

Tuijin Jishu/Journal of Propulsion Technology

ISSN: 1001-4055



<http://propulsiontechjournal.com>

Beyond the Frames: Decoding John Crowley's Artistic Signature in *The Goldfinch* through Filmic Vision

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Abstract

Film as a complex and multidimensional art form offers a canvas for artistic expression, narrative exploration and cultural reflection. Within the realm of film studies, auteur theory has emerged as a foundational principle placing the director at the forefront as the primary creative force shaping the film. The paper entitled, “Beyond the Frames: Decoding John Crowley’s Artistic Signature in *The Goldfinch* through Filmic Vision” delves into the fascinating domain of film studies by applying auteur film theory to *The Goldfinch*, a cinematic masterpiece directed by John Crowley. The film, an adaptation of Donna Tartt’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Goldfinch* serves as a rich canvas to examine the director’s imprint and analyze how Crowley’s unique auteurial style informs the narrative, lending depth and coherence to the film. The paper presents an in-depth exploration of *The Goldfinch* through the lens of auteur film theory. The study aims to dissect and analyze the director’s distinct imprint on the film, showcasing how Crowley’s unique style, thematic inclinations and directorial choices echo the essence of auteurism. By examining various facets of the film including narrative structure, visual aesthetics and character development, this research seeks to illuminate the director’s auteurial vision and the extent to which it enriches the film’s cinematic experience. The paper examines the pivotal scenes, directorial decisions and stylistic elements that bear the signature of Crowley’s auteurial influence. This research underscores the applicability of auteur film theory in understanding the director’s role as a creative powerhouse in the realm of cinema and showcases the art of filmmaking as an avenue for profound personal expression and artistic vision.

Keywords: Auteurial Imprint, Cinematic Narrative, Filmic Vision, Thematic Resonance, Visual Aesthetics, Film Studies.

Introduction

Adaptations of literary works into films have always been a fascinating realm of exploration to filmmakers. One of the most critical aspects of such adaptations is how the director interprets and transforms the source material into a cinematic experience. John Crowley's adaptation of Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* offers an interesting case study when viewed through the lens of the auteur film theory. The film showcases Crowley's adeptness at crafting a narrative that breathes life into the canvas of cinema, while also highlighting the intricate challenge of translating the essence of a renowned painting into moving imagery.

When adapting a literary work for the screen, filmmakers face the challenge of translating a complex narrative, rich character development and intricate themes into a visual medium. Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* presents such a challenge with its dense prose and deep exploration of the human condition. The essence of auteur theory hinges upon the belief that a film director is the primary creative force, wielding the power to infuse their personal artistic signature, thematic preoccupations and unique style into the films they create and elevate the film to an art form with a distinct personality and thematic resonance.

The term *auteur* in French corresponds to author in English. Traditionally, literary authors were celebrated for their creative and intellectual contributions. However in mid-1950s emerged the auteur theory, challenging the disparity in credit between literary authors and film directors. This theory gained prominence during the French New Wave movement, with Claude Chabrol's *La Beau Serge* cited as an early auteur film. Andrew George Sarris, an American film critic introduced the term auteur theory in 1962 through his essay "Notes on the Auteur Theory."

Auteur film theory has long been a cornerstone of film analysis, emphasizing the director as the primary author of a film imbuing it with their distinctive vision and style. This theory posits that a director's distinct style and creative vision transcend the constraints of genres and studio influence, making them the auteur of their films. The foundational ideas of auteurship were attributed to French film theoreticians, notably Andre Bazin and Alexandre Astruc. Bazin believed that a film is fundamentally shaped by its director's vision. According to Andrew Sarris, "the auteur theory itself is a pattern theory in constant flux" (563).

Astruc introduced the concept of "camera-stylo" or "camera-pen" drawing a parallel between a literary author's pen and a film director's visual storytelling. A director like an author utilizes a unique *mise-en-scene* to craft a distinct visual language in their films. An auteur as the principal agent orchestrates various facets of film production integrating them into a cohesive cinematic creation. They wield the metaphorical "camera-pen" to write the cinematic text amalgamating diverse elements such as visuals, sound, text and editing. Subsequently, filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut emerged as key proponents of the auteur theory, further solidifying its influence and application in the realm of cinema.

Crowley's journey as an auteur begins with his adaptation of Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* into a screenplay. His screenplay adaptation is a testament to his authorship in the film. He navigates the

intricacies of the source material to fit the cinematic medium. His choices reflect his authorship as he decides which scenes, characters and themes best serve his unique vision while remaining true to the novel's core. When examining John Crowley's *The Goldfinch*, it becomes evident that he exercised significant autonomy as an auteur filmmaker.

The Goldfinch is marked by John Crowley's distinct artistic style, which is palpable throughout the film. The film's unique visual style characterized by its use of the painting's symbolism reinforces Crowley's artistic imprint. The painting becomes the visual motif that mirrors the protagonist's emotional journey. Just as the Carel Fabritius' masterpiece painting, "The Goldfinch" represents captivity, the film's visual style, cinematography and *mise-en-scene* reflect these themes.

In an interview to *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Ansel Elgort who played the role of Theodore Decker in the film avows, "With this film, Donna Tartt wasn't involved at all and even at times where there was a detail in a scene and I'd say, 'but in the book this happened', John (Crowley) would say, 'that's the book, this is the movie'" (Cooney). One striking aspect of Crowley's adaptation is his decision to distance the film from Tartt, the author of the source novel. Unlike some adaptations where the author is closely involved, Crowley chose to create a film that stands independently from its literary origin. An exemplar of this is when Ansel Elgort notes that Tartt was not involved in the project. This decision embodies the director's authority and vision over the source material, aligning with the auteur theory's emphasis on the director as the primary creative force.

Elgort's observation that Crowley was less inclined to adhere to the source material highlights the director's autonomy in shaping the film's narrative and visual elements. Crowley's approach reflects a focus on cinematic storytelling rather than attempting a faithful replication of the book on screen. Ansel Elgort's observation about a scene differing from the book exemplifies this. When Elgort pointed out discrepancies between the book and the film adaptation, Crowley firmly asserted, "that's the book, this is the movie" (Cooney). This statement underscores Crowley's determination to assert his creative vision making him the primary authorial figure in the film's production. Crowley prioritizes the medium of film acknowledging that it has its own language, pace and visual elements that may require deviations from the source material. This aligns with the auteur theory's idea that a director's unique style should shape the cinematic narrative.

To further understand Crowley's auteurship in *The Goldfinch*, it is essential to analyze his unique directorial choices. The film exhibits a somber and melancholic atmosphere characterized by a muted color palette and deliberate pacing. These stylistic elements are consistent with Crowley's previous work showcasing his distinctive filmmaking style. Moreover Crowley's emphasis on the emotional journey of the protagonist, Theo Decker reflects his thematic choices as an auteur director. The film delves into the themes of trauma, loss and the search for identity, all of which aligns with Crowley's oeuvre as a director known for exploring complex human emotions.

While auteur theory emphasizes the director's authority, it is crucial to recognize the role of actors in bringing characters to life. In an interview to *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Oakes Fegley and Ansel Elgort, who portrayed the character of Theo at different stages of his life revealed the extent of their research and engagement with the source material. Their reliance on Donna Tartt's novel for

character development demonstrates the collaborative nature of filmmaking, where actors contribute their interpretations, while respecting the director's vision. This synergy between director and actors is essential in realizing the characters' depth and authenticity on screen.

Oakes Fegley, an actor renowned for his role in *Pete's Dragon* played a pivotal role in *The Goldfinch*. He brought to life the character of Theo Decker, the novel's protagonist. In an interview to *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Oakes Fegley posits, "The book was a great tool for me, especially for the Las Vegas portion of the story, because of all the descriptive adjectives that Donna uses and the story being written in the first person, so I could really get behind his eyes and think what he thought" (Cooney). Fegley's comments reveal how he approached his role through the lens of the source material.

One of the key aspects of Tartt's writing that significantly impacted Fegley's performance was her use of descriptive adjectives and the first-person narrative style. Fegley mentioned that these elements allowed him to "get behind [Theo's] eyes and think what he thought" (Cooney). Fegley's engagement with Tartt's writing helped bring out the essence of Theo Decker, aligning with Crowley's vision for the film. Auteur directors often work closely with actors to ensure they inhabit the characters in a way that aligns with the film's overall vision. Fegley undoubtedly brought his interpretation of Theo to the screen, while Crowley's direction guided him in capturing the essence of the character as described in the source material. This collaborative effort between actor and director is a hallmark of auteur cinema, where the director's influence is palpable throughout the production.

The Las Vegas portion of *The Goldfinch* is a pivotal juncture in Theo Decker's life. It is where he undergoes significant character development and faces crucial choices. By immersing himself in Theo's perspective and internalizing his thoughts and emotions, Fegley was better equipped to convey the complexity and turmoil of this part of the story. This collaboration between actor and director, both influenced by the source material underscores the auteur theory's emphasis on the director's authorial vision.

Crowley's *The Goldfinch* presents a fascinating canvas to explore the auteurist perspective in filmmaking, showcasing how the director's vision and artistic interpretation breathe life into the original literary work. The film showcases a diverse cast with varying performances, providing insights into Crowley's auteurship. Peter Wollen's concept emphasizes that for an auteur, a literary work serves as a trigger igniting their cinematic imagination. The source material acts as a catalyst sparking a creative reaction within the auteur's mind combining with their unique motifs and themes. In this light, incidents and episodes from the original work become agents that interact with the auteur's preoccupations, culminating in a radically new cinematic creation. The director as the auteur does not merely adapt, they craft a new text, replete with their unique interpretation and style, ultimately transcending the confines of the original author's intent.

In the context of *The Goldfinch* through the cast and their performances Crowley's auteur vision is manifested. Ansel Elgort's portrayal of adult Theo, albeit criticized for lacking charisma can be viewed as a fusion of the character's essence with Crowley's directorial preoccupations, portraying a complex narrative arc that resonates with the film's overarching themes. Nicole Kidman embodying the frosty society dame serves as a catalyst for Crowley allowing him to infuse the character with depth and

intricacies that align with his auteurist style. Luke Wilson's depiction of Theo's gambler father and Sarah Paulson's portrayal as his girlfriend further exemplify how the original characters act as catalysts shaping Crowley's unique cinematic narrative.

Finn Wolfhard with a Russian accent introduces a new cultural dimension integrating Crowley's inclination towards diversity and global facets. Jeffrey Wright's role as the antique restorer provides an avenue for Crowley to delve into mentorship dynamics, aligning with his recurrent thematic preoccupations. In essence, *The Goldfinch* is a testament to Crowley's role as an auteur in the cinematic realm. Through his interpretation and reimagining of the literary source, he crafts a film that is a departure from the original text breathing new life into the narrative, characters and themes, resulting in a distinct and captivating cinematic work.

Crowley's approach to the narrative structure in *The Goldfinch* is deviated from Donna Tartt's original linear storytelling. The decision to present the story non-linearly can be seen as a manifestation of Crowley's directorial prerogative. He utilized incidents and episodes from the novel as catalysts, allowing them to interact with his personal artistic preoccupations ultimately birthing a new and distinct cinematic work.

Ansel Elgort's portrayal of Theo often criticized as a drawback in the film can be viewed as an interpretation shaped by Crowley's directorial vision. An auteur's treatment of characters and their performances transcends a literal adherence to the source material. The director's interpretation of Theo, albeit perceived negatively by some represents the latent production of a new character molded by Crowley's artistic inclinations.

The choice to employ multiple timelines in the film, perhaps to expedite the less favorable aspects of the movie underscores Crowley's authority as an auteur. He manipulated the narrative structure to align with his directorial preferences emphasizing scenes and elements that resonated with his artistic vision while potentially sacrificing a faithful adherence to Tartt's original linear narrative.

The narrative which meticulously delves into minutiae early on does not culminate in a satisfying payoff later in the movie. The most gripping and moving set piece, the terrorist bombing is revealed towards the end and only in fragments, deviating from the detailed work invested earlier. This approach can be seen as the director's interpretation and manipulation of the source material, emphasizing how the director is not subservient to the original author and sees the literary work as a pretext.

The film's structure and pacing, particularly the thrilling crime drama in the final third seem rushed and fleeting, possibly a result of the director's realization of the movie's runtime nearing the two-and-a-half-hour mark. The gripping crime drama, which forms the pinnacle of the book's tension and intrigue are condensed into a mere five minutes on-screen minimizing the opportunity for true engagement and emotional investment. This departure from the detailed portrayal in the book signifies Crowley's intention to fuse his own preoccupations and vision creating a radically new cinematic work that stands independent.

In line with the auteur theory, the film diverges from the literary source manifesting Crowley's distinct directorial style and vision. The intrinsic scene perhaps even dies in the hands of the filmic auteur giving rise to a new text, an interpretation of the story that is fundamentally different and bears the distinct stamp of the director's creative identity. The incorporation of violin music and emotional scenes in lieu of gritty details at crucial moments further exemplifies the director's imprint on the narrative showcasing the transformation of the original material into a unique cinematic expression.

A fundamental tenet of auteur theory as outlined by Peter Wollen is the idea that a literary work serves as a mere trigger for the director's cinematic imagination. It is not a matter of slavishly reproducing the source material, but rather using it as a catalyst to explore the director's own artistic vision and thematic preoccupations. However, this adaptation illustrates a disparity between the literary text and the director's vision. The source material serves as a pretext offering catalysts that fuse with the director's distinctive preoccupations. The resulting work becomes a radically new interpretation, potentially overshadowing the essence of the original literary narrative. In this adaptation, the director's artistic imprint takes precedence altering the fundamental essence of the literary author's creation.

Crowley's interpretation of *The Goldfinch* is both faithful to the source material and infused with his own artistic inclinations. The film demonstrates a strong commitment to faithfully representing the characters and locales as described by Tartt. The characters are brought to life on the screen in a manner that aligns with Tartt's descriptions, capturing their essence and actions as envisioned by the author. The locations depicted in the film are meticulously crafted to stay true to the novel and Roger Deakins' cinematography masterfully brings them to life, particularly the haunting housing complex in Las Vegas. This fidelity to the source material can be seen as a nod to the literary work, acknowledging its significance as the initial catalyst.

The auteur's interpretation does not rigidly adhere to every aspect of the source material. This is where auteur theory is especially relevant the director takes liberties in enhancing certain elements to align with their personal style and artistic vision. Wollen's concept of "scenes which fuse with [the director's] own preoccupations" is evident in the film's deliberate choice to delve into the intricacies of furniture restoration. This extended focus on the restoration process becomes a motif that aligns with the director's thematic interests, perhaps symbolizing the restoration of the protagonist's own fractured life.

The film's omission of an exciting chase scene through the streets of Amsterdam reflects Crowley's conscious decision to deviate from the literary work's pacing and priorities. This omission underscores the idea that the director is not beholden to the expectations of a faithful adaptation but rather uses the source material as a canvas to paint his own cinematic narrative. In the light of these observations, it becomes evident that for Crowley, *The Goldfinch* is not merely a novel to be transcribed onto the screen; it is a canvas onto which he projects his own artistic vision. The film becomes a manifestation of Crowley as an auteur showcasing his unique interpretation and thematic concerns, while the influence of Donna Tartt's text serves as the catalyst for this transformation.

The film appears to succumb to what can be termed the Memento effect or the Interstellar effect, where the film industry tends to present narratives as intricate puzzle boxes. This approach seems to deviate from the seamless unfolding of the original narrative in Donna Tartt's novel. Rather than

enhancing the emotional impact and plot surprises, this style of storytelling appears to dilute the profound elements and leaves the audience with a sense of hollow emotion and diminished impact.

In the intricate craft of filmmaking, the manipulation of time within the narrative structure holds a profound significance. In an interview to *Entertainment.ie*, John Crowley posits, “The idea of playing with two time frames was always there, and then in the edit, we took that idea much more forward. . . . Nicolas Roeg, who said ‘...in an editing room, all time is available, all the time...’ and I love that idea that a film creates its own relative time frame” (Lloyd).

Crowley emphasizes the strategic utilization of dual time frames as a fundamental aspect of the movie’s conceptualization. This dual temporality, the interplay of past and present was an integral part of the film’s design from its inception. However, its true potency was fully harnessed during the editing process, where the concept was further refined and amplified. One luminary director who significantly influenced Crowley’s approach to time manipulation is Nicolas Roeg, renowned for his innovative editing techniques and unconventional narrative structures.

Roeg’s assertion, “in an editing room, all time is available, all the time,” (Lloyd) encapsulates a revolutionary perspective on film editing. This philosophy underscores the malleability of time within the editing suite, allowing directors to transcend the linear constraints of time inherent in the narrative and create their distinct temporal landscapes. In the case of *The Goldfinch*, this notion finds a powerful realization, as the film navigates between two distinct time frames, blurring the lines between past and present. This deliberate manipulation serves to enhance the emotional and thematic depth of the storyline, echoing Roeg’s ideology of unrestricted temporal creativity.

Andrew Sarris posits, “the first premise of the auteur theory is the technical competence of a director as a criterion of value” (562). Drawing on auteur film theory, notably Sarris’ foundational premise, the technical prowess of a director serves as a paramount criterion for assessing cinematic value. This technical proficiency manifests in various forms, including the mastery of editing techniques to manipulate time effectively. Crowley’s adept use of dual time frames in *The Goldfinch* not only showcases his technical prowess but also underscores his prowess as an auteur. The deliberate choice to manipulate time and embrace Roeg’s philosophy signifies Crowley’s creative autonomy and his ability to innovate within the confines of film editing. Crowley’s adaptation and refinement of this approach serve as a testament to his competence as a director and in line with auteur theory affirm the crucial role of technical proficiency in defining a filmmaker’s unique vision and contribution to the cinematic tapestry.

In an interview to *Entertainment.ie* titled, “The Interview: John Crowley on ‘The Goldfinch’, adapting other people’s work, and non-linear storytelling” John Crowley avows, “We gave it a completely different structure, but that was necessary to transfer it into a different medium. There’s no way of doing the whole linear story in a single film” (Lloyd). The transformation of a narrative from one medium to another necessitates reevaluation of its structural integrity. In the case of *The Goldfinch*, the shift from the literary domain to the cinematic realm demanded a departure from the conventional linear storytelling approach. John Crowley in defending this structural deviation emphasized the impracticality of encapsulating the entire storyline within the confines of a single film. This assertion underscores the inherent challenge of adhering to a linear narrative in cinematic adaptation.

Crowley's inclination towards non-linear storytelling is not a solitary occurrence within his body of work. In the film *Intermission* the storyline unfolds intricately across the vast canvas of Dublin weaving diverging and intertwining narratives. This showcases Crowley's penchant for multifaceted storytelling, where the plot is propelled by a mosaic of interconnected events and characters. Similarly, in *Brooklyn* the narrative sprawls across geographical boundaries mirroring the thematic exploration of the past and the future's dynamic interplay. These distinct storytelling choices exemplify Crowley's directorial signature and his inclination towards non-linear narrative structures to convey intricate and engaging tales.

According to Andrew Sarris, "The second premise of the auteur theory is the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value. Over a group of films, a director must exhibit recurrent characteristic of style, which serve as his signature. The way a film looks and moves should have some relationship to the way a director think and feels" (Sarris 562). Drawing on auteur theory, notably Sarris' second premise, a director's distinguishable personality and recurrent stylistic elements across a body of work form a significant criterion of value. Crowley's inclination towards non-linear narrative structures and exploration of diverging storylines is consistent across his films, signifying a unique and identifiable directorial style. The way he approaches the depiction of time, space and the interplay of past and future in his films is a reflection of his thoughts, feelings and artistic vision.

The non-linear narrative structure in *The Goldfinch* epitomizes Crowley's consistent directorial style, highlighting his expertise in crafting intricate and captivating narratives that mirror his artistic sensibilities. It showcases the amalgamation of his creative interpretation and the necessities of the cinematic medium, ultimately reinforcing the core tenets of auteur film theory, where a director's distinct style and perspective are paramount in shaping the ultimate cinematic creation.

In an interview to *Sound & Picture* titled, "Uncaging a narrative: How 'The Goldfinch' Director John Crowley Brought an Epic Tale from the Page to the Screen" Crowley posits, "Painting and film is a tricky balance because it's almost as if they talk different language" (Hogg). Crowley adds that he deeply succumbed to the enchantment that "The Goldfinch" painting holds. He openly concedes that despite their best efforts, the film inevitably falls short of encapsulating the sheer potency exuded by the original artwork. In his attempt to articulate the allure of the painting, Crowley elaborates on how it seemingly pulses with life.

The fusion of painting and film is an intricate dance, a delicate interplay of visual languages that necessitates a harmonious balance. Crowley astutely observes the nuanced challenge in reconciling these distinct artistic realms. Painting and film albeit sharing visual elements possess languages with unique dialects requiring careful translation to convey their respective essences within a cinematic narrative. The task of maintaining a consistent tone throughout the film proved to be a formidable endeavor, grappling with the inherent darkness that permeates the narrative's core.

In an interview to *Sound & Picture* titled, "Uncaging a narrative: How 'The Goldfinch' Director John Crowley Brought an Epic Tale from the Page to the Screen" Crowley limns, "There's a darkness that swirls around it all of the time . . . There are aspects of noir in the Amsterdam section, high culture in the Barbour section and teenage slightly nihilistic despair in the Las Vegas section. It was quite a difficult

tapestry to knit together into one whole” (Hogg). Crowley elucidates the multifaceted tonality present within the film’s diverse sections, each demanding its distinct narrative texture. From the noir aesthetics of Amsterdam to the highbrow cultural milieu of the Barbour section and the teenage slightly nihilistic despair of Las Vegas, these segments embody a range of thematic and stylistic elements. Weaving these disparate threads into a cohesive tapestry posed a formidable challenge. It required a nuanced understanding of each section’s nuances and an artful knitting together to present a seamless whole.

The third ultimate premise of auteur theory is concerned with interior meaning, the ultimate glory of cinema as an art. . . . The conception of interior meaning comes close to that Astruc defines as *mise-en-scene*, but not quite. It is not quite the vision of the world a director projects nor quite his attitude toward life. It is ambiguous in any literary sense, because of part of it is imbedded in the stuff of the temperature of the director on the set, and that is close approximation of its professional aspect. (Sarris 562-563)

Drawing on auteur theory, notably Sarris’ third premise, the notion of interior meaning stands as a pivotal concept. This interior meaning emanates from the interplay between a director’s personality and the material at hand. Crowley’s passion for “The Goldfinch” painting with its enigmatic and compelling presence adds a layer of depth to this interior meaning. The painting pulsating with an elusive tension and potential flight embodies a deeper metaphorical significance. It beckons viewers to withhold judgment evoking a sense of shared vulnerability and empathy. The director’s engagement with the painting aligns with Sarris’ concept of interior meaning, as it involves the symbiotic relationship between the director’s disposition and the material’s inherent essence. Navigating the intricate balance between painting and film and harmonizing the diverse tonalities present in the narrative underscores Crowley’s adeptness in crafting a cinematic experience that resonates on multiple levels. The infusion of interior meaning, stemming from the profound connection to the enigmatic painting epitomizes the essence of auteur theory by merging the director’s temperament with the narrative substance, resulting in a profoundly artistic cinematic endeavor.

Conclusion

Conclusively, the intricate tapestry of *The Goldfinch* film unfolds as a testament to the directorial prowess of John Crowley. Crowley’s ability to infuse his personal style, thematic inclinations and unique narrative approach into the film, while staying true to the essence of Donna Tartt’s literary work exemplifies the core tenets of auteur theory. His creative choices such as the intricate interplay of dual time frames and the delicate handling of the painting’s mystique highlight his role as an auteur, shaping the film into a unique cinematic experience.

The Goldfinch not only stands as a remarkable testament to Crowley’s prowess as an auteur but also signifies the harmonious blend of art forms, the convergence of literature, painting and cinema. As the painting in the narrative comes to life through Crowley’s lens, so does the auteur’s vision, portraying a vibrant tapestry where film serves as a conduit for creative expression and a medium for exploring the human condition. This research illuminates the profound impact of auteur theory, reinforcing the idea that a director’s distinct imprint on a film elevates it beyond mere entertainment to a realm of artistic

endeavor, enriching both the cinematic landscape and one's understanding of the complexities of the human experience.

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