RISING ASIA JOURNAL
RISING ASIA FOUNDATION

RESEARCH ARTICLE

KELVIN KE JINDE
Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University

THE "DIVINITY" OF ART CINEMA AS A DISCIPLINARY POWER
The Case for Decolonizing Cinema Studies

ABSTRACT
This article argues that art cinema functions as a form of "disciplinary power" through the discourses and practices of film festivals, film criticism, and media institutions. It examines how these institutions deploy a discourse of "divinity" to construct social, cultural, and stylistic hierarchies. It also discusses how filmmakers are incentivized, economically and socio-culturally, to make films that conform to foreign taste regimes. This article is a decolonial rethinking of the presumed naturalness and neutralness of art cinema. The significance of this article lies not only in problematizing the use of divinity in art cinema to enact disciplinary power. It also lies in opening up a space to discuss and consider cinematic epistemologies beyond those authorized by dominant cultural institutions.

© RISING ASIA FOUNDATION 2026.

KEYWORDS
Cultural studies, film studies, art cinema, aesthetics, différance, disciplinary power

This essay argues that art cinema constructs a system of symbolic domination through institutionalized mystification, which operates analogously to religious structures to reinforce class, cultural taste, and global hierarchy. The reason for doing so is because art cinema is one of the most consequential yet misunderstood concepts in cultural history. The concept of art cinema is misunderstood because people think that it is merely a label to categorize films where actually it is used as a tool of social distinction. However, despite this point about art cinema, debates about how we should see art cinema, whether as a genre or intuitional practice, continue in critical and scholarly domains.

David Bordwell, for example, argues that we should see art cinema as "a distinct mode of film practice, possessing a definite historical existence, a set of formal conventions, and implicit viewing procedures."[1] But Steve Neale couches it in a competitive historical perspective, stating that art cinema grew out of attempts by European countries, namely, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, and Britain, to "counter American domination of their indigenous markets in film and also to foster a film industry and a film culture of their own."[2] However, Eleftheria

[1] David Bordwell, "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice," *Film Criticism* 4, no. 1 (1979): 56.

[2] Steve Neale, "Art Cinema as Institution," *Screen* 22, no. 1 (1981): 11

Thanouli believes that we should focus on the "historical poetics" of art cinema such as narration instead of trying to find a grand-theory to unite or universalize the diversity that is inherent with films labeled as art films.[3] But David Andrews argues that we should see art cinema from an institutional perspective that "relates the genre's diversity to its institutions, including the art house, the festival, and the discipline of film studies."[4] Apropos, Andrews defines art cinema as "an unfolding, super-generic event in which artists, promoters, and audiences typically reject a devalued, commercialized idea of the movie as a genre vehicle. Movies assigned to this category often secure their status through institutional means or through context-reliant canonical processes."[5] The hegemonies surrounding the creation and promotion of art cinema are inescapable.

As useful as a poetic/stylistic or institutional perspective is—in terms of helping us to see what is or is not art cinema, or who belongs or does not belong to art cinema, or even who or what deserves the label "art" to their name—I argue that a much more consequential, or perhaps more urgent, perspective is that of a socio-cultural and political approach towards the significance of art cinema in structuring and centering, as well as

[3] Eleftheria Thanouli, "'Art Cinema' Narration: Breaking down a Wayward Paradigm," *Scope: An Online Journal of Film and Television Studies* 14 (2009), 11.

[4] David Andrews, "Art Cinema as Institution, Redux: Art Houses, Film Festivals, and Film Studies," in *Theorizing Art Cinemas*, pp. 172-190 (University of Texas Press, 2013), 189.

[5] David Andrews, "Art as Genre as Canon. Defining 'Art Cinema,'" in *Theorizing Art Cinemas* (University of Texas Press, 2013), 13.

decentering who or what deserves the term and status of "art" and "artist." Importantly, by shifting away from aesthetics and industry, a socio-political approach re-orientates our perspective from the objects of affection (film styles and institutions) to the decision-makers who determine and decide the objects and subjects deserving of our affection. Indeed, we can certainly witness that some groups have used the idea, practice, consumption, and reception of art cinema to legitimize their cultural authority, while deciding who deserves to be called an artist and what deserves to be called art.

I argue that far from being a neutral term, "art cinema" often functions as a "sorting hat" or class marker that is used to express cultural preference and signal social status. Much like luxury goods or dietary choices that distinguish elites from the lower classes, critics and scholars use the label to align themselves with a certain socio-cultural identity. The result is that people assume that the term inherently signifies artistic excellence, rather than recognizing it as a reflection of the tastes and values of a particular social group. Indeed, the word "art" in art cinema does not imply universal genius, but a specific kind of excellence tied to the preferences of a class of people. But why is it important to recognize this aspect of art cinema? The reason is because whoever controls what is considered art controls not only the prestige but also the political, social, and cultural voice of other cultures around the world. This control can both influence and change how one sees oneself and how others see us according to the preferences and biases of external forces.

The following analysis draws on Jacques Derrida's concept of différance and Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power to understand art cinema as a form of cultural governance. It examines how art cinema operates through three institutional domains: film criticism in the media, academic discourse in universities, and curatorial practices in film festivals. By analyzing its cultural impact, the study reveals both the productive and limiting effects of art cinema. It also proposes ways to decolonize its influence, especially in non-Western contexts where the uncritical adoption of art cinema's values may obscure local artistic and cultural expressions.

1. Contextual Framework

Jacques Derrida's concept of différance helps us to understand the underlying matrix of power relations within language and language use.[6] Différance highlights the idea that words are often delayed or pushed aside, and/or made to show deference to other words. By highlighting these activities, words and meanings being made to submit or to de-prioritize to other words and meanings, Derrida's différance shows us that concepts, words, and ideas not only have a textbook or dictionary definition, but that words have a "positive" and "negative" dimension to them as well. For example, a man is a man because a man is not an animal. But he is also said to be superior to one. In this estimation, difference and ranked order are used to distinguish man from animals. The concept of différance forces us to be

[6] Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, Translated by David B. Allison (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

mindful that words, and the concepts that underpin them, encompass two dimensions to their construction and meaning. They are (a) is/is-not, and (b) ranked-order dimensions.[7] By being aware of such dimensions, différance makes us careful of treating words as neutral or take them for granted.

The concept of différance can also be seen in Friedrich Nietzsche's investigations of eighteenth-century German society and its associated morality influenced by Christian thought.[8] Specifically, Nietzsche blames Christianity for imparting what he considers to be deleterious effects of slave morality on the cultural mores of German society of his time. The philosopher was of the view that Christianity encourages submissiveness and obedience rather than agency and self-determination. This is reflected in his comparison between master morality and slave morality. Whereas the former stresses the will to power, courage, and initiative, the latter stresses passivity, meekness, and guilt. His analysis forces us to re-examine what constitutes "good," especially in relation to Christian thought. Specifically, the notion of morality is to be meek, docile, and obedient, whereas bad or "evil" in religion is to excel and do great things. Importantly, Nietzsche shows us that socio-cultural or religious values should not be taken for granted. While he takes a stringent approach towards Christianity, his approach reminds us to think not only about what something is, but also who benefits or does not

[7] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

[8] Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, translated by Michael A. Scarpitti (Penguin Books, 2014).

benefit from a given set of social norms, ethics, and values. Indeed, his work reminds us to be alert of the naturalization, or "taken for granted," of such values in society.

Erasure (French, *sous rature*) is a term that reminds us that words and their ideas are often erased or de-prioritized during or at the end of what occurs with différance. But there are many types of erasure. With writing, erasure usually means erasing a word or a fragment from the page. This is usually done using an eraser or correction fluid. With productivity software, this is usually done using the backspace or delete key. With all of these actions, erasure is to correct a mistake. But erasure can also mean under-erasure or to be erased. This can be seen whenever we see a word that is struck through (e.g. tree). Unlike the former where erasure is invisible, and where one is unable to see the initial error or mistake, the latter publicly shows the word that is marked out for erasure. To be under erasure is to be publicly seen to be erased. This visibility is not so much about correcting a mistake as it is about showing and telling those who see the to-be erased word that the said word is not only "wrong" but that another word is preferred in its place. In this sense, we get to see what is wrong or bad and what is correct or good. In what comes below, I argue that, following Derrida and Nietzsche, art cinema encompasses an is/is-not and ranked-order, and that it is necessary to examine these dimensions before we can really understand what art cinema is, and what it does as an artform.

2. The Invented Myth of Art Cinema

Art cinema has been used as a "sorting hat" to differentiate and rank people according to their film preferences or tastes. Taste is

used to determine class and, by extension, worth. As a result, the people that are most interested in advocating the superiority of art cinema, be it in terms of story and style, or in terms of moral or ethical worth, are the ones that tend to benefit from the acceptance of art cinema in wider society. But it is not sufficient enough to tell people why a certain class of film is better than others; one must create a mythology or mysticism about that certain class of film. To make people believe in the superiority of something or someone, one cannot just appeal to authority. Instead, one can combine authority with mysticism and mythology, even if they have to be invented and elaborated over the years. A myth is a traditional story that explains the world and human experience, often involving gods, heroes, and magical creatures. Myths are symbolic narratives that are often associated with religious beliefs and spirituality. Myths are often presented as authoritative and factual accounts, even if the narrated events are at variance with natural law or ordinary experience.

If what Walter Benjamin says is true,[9] in that we lose a certain sense of reverence or aura to religion, or to old traditions, because we are all living in a mechanical and by extension modern age (i.e. a rational and humanist centric world), then it also stands to reason that we also lose a certain sense of reverence or sense of awe to art itself, especially cinema. Art cinema, in order to seem superior to the masses, uses the oldest trick in the book to do so, which is to make "Man" God or the

[9] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

very least, divine. This strategy is engendered through the activities of four intersecting institutions: film production companies, news media, academia, and film festivals or awards ceremonies. The first is to create a set of words within a discourse of otherworldliness and divinity. Words like "auteur," "visionary," "art," "camera-stylo," "kino-eye," and "mise-en scene" become important codewords and in some cases incantations. Importantly, these words are paired with practical activities such as spectacles, praise, and honors. These activities are made into annual rituals which are themselves designed to simulate royal ceremonies and protocols (film festivals and awards). Think of the "red carpet."

In of itself, the red carpet is just a red carpet. But association with royalty and monarchy makes a walk down the red carpet symbolic and significant; specifically, by associating those who walk the carpet (filmmakers and actors) with royalty. So, what is the myth of art cinema? The myth of art cinema is that it is not only different from other kinds of cinema, but it is a divine form of cinema, and because it is divine it is "art." This trick is what underpins the *je ne se quoi* of art cinema. Now, having said that, this is not to say that art cinema has no intrinsic value. Rather, the aim here is to remind the reader that the words, practices, and activities of art cinema are designed to give art cinema an otherworldly and divine veneer. As enchanting as it may be, it will do us well not to be drawn too closely and to get entangled over what we actually have to indulge and give to extend the influence of art cinema as a social activity; which is,

essentially, to divide society based on taste, class, and ultimately, worth.

3. Church and Doctrine

The first thing that art cinema did (or at least its architects and supporters) was to convince the people that humans (filmmakers and celebrities) are godheads. While it is not exactly a ground-breaking tactic, it is nonetheless one of the oldest tricks in the world. By conferring otherworldliness and divinity to a person, the said person becomes automatically legitimized and authoritative. More importantly, they become unquestionable. And because he or she is unquestionable, they are "naturally" superior to not only other forms of cinema but also to other forms of human beings. But how to teach the masses what is, or is not, superior? Or more importantly, how to teach them what to consider divine? Namely, art cinema is the cinema of "auteurs." What is an auteur? Andrew Sarris's *Notes on the Auteur Theory* (1962) delineate what constitutes auteurship in terms of (a) technique, (b) style, and (c) "interior meaning" in art films.[10]

Alexandre Astruc's article *The Birth of a New Avant-garde: La Camera-Stylo* (1948) and his concept of the camera-stylo argues that "an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel" with a camera in cinema (para 3).[11]

---

[10] Andrew Sarris,"Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962," *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader* (2008): 35-45.

[11] Alexandre Astruc, "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Camera-Stylo," La Camera Stylo—Alexandre Astruc, accessed May 23, 2025, https://www.newwavefilm.com/about/camera-stylo-astruc.shtml

Specifically, Astruc uses the metaphor of the camera pen to advocate for a "different and individual kind of film-making" (para 9). Indeed, Astruc argues that filmmakers, especially good ones, treat films as "vehicles of thought" (para 10). This approach locates writing or personal expression as a unit of genius in cinema or specially, art cinema. But there is an error in reasoning. First, it is clear, to anyone who has ever watched an art film, that not all ideas are good ideas. Secondly, by the same token, just because it is personal does not make one's idea any better or superior or moral to others. But this idea of the solo artist is extended and elaborated with another influential article.

Francois Truffaut's notion of auteurs is explicitly expressed in his famous article, *A Certain Tendency*.[12] Indeed, the use of the word policy, as seen in Andre Bazin's article *La Politique Des Auteurs (The Policy of the Authors)*, suggests a certain preference and promotion of a manifesto or doctrine, and indicates the desire to shift and situate the film director as the center of a film; and by extension as being the rightful possessor of power.[13] In other words, the auteur theory relocates and centers anything that is good about a film to the person. But there is sleight of hand at work here. Because what is good about a film is due to the person making it, nominally the director, then, by extension, it

[12] Francois Truffaut, "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema" (*Une Certaine Tendance of Cinema Francaise*), accessed May 23, 2025, https://www.newwavefilm.com/about/a-certain-tendency-of-french-cinema-truffaut.shtml

[13] André Bazin, "La Politique Des Auteurs," accessed May 23, 2025, https://www.newwavefilm.com/about/la-politique-des-auteurs-bazin.shtml

also means that what is good about a film is because of the good that comes from the person. In other words, through association, if a film talks about social injustices, it must be that the film director is fighting social injustice; and is thus "naturally" an intellectual, moral, and virtuous person. And through association, the morality tale of the film becomes affixed or attached to the man (or woman) said to be responsible for the film.

But just because one makes a film that addresses social injustice, it does not make one more moral or ethical or political or prosocial than the other. At the same time, it does not mean highlighting issues implies that one is more moral or worthier. By the same token, whatever solutions are proposed to solve real-world issues, by filmmakers, may not be the most suitable or even reasonable. To be sure, this is not to dismiss or discount artistic intentions. But these principles, having been expressed, have now become accepted as "truths" in society, if not least in academia. Hence, it must be our duty as analysts to call out the inconsistency or illogical reasoning of ideas that have great influence in social and cultural affairs, especially when it involves the formation of a social order. It is especially important to do so because these ideas have helped to generate, legitimize, and sustain a whole class of "art cinema" clergymen and are embodied by film critics. Accordingly, Huw Walmsley-Evans argues that we can and should think of film criticism and, by

extension, film critics, as being part of a larger set of institutional practices.[14]

4. Clergy and Scholarship

For art cinema to claim supremacy, it is not enough to assert that one is making art. Instead, one needs "hype-men" or salesmen to sell the art. In this sense, the artist class needs a *critical or scholarly class* to play the role of hype-men. But while it is obvious that the artist class benefits commercially, what benefits are gained by the critical and scholarly class? Namely, social influence but, by extension and in small doses, political influence. By associating with the "artist" class, the critical/scholarly class plays a similar role as prophets or oracles of old where their words and opinions carry weight and influence. Given that religion plays a big role in society, it is not surprising to see its influence in shaping the discourse and practices of art cinema. Specifically, we can find the influence of religion in art cinema in the ways it pays respect to mystical conceptions of art cinema and the auteur. The use of "scripture"—much like religion—is the key to the mystification of art cinema, and it is "scripture" that shapes the way we understand what counts as "art" in cinema. In this context, film critics, scholars, and curators are not simply commentators on cinema; they act as interpreters, gatekeepers, and evangelists, performing roles that closely resemble those of religious figures.

[14] Huw Walmsley-Evans, *Film Criticism as a Cultural Institution* (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2019).

The idea of art cinema having its own "scripture" may seem exaggerated at first, but when we examine how the canon of art films has developed, the comparison holds weight. Just as the *Bible* is not a single book but a collection of writings that were selected, debated, and interpreted over centuries, the "canon" of great art cinema is also the product of critical and scholarly curation. Works by filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard, Ingmar Bergman, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Wong Kar Wai, and many others, have become sacred texts of sorts not only because of the films themselves, but because of how they have been written about.

The essays of André Bazin, Laura Mulvey, or Susan Sontag, among others, become interpretive tools, much like sermons or theological exegesis, guiding audiences on how to see, what to admire, and what to reject. In this light, with these paratexts, film critics and scholars take on a priestly role. While they are not creators of the sacred works themselves, their interventions and interpretations, in terms of their writing, mediate the relationship between the audience and the "divine" realm of art. Film reviews, columns, and essays in broadsheets, academic journals, and popular magazines, become the tools that the critical and scholar class uses to educate the public about the moral and aesthetic values of art cinema. They explain, for instance, why certain films are virtuous, complex, subtle, and politically aware, and why other (usually commercial blockbusters) are vulgar, simplistic, or corrupting. Just as priests deliver sermons on the virtues of humility and sacrifice, these critics preach the virtues of long takes, minimal dialogue, and narrative

ambiguity. Just as the Church has its Bishops, Archbishops, and Popes, so too does art cinema have its tiers of critical authority.

But the critical and scholar class not only clue us into the aesthetics of films, they also clue us into the social structure of art cinema in broader society as well. A review in *The New York Times* or *Cahiers du Cinéma* carries more symbolic weight than a blog post, just as a sermon at St. Peter's Basilica holds more influence than a local Sunday service. Critics with cultural capital, those invited to jury panels at festivals or asked to contribute to museum retrospectives help decide not only what gets seen, but what gets remembered. They preserve the canon and add to it, constructing lineages of influence and taste that others follow. Of course, like all religious systems, this structure can be both empowering and exclusionary. Indeed, the art cinema world is evidently vibrant and thriving and offers audiences a richer, deeper understanding of cinema. But it can also limit access, reinforcing certain norms and excluding others.

The reason is the "priests" of art cinema often come from similar cultural, educational, or economic backgrounds, and their views, however well-intentioned, can—and in many cases have—become a form of orthodoxy. A film that does not conform to the established criteria of what art cinema should look like may be dismissed as unserious, even if it offers innovation or emotional truth.

But it is not enough to have a doctrine or a clergy. Instead, one must have a presence in wider society to legitimize and institutionalize one's beliefs and reasons for existing in the world. As a result, pageantry, rituals, and spectacle are the

mechanisms through which public actions convey the otherworldliness and divinity of art cinema to the masses.

To understand how the distinctions between art cinema and popular cinema are maintained, we can turn to Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power.[15] Foucault argued that modern societies regulate individuals not merely through top-down repression, but through institutions, discourses, and norms that shape what is seen as acceptable or desirable. Art cinema, in this sense, is not just a genre but a disciplinary formation. Film schools, critics, and festivals function like the panopticon, not as overt enforcers, but as quiet authorities of taste. They train viewers and filmmakers alike to internalize certain aesthetic values (ambiguity, slow pacing, minimalism) and reject others (sentimentality, formulaic structure). These disciplinary practices do not simply distinguish art cinema; they produce it as a social and intellectual identity. In doing so, they reinforce class-based distinctions under the guise of refined cultural capital. We can see them in action at film festivals.

5. Institutions and Pageantry

Film festivals are the most obvious sites of witnessing the disciplinary power of art cinema. Indeed, they are not only cultural institutions. They also enact socio-political power through their selection, promotion, and celebration of certain types of films, especially through funding and programming, or

[15] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 2012).

even through retrospectives and special screenings.[16] But film festivals do not only show movies. They also celebrate selected filmmakers whom the organizers and judges deem to represent what they consider to be high-art. Celebratory proceedings, especially when it involves the press or media, become pageantry. Indeed, pageantry plays an important role in helping art cinema to become seen as an otherworldly and mystical practice.

We only need to look at how the proceedings and protocols of film festivals simulate the proceedings and protocols of royal coronations, ceremonies, and assorted activities. First, the very action on the red-carpet makes everyone conscious of the idea that those who walk the red fabric are "royalty." Second, on a very crude level, the fact that masses of people gather and sit in a dark theatre, and where everyone is expected to keep quiet and look up at the big screen, functions very much as if one were at a sermon. Third, if it were an award ceremony, the entire judging process and award-giving moments, all signal to the world that one "must" or "should" bow and worship a given filmmaker or auteur. Later, scholars and critics will write books and articles about the said auteur. The result of all of these actions is designed, intentionally or not, for people to worship the mysticism and mythology of the "auteur."

Now, it is important to note that one is not talking about a specific filmmaker per se, but the manner in which film festivals keep alive the idea of the "auteur" in people's minds. Indeed, in the grand scheme of things, it is not a human being that is

[16] Marijke de Valck, Brendan Kredell, and Skadi Loist, *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice* (London: Routledge, 2016).

important. Rather, it is keeping alive the concept of the auteur that is important, because without it, the entire edifice and construct would weaken and cease to exist in the long run. Much like how most find it hard to accept that current members of royalty are descended from God or are divine creatures, it would be disadvantageous for the prestige of art cinema, and everyone associated with it, if people start to doubt its authenticity and origins. Instead, it is of everyone's interests that art cinema continues to be seen as something deep, meaningful, and mysterious. In this sense, a film festival is not just the films themselves that make art cinema feel special. It is also the rituals and pageantry around it, such as the red carpets, film festivals, fancy clothes, and awards. These external activities, images, and proceedings make art cinema feel otherworldly and seem mystical.

At major film festivals like Cannes or Venice, there are official selections, golden trophies, and juries made up of famous directors and critics. The way people dress, speak, and behave at these events is full of rules and traditions. This creates an atmosphere where the films being shown seem important and sacred as if we should watch them with seriousness and respect. Importantly, these rituals socialize us to learn that art cinema is different from regular movies. As a result, we are encouraged to watch art films more slowly and think about them more deeply. If you are a filmmaker, getting your film into a big festival can be like being knighted, it tells the world your work matters. But all this ceremony can also, and quickly, become just a show. The red carpet, the flash of cameras, and the celebrity buzz can make

festivals feel more like fashion shows or business deals than places for real artistic discovery.

Sometimes, the same kinds of films get chosen over and over again—usually serious, quiet, sad films from certain countries that fit the "art film" image. Other creative voices, especially from underrepresented groups or regions, can get ignored. So, the rituals can close doors as much as they open them. This is where French philosopher Michel Foucault helps us understand what is going on. Foucault said that power is not just about governments or laws. Power is everywhere; it shows up in the way we talk, in rules, in who gets seen and who does not. So, when a festival picks certain films and not others, it is not just a taste decision. It is a form of power that shapes what we think is "good," "important," or "real art." Another thinker, Pierre Bourdieu, said that the world of culture (including film) is full of what he called cultural capital.[17] This means that liking certain types of art gives people status because knowing about foreign art films can make someone seem more sophisticated.

Festivals use their rituals to help create and protect that kind of status. But that also means they sometimes ignore voices that donot "fit" their idea of what counts as high art. The French writer Roland Barthes talked about how culture creates myths.[18] These are not lies, but stories we believe without realizing it. For example, the idea that a serious, slow film from Europe is

[17] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice and Tony Bennett (London: Routledge, 2015).

[18] Roland Barthes, Annette Lavers, and Siân Reynolds, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 2009).

"deeper" than a loud, funny movie from Asia or Africa might be a myth created by the way festivals are run. Finally, Guy Debord warns us that modern life has become a spectacle and a world of images where everything is about how things look, not what they really mean.[19] Film festivals can fall into this trap too. They sometimes focus more on how things appear than what is actually being said, or how logically or rigorously they are presented.

Despite these problems, the solution is not to throw away rituals or cancel festivals. Rituals can be beautiful and meaningful. But we need to ask questions about them. Who decides which films get shown? Who gets invited? What kinds of stories are left out? To answer these questions, as analysts, we have to look beyond the red carpet and see carefully what is being said and what is not, or importantly, what is being selected and what is not.

6. Moralization through Stylistics

Art cinema, from its earliest moments, has positioned itself as not only aesthetically distinct from mainstream or commercial cinema, but also morally superior. Andre Bazin, the famous French film critic, was particularly influential in promoting and pushing the idea that high-art cinema should be concerned with realism and ambiguity, as shown in Jean Renoir's films.[20] Peter

[19] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, translated by Fredy Perlman (Detroit, Michigan: Black & Red; AK Press, 2018).

[20] André Bazin and François Truffaut, *Jean Renoir,* edited with an introduction by François Truffaut, translated from the French by W.W. Halsey II and William H. Simon (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973).

Matthews argues that Bazin particularly favored long takes combined with the technique of deep-focus cinematography. Why? The reason is because "the audience has to decide for itself what is meaningful or interesting."[21] But it is not simply a matter of taste or style; the formal qualities of art cinema, its long takes, ambiguous narratives, sparse dialogue, and meditative pacing, are often perceived as ethical choices, expressions of a deeper integrity or seriousness. By resisting spectacle and formula, art cinema asserts itself as a cinema of authenticity, reflection, and conscience. Unlike commercial films, which often aim to entertain, excite, or comfort audiences, art films are frequently said to challenge viewers. They demand patience, provoke thought, and often withhold resolution. These very traits have come to be associated not only with aesthetic refinement but with moral or intellectual virtue. A viewer who sits through a slow, non-linear film is seen not just as cultured, but as morally attuned and willing to engage with ambiguity, to confront discomfort, to resist easy pleasures. In this schema, to enjoy art cinema is not merely to enjoy art; it is to be a "better" viewer.

This moral claim is deeply tied to art cinema's stylistic conventions. The long take, for example, is often valorized for its honesty: it refuses manipulation, allowing time and space to unfold organically. The absence of musical cues or sentimental soundtracks is read as emotional restraint, a refusal to tell the audience what to feel. Minimalism in acting, realist settings, and

[21] Peter Matthews, "Divining the Real: The Leaps of Faith in André Bazin's Film Criticism," BFI, April 17, 2018, para 24, https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/features/divining-real-leaps-faith-andre-bazins-film-criticism

non-professional actors are interpreted as ethical gestures toward truth, life as it is. In contrast, commercial cinema with its fast cuts, swelling music, and emotional manipulation is cast as dishonest or corrupt, catering to baser instincts. Such assumptions are reinforced by the way film scholars and critics frame art cinema. Thinkers like André Bazin praised realism and ambiguity as morally and philosophically superior to spectacle. Béla Tarr, Abbas Kiarostami, and Chantal Akerman are often cited not just for their artistry, but for their humanism for creating films that respect time, space, and the inner lives of characters. The very slowness of their cinema is seen as a political and ethical act: a refusal to commodify time, to reduce life to plot points.

Appropriately, this moral economy of style deserves interrogation. To associate formal austerity with moral virtue is itself a kind of aesthetic dogma. It risks turning certain styles into ethical clichés, where slow equals serious, bleak equals honest, and silence equals depth. It also creates a system where films that do not conform to this minimalist aesthetic, or films that use color, music, or emotion in expressive ways, may be dismissed as less sincere or sophisticated. This excludes many global traditions of cinema, including melodrama, popular genre films, and hybrid forms, which may offer equally powerful ethical or political insights through different formal means. Indeed, this supposed purity of art cinema often ignores its own structures of privilege and power. The very ability to make a slow, contemplative film often depends on funding, festival support, and cultural capital. Art cinema may claim moral superiority, but it often circulates within elite spaces; museums, film festivals, and

art house cinemas, places that are far removed from the everyday reality of most audiences. Its moral stance can sometimes function more as signaling than substance: a way to mark one's distance from mass culture rather than a genuine engagement with moral questions.

Virtue signaling in art cinema refers to the way certain films, filmmakers, critics, or institutions demonstrate moral or political righteousness, not necessarily to provoke real change or engage deeply with ethical questions, but to gain cultural status, critical approval, or social capital. In other words, moral or aesthetic seriousness becomes a performance or a way to show that a film (or its audience) is "above" mainstream entertainment, more intelligent, or more culturally refined. Art cinema often uses slow pacing, minimal dialogue, handheld cameras, or non-professional actors as stylistic markers. While these techniques can create powerful emotional and political experiences, they are sometimes used more as signals of seriousness or moral depth. A film that avoids spectacle may be automatically seen as more "ethical" or "truthful," even if it does not engage with its subject matter in a meaningful or critical way. For example, a film that lingers in long takes of poverty or suffering without offering any critical reflection may be more interested in showing that it cares than in actually interrogating the issues it presents. Or worse, the solutions that it proposes are not necessarily innovative or groundbreaking.

At major film festivals, films dealing with oppression, trauma, or marginalization, especially when presented with a certain aesthetic minimalism, are often awarded and celebrated.

This can encourage a kind of formula: filmmakers know that if they depict suffering in a "quiet," "beautiful," and "serious" way, they are more likely to gain festival attention. These depictions can lead to trauma being aestheticized. That is, trauma is used not to empower or challenge, but to signal empathy and earn cultural credibility. By extension, with these films, critics and scholars sometimes participate in virtue signaling by using moral language to defend certain films: calling them "necessary," "urgent," or "courageous," even when the film's actual engagement with politics or ethics is surface-level. The critic's praise becomes a way to display their own ethical refinement and their own calculated alignment with progressive values or artistic purity rather than an honest appraisal of the film's impact. Virtue signaling thus creates in-groups and out-groups. Because commercial or genre films, be they comedies, horror, or musicals, are often dismissed as morally or intellectually shallow, even when they address social issues creatively or subversively, the assumption and bias is that only slow, ambiguous, or non-commercial films can speak seriously about the world. As a result, this reinforces elitism and the idea that audiences that enjoy "lesser" films are seen as less thoughtful or less ethical, simply because of their tastes.

7. Political Unconscious

Fredric Jameson's concept of the political unconscious proposes that all cultural texts, however apolitical they may appear, are

structured by deep ideological tensions.[22] For Jameson, texts are not merely reflections of the world but symbolic resolutions of real, material contradictions. The "political unconscious" refers to the way cultural forms encode repressed or unacknowledged historical forces, especially those pertaining to class struggle, economic inequality, and political power. In this view, even the most aesthetically abstract or formally radical work participates, consciously or not, in ideological processes. Art cinema, with its celebrated ambiguity, slowness, and resistance to conventional narrative closure, has long been framed as a counterpoint to Hollywood's spectacle and consumerism. Yet, these very formal features can be read through the lens of Jameson's theory as encoding a distinct bourgeois ideology, one that reflects and reaffirms the sensibilities of a global elite.

In privileging ambiguity over clarity, austerity over affect, and alienation over resolution, art cinema performs not just an aesthetic gesture but a social one. It positions its audience as culturally refined, intellectually superior, and politically discerning, even when its content may be emotionally sparse or narratively opaque. Consider again the slow cinema movement, often praised for its meditative pace and resistance to capitalist time. While such qualities may be interpreted as anti-commercial or critical of modern alienation, they may also reveal a political unconscious structured by bourgeois privilege: the luxury of time, the abstraction of suffering, and the aestheticization of poverty. Films like those of Béla Tarr or Tsai Ming-liang, while

[22] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 2002).

politically potent in some contexts, risk becoming artifacts of "misery chic" when consumed by global festival audiences more interested in affective intensity than political change. These films aestheticize hardship, often without directly engaging the conditions that produce it, thus satisfying a desire for depth without the discomfort of critique.

Art cinema's global circulation through festivals and arthouse circuits reflects a cosmopolitan desire to possess cultural otherness while maintaining intellectual and moral superiority. This consumption of difference—stylized, controlled, and distanced—reveals a deeper ideological structure that masks itself as openness. In this way, the refusal of narrative resolution mirrors a refusal to confront ideological totality: art cinema displaces political clarity with formal elusiveness, turning systemic contradiction into existential confusion. Jameson's theory allows us to see that aesthetic form is never neutral. The very structures of art cinema, what it valorizes and what it suppresses, are shaped by political forces, even when they appear to resist them. The political unconscious of art cinema is the very condition of its cultural intelligibility. To watch an art film is thus to participate in a tacit ideology and, therefore, one that must be critically unpacked, not simply admired.

8. Art Cinema as a Tool for Cultural Imperialism

Rey Chow calls the "coercive mimeticism" of the global gaze the compulsion placed on postcolonial subjects to perform their cultural identity in forms legible to hegemonic, usually Western,

spectators.[23] This dynamic intersects with what Arjun Appadurai conceptualizes as the disjunctive flows of globalization in terms of the "ethnoscapes," "technoscapes," "mediascapes," "financescapes," and "ideoscapes," which unevenly shape the cultural imagination.[24] Within the mediascape of global art cinema, filmmakers from the Global South are drawn into a structure where representation is filtered through the aesthetic codes of international visibility. The "ideoscape" of cosmopolitan liberalism and with its values of tolerance, diversity, and soft humanism prescribes a politically palatable form of difference, one that is depoliticized, visually restrained, and emotionally muted.

In this context, "coercive mimeticism" operates through the mediascape's ideological machinery, requiring local filmmakers to frame their own cultures in ways that fulfil the global expectation of 'authenticity' without unsettling dominant aesthetic sensibilities. Art cinema's long takes, ambient silences, and elliptical narratives, all hallmarks of the global festival circuit, become part of what Appadurai might call a transcultural technoscape, where the technologies of production and distribution align with global tastes, not local traditions. These scapes do not exist in harmony; their disjunctures create pressures that artists must navigate, often at the cost of fidelity to their own

[23] Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

[24] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

cultural epistemologies. As such, the cosmopolita-nism promoted by global art cinema circuits risks reterritoriali-zing native expression into a narrow corridor of globally consu-mable forms.

What is lost is not simply local color or folklore, but the very ways of knowing, feeling, and relating to time, space, and narrative that emerge from within the community. The native becomes intelligible only through the lens of the foreign gaze, and cultural expression becomes mediated through what Appad-urai calls the "imagined worlds" constructed by global audiences. The global imagination, in this case, not only absorbs but reconfigures the local, shaping what can be seen, heard, and validated. Thus, the scapes that Appadurai identifies are not neutral. They operate with structural asymmetries, privileging certain flows and stifling others. In the political unconscious of art cinema, these asymmetries naturalize the dominance of a cosmopolitan aesthetic, while masking the gradual erosion of vernacular lifeworlds. The tension between global legibility and local rootedness becomes a site of negotiation, but also of loss or a slow forgetting, not only of indigenous forms, but of the very conditions that make them intelligible to their own people.

This tension between global legibility and local rooted-ness is exemplified in the work of Apichatpong Weerasethakul, whose films, in particular *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010), have been widely celebrated on the international film festival circuit. His use of long takes, ambient sound, and elliptical narrative aligns closely with the aesthetic markers of global art cinema. Yet, while Apichatpong often gestures toward

local cosmologies, animist beliefs, and rural Thai life, these elements are abstracted, stylized, and rendered deliberately opaque as if designed to preserve mystery rather than political specificity. Under Rey Chow's framework of coercive mimeticism, we might read this stylistic ambiguity as a kind of double bind: the director must evoke a sense of cultural alterity to remain 'authentic' to global audiences, but that alterity must also be packaged in a modernist aesthetic that distances the local from its own material conditions. In Appadurai's terms, this reflects a deeper disjuncture between the ideoscape of liberal cosmopolitanism and the ethnoscape of Thailand's lived realities, where military coups, censorship, and rural marginalization persist beneath the surface of dreamy, meditative cinema.

The political unconscious of Apichatpong's work lies not in its overt content but in what it displaces: the local struggles against authoritarianism, the tensions between Buddhist myth and state violence, and the class dynamics of rural Thailand, which are subsumed under the aesthetic expectations of a global festival circuit hungry for the "exotic sublime." His films may quietly allude to these tensions such as the spectral presence of soldiers in *Tropical Malady* or the jungle as a space of resistance, but they remain muted, metaphorical, and abstract, palatable to international audiences who seek a contemplative otherness rather than a disruptive politics. Thus, even in a celebrated case like Apichatpong's, we can see how the flows of the global mediascape and financescape (film grants, distribution networks, curatorial tastes) shape what is made visible and what remains occluded. The vernacular does not disappear but it is re-coded

through the symbolic grammar of the global, rendered into an aestheticized "native" that is legible within the constraints of transnational art cinema. In this light, Appadurai's scapes do not merely map the movement of culture; they illuminate the structures of power that choreograph which stories are told, and how.

9. Sight and Sound's Greatest Films as Examples

In this section, I use *Sight and Sound's* "The Greatest Films of All Time" list to argue my thesis that it is crucial for us to re-examine the underlying assumptions of cinematic representations from a non-western or European perspective.[25] Published every ten years by the British Film Institute, this list indicates the kind of films deemed by critics and filmmakers as what constitute "greatness" or high art in films. David Andrews suggests that art cinema taps "into a very human preference for status and hierarchy," and that art cinema can be defined "as an ongoing set of events impelled by an aspirational idea of cinema."[26] But we need to ask the following questions: Whose aspirations? Who, or what, are we aspiring towards?

While David Andrew suggests that "high-art just happens,"[27] I argue that nothing comes from nothing, and that what is art is often art according to the opinion of whoever is in power, or

[25] "The Greatest Films of All Time," BFI, accessed July 31, 2025, http://bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/greatest-films-all-time#rank-225

[26] David Andrews, "Art as Genre as Canon: Defining 'Art Cinema,'" in *Theorizing Art Cinemas* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2013), 21-22.

[27] Ibid., 13.

at least, according to the opinions of cultural gatekeepers and opinion leaders of the world. From this perspective, a work of art is only art if, and only if, the "experts" say it is art. Now, having said that, this is not to devalue the intrinsic value of an artwork. Rather, it is only to point out the determining power of critics or the critical community to determine value for the rest. To make my argument, due to personal reasons, I use the list compiled by *Sight and Sound* to focus only on the Asian films ranked in the top fifty. The Asian films in the top fifty are as follows: *Rashomon* (rank 41), *Pather Panchali* (rank 35), *Late Spring* (rank 21), *Seven Samurai* (rank 20), *In the Mood for Love* (rank 5), and *Tokyo Story* (rank 4).

While one can hardly argue against the idea that these are perhaps some of the finest films made by Asian filmmakers, it is also important not to be seduced by accolades or critical acclaim, and to look at the thing in of itself, and understand the reasons and implications of said accolades and acclaim. For example, one is generally praiseworthy when one obeys the rules and regulations of a company or enterprise. But is one truly deserving of praise when the rules of the company enable things that, in the end, will pollute the environment? In this instance, one is "good" when one obeys the company's rules, and one is "bad" when one disobeys said rules and regulations. Likewise, the analyst benefits from a wider picture, or when he or she sees clearly what exactly is being praised as "high-art," and the ways it affects how Asians are made to see themselves, and how others see Asia as a whole.

Rey Chow's notion of coercive mimeticism comes to mind when we see *In the Mood for Love* (rank 5) and *Tokyo Story* (rank 4)

ranked within the top ten. Specifically, we can see how these two films seem to essentialize or exoticize, or to a certain extent, eroticize Oriental cultures. Even more specifically, exoticize and eroticize Japanese and Chinese (Hong Kong) societies and cultures through their narratives and stylistics. Now, one does not mean to say that these films are undeserving of their place or praise. But one is impelled to examine the implications of that which is praised and used as benchmarks for all other Asian films. Indeed, one is impelled to ask what kind of "Asia" is being praised here, and what kind of "good" is being praised about its representations. To be sure, generalization is not the hallmark of good scholarship. But, given the context and scope here, one risks censure by adopting generalization to make the point that it is important to decouple authority from criticality, and de-power authority from art.

10. The Imaginary of Asia as Soft, Passive, Submissive, and Insalubrious

Many critics, scholars, filmmakers, and viewers highly value 5th ranked *In the Mood for Love, directed by Wong Kar Wai*, and 4th-ranked *Tokyo Story, directed by Yasujiro Ozu.* Their directors are rightly hailed as among Asia's best. Yet, within the context of this article, it is argued that these films construct a vision of East Asia that is negative. Specifically, these films emphasize passivity, emotional repression, and resignation. *In the Mood for Love* centers on a middle-aged man and woman who, despite learning of their spouses' infidelities, choose to suffer silently rather than pursue personal happiness. While critics admire its visual elegance, thematic ambiguity, and restraint, the characters

remain emotionally stagnant and trapped by indecision. The film's stylized eroticism often masks the deeper portrayal of psychological inertia and unfulfilled lives.

Similarly, *Tokyo Story* tells of an elderly couple quietly enduring emotional neglect by their adult children. Though praised for its minimalist realism and formal subtlety, the film presents its protagonists as passive and resigned. It romanticizes filial piety while lamenting modernization, suggesting that social progress comes at the cost of traditional values. These films are undoubtedly masterful, but they raise uncomfortable questions: Why does greatness in Asian cinema involve stories of emotional suppression, melancholy, and helplessness? Why is such an Asia praised?

While these films are, correctly, celebrated for their aesthetics, global critical acclaim may, consciously or not, reward representations of Asia that conform to orientalist tropes where Asian characters are stoic, subdued, and resigned to their fate. This imaginary not only exoticizes emotional suffering, but also establishes it as a cinematic standard for Asian storytelling, influencing how Asian cultures are represented, and how future films are evaluated. Specifically, it is but another form of othering, or, as Edward Said would say, a form of Orientalism.[28]

As a result, from the perspective of Orientalism, *In the Mood for Love* and *Tokyo Story*, putting aside their technical or stylistic innovations and achievements, are great precisely because they show an erotic and exotic Asia that is filled with passive and submissive East Asian people. Indeed, despite rapid

[28] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2021).

development, modernization and Westernization, the East Asian experience is often presented as somnolent, prosaic, and ultimately, undesirable. Now, as trite as these descriptions are, we must remember that this critical framework, whereby greatness is marked, can also be seen in the rest of the Asian films in the list. Indeed, this imagination of Asia colors the perspective and practices of critics, scholars, and filmmakers in relation to the Asian experience. Crucially, and quietly, this imagination is also often used as a benchmark for greatness, or art, in Art cinema.

11. Limitations

Several limitations underpin the argument that art cinema acts as a disciplinary force that promotes cultural conformity. First, art cinema lacks a centralized authority, weakening claims of systemic control. Second, it assumes a lack of universal aesthetic ideals, a contested premise. Third, it challenges the supposed aesthetic and philosophical superiority of art cinema. Fourth, it questions the influence of critics and scholars, potentially undervaluing their cultural role. Fifth, it casts doubt on the legitimacy of art cinema's proponents despite their institutional authority. Sixth, critiques of auteur worship and celebrity culture risk overlooking the symbolic value of artistic labor. Lastly, it overgeneralizes art cinema as lacking stylistic and narrative diversity.

12. Conclusion

It is not the intent here to dismiss the intrinsic value of art cinema. Rather, it is to re-examine and reveal its role in

disciplining and reinforcing the global aesthetic. In a world shaped by political and economic pressures, it is vital to question the political unconscious of art and how global cinema is incentivized to conform, often at the cost of local expression. Indeed, the aim is to defend cinematic plurality against the rise of a homogenized global art cinema. But resistance also means redefining artistic value beyond dominant canons, challenging norms equating art with slowness or pessimism, and critically examining the institutional construction of art cinema. Doing so deepens our understanding of taste, cultural capital, and social hierarchy, while confronting lingering colonial influences in cultural discourse. To critique art cinema is not to reject it, but to reclaim agency and expose its disciplinary role within global film culture.

Note on the Author

Kelvin Ke Jinde is Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University. An award-winning writer and media practitioner, he received the Departmental Teaching Excellence Award in 2024, and the Industry Engagement Champion Award in 2025. His research focuses on film, cultural studies, and intangible cultural heritage. As a practitioner, he works across filmmaking, arts curation, and time-based media. Kelvin is especially interested in the role of the arts as a mode of social activity and public engagement, exploring how creative practices intersect with community, identity, and heritage through both academic inquiry and creative production.