film *Arirang* at the Cannes Film Festival in 2011. Without the contribution of any other professional components (in a conventional film production this is usually the film crew), he filmed a self-portrait as an unconventional full-length feature film in a cottage in the mountains all by himself. In addition to having the starring role, he found himself in the positions of director, writer, cameraman and film editor. Only his name appears in the credits at the end of the film. From a formal point of view, we cannot speak about a standard home video. Here there is the concept of a special filmed confession by a famous film director, who has found himself at an important crossroads in life and in terms of creativity while retreating into solitude to re-evaluate his life and creative experience so far. In a denuding self-critical self-portrait, he reviews his work and attitudes towards life, the film industry and directional experience. And we cannot forget that we are talking about a film maker who has won awards at the most prestigious festivals in the world (e.g. Cannes, Berlin and Venice). Just because of this, *Arirang*, in its honestly poignant nature, must have taken the breath away of admirers, critics and ill-wishing people. At the same time, the film tells us about solitude, the director's escape from the world, the depression of creating, psychological "burn-out" and trying to understand the purpose of life and art. It is a meditative contemplation about the state that the world finds itself in at the moment and where an individual stands within it; it is a reflection of the artist's position in society.

The talking on screen is held together by experimental editing and a dialogically alternating flow of motif lines. The sober Kim Ki-Duk, the critic, is asking the drunken and sentimental Kim Ki-Duk, the director, hard personal questions that he is trying to answer. As he states in the film, his aim was not to create a documentary as such but a drama with fantastical features. This is apparent from the scenes where someone is knocking on his door, but there is nobody standing there after he opens it. Kim Ki-Duk the critic plays the role of an imaginary alter ego in which he represents the voice of the public and the critics. He laughs at the pitiful Kim Ki-Duk, the director, who is aimlessly repeating his basic needs over and over again. Every day has a routine: in the morning he goes to the yard to get water, then he washes his face, makes coffee, adds wood to the fire, prepares his food and eats it, goes to sleep while pitying himself, gets drunk from time to time and sings. His very existence is some sort of mechanical operation: nothing more and nothing less. His alter ego (the critic) asks him why he lives this way. He is sure that his fans would pity him for his desolate appearance, but in reality they are all awaiting his new amazing film. Kim Ki-Duk the director admits that he cannot work at such a tempo as he did before, when he had made fifteen films over thirteen years. When one was still in postproduction, another was already in the works. He had set a pace stretching into obsession. But as he cannot live without film, he decided to shoot only footage of himself. Now he is the one who has become the actor of his own life story. He directed the

camera lens at himself, which happened, as he admits, for the very first time in his life. He states that the impulse for his retreat has to do with the shock and the awareness of self-responsibility that he suffered while shooting *Dream*, his fifteenth film. There was an accident in which an actress almost lost her life. In the storyline she was supposed to hang herself in the prison cell. She was rescued, but from that day something changed in Kim Ki-Duk. The director was crying in shock in the next cell and subsequently made a decision to film only himself from then on, creating a film confession about himself and his solitude and serving the audience a self-critical look into himself "from the point of view of the director, but also the human being". Moreover, his two assistants in direction left him right after that, going behind his back to work for a film studio company when he was at rock bottom. After Kim Ki-Duk states his major pains, the camera becomes a therapeutic mediator between the director as a patient and the director as a doctor who watches the recorded material again on the screen of his computer.

Over the course of the film, Kim Ki-Duk the director asks himself essential questions. Are films really so important that an actress would die for his ideas and conceptions or for his desire to bring realistic details into them? After finishing *Dream* and after the accident that affected him deeply, he ran away from the world and since 2008 he has lived in modest conditions in a small village in the mountains; he stars in his own film, which oscillates between the authentic recording of a psychotherapeutic session and a traumatic drama with elements of fiction. He is not dependent on anyone and is responsible for all of the creative components. Originally his new film was supposed to be about the mystical understanding of death as a gate between worlds. Now he perceives the absence of being as a transition from white to black. There is no wonder that he starts his monologue with a demanding "Ready! Action!" From his present point of view, he finds all of his previous films naïve, innocent and rushed. Some praise him for this, others criticise him mainly for his films being technically raw and rough. He admits that he does not need lights anymore, he abhors big film cameras and that he hates film designers and stylists. As he rushes himself into becoming the self-critical Kim Ki-Duk, the director, he repeats the same sentence all over again to underline how an actor is able to modulate emotion when interpreting a movie hero by intonation and the timbre of his voice. In this context, he angrily scolds hypothetical actors because it is always easier to portray negative emotions rooted deep down in everyone's unconscious mind, as he claims. With simulated anger and swear words, he wants to prove that he is as good a performer as anyone else. During his utterance he suddenly starts crying. Right in the next shot we can see Kim Ki-Duk again as he fixedly watches his hysterical, emotional and drunken doppelganger on the computer screen and is having a good time observing an outpouring of honest uneasiness. Once he regains peace, he relativises the urgency by claiming that his aim was to create a targeted auto-stylisation through which he wanted to bring dramatic emotions into the film. In the crying scene we can see in sequence how the three Kim Ki-Duks view the story differently. The authentic one cries, and the critical one is disgusted and sad about him. The third one, who watches the whole scene on the computer screen, cannot help laughing. Kim Ki-Duk varies these three views of himself on purpose. He wants to demonstrate three various approaches that the audience can play with. As an accomplished director, he is a master of controlling the emotional contribution of the audience. The layering of autobiographical details,

pretence and critical distance all characterise Kim Ki-Duk as a person or human being and as a director at the same time. We perceive him on three transpersonalised levels of his character as a professional artist. The intersection of filming methods and stage-managed moments with autobiographical ones creates a functional strain between authentic reality and stylisation, reality and the world of film, and truth and pretence.

In his own words, he really does not care about the audience possibly finding *Arirang* boring. Since his childhood he had felt alone, and after he became a director; his happiest moments in life took place while shooting films. International fame is of no importance to him, even though he loves travelling and world festivals. He finds it beyond reason that the Korean government would give him a national award for representing South Korea because the stories of his films are more socially critical than celebratory. He actually doubts that government representatives have even seen them. In a scene reminiscent of *Hamlet*, he looks into the dead eyes of a smoked fish while cutting pieces of flesh from its spine and eating them pensively. He finds consumer society to be built upon the principle of negative emotions and existential stress. People carry and create more negativity and stress by violently trying to subdue their sources. They eat killed plants and animals, which causes the concentration of stress in the human organism. All of the achievements of modern society, like mobile phones or nuclear bombs, have to do with the used potential that is immanently inherent in all living and non-living nature from the beginning of time.

In the following existential and philosophical dialogue, Kim Ki-Duk the human answers questions put to him by his own shadow. With the close detail of his face in profile, we can see how the shadow comments on the answers or nods. He asks him an essential question: "What is the most important thing in life according to you?" Kim Ki-Duk answers: "Life for me is sadism, self-torment and masochism." The qualitative synonyms of these three principles constantly appear in his films and are presented through a naturalistic and realistic framed form, whether this concerns various forms of self-torment, physical and psychological torment, or mental and bodily torment. Kim Ki-Duk's films are possessed by violence, the torment of others and self-torment; the basic propelling force of relationships between characters are emotions like love, hatred, revenge, greed and lust as well as humility, coping with stress and self-tormenting catharsis. They form the base of the film plot in *The Island* (2000), *Samaritans* (2004), *3 Iron* (2004), *Bow* (2005), *Time* (2006), *Breath* (2007) and others. But it is his movie *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter... and Spring* (2003) that best fits into the conception of *Arirang*. It is a story of a boy growing up with his old teacher in a floating Buddhist retreat placed in a middle of a rather small lake which functions as a straightforward metaphor of solitude and finding life's purpose. While still a child, he finds pleasure in tying a little stone to a frog which then cannot move and thus suffers and dies. By doing this he breaks the basic principle of Buddhist philosophy of not imposing suffering. After growing up, he falls in love with a girl and leaves the retreat only to return after some time and continue his life as a monk, thus fulfilling the legacy of his deceased teacher. In an emotionally stretched finale, the monk, in a purification gesture, ties a rope around his waist and hangs a stone wheel on it. He drags the wheel right to the top of a mountain upon a valley where the lake is situated. The scene is set in winter; the monk is half naked and holds a statue of Buddha in his hands. In a self-tormenting purification gesture, he climbs the top of the mountain where he sinks into meditation. The scene is naturalistic and the self-

torment is depicted in a realistic way; the emotions are enhanced by the accompanying music. Symbolically he refers to the realisation of the only truth, which is the rejection of the material world, and he points to the spiritual self-realisation built on Buddhist principles. This is the exact scene the director watches on his computer screen in *Arirang* when he starts crying again hysterically.

In the epilogue, Kim Ki-Duk returns to fiction built on a narration through scenery, just like we are used to when watching his films because they contain minimum of dialogues. But it is necessary to mention that the border between a documentary film and a piece of fiction is very thin in this case. Kim Ki-Duk makes a revolver using a scroll lathe and leaves for town. He stops his car three times, every time at a different place in a residential area. He makes sure if the gun is loaded, steps out of the car and leaves. The next scene shows the upper floors of a building, and we hear a gunshot. Emotionlessly, Kim Ki-Duk returns to his car and heads to a different place. After murdering three of his fictional enemies, possibly including his previously mentioned assistants, he turns the gun on himself in a self-destructive gesture. He shoots and the screen goes black. After that, for approximately the third time during the film, we can hear Kim Ki-Duk sing the lonely Korean song *Arirang*. Like some posthumous tribute, in front of our eyes we can see shots of all of Kim Ki-Duk's film posters, scripts and trophies from world film festivals, and later on some older photos of a tidy Kim Ki-Duk smiling at a film festival or moments from shooting. The personal film confession ends with a single title: "Kim Ki Duk".

And what does *Arirang* even mean? It is a lonely folklore ballad that people in Korea sing when they are sad or sorrowful. At the same time, it is a game that the director compares with life, which has its ups and downs, wherein humans live by climbing up and falling down, climbing and falling, up and down, up and down.

The film *Arirang* is a very personal philosophical lament about the purpose of life, human legacy, meditation about the role of art in the world, existential therapy and a self-critical polemic between the author and his present work. The film received the main prize in the Uncertain Regard section at the Cannes Film Festival in 2011 as well as a standing ovation from the two thousand people in the audience as a bonus. However, not all of the critics shared such amazement. One of the critics at Cannes wrote that he believed in the quick reconciliation of this talented Korean director and his return to normal films so that the everyday audience would also have something to watch.

Translated by Tomáš Štrbík

SUMMARY

This study attempts to trace the elements of self-critique that are connected with reflections on film by the film makers themselves. The first example alludes to the transition from critical thinking as the negation of the past to a new self-critical creative work that should no longer repeat the mistakes from the past, which is something film makers want to avoid in the future. The second example has to do with the functioning of a self-critical reflection of the film maker, who judges his own work after a certain period of time. Finally, the third example describes a self-critical situation that the film maker tried to translate to the audience through a communication medium that he knows best.