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The filmmaker as Instagram auteur: A case study on Claire Denis

Cáit Murphy

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Abstract

In this article I propose further inclusion of auteurs' Instagram profiles within contemporary auteurism. Examining selected auteur profiles, I trace aesthetic and commercial tendencies. I compare the forms of film and Instagram, connecting this to Lev Manovich's research and Timothy Corrigan's 'commerce of auteurism'. Instagram's individualism extends Alexandre Astruc's *caméra-stylo* theory. My case study is Claire Denis' profile. I argue that her posts share aspects with her filmic 'corpus', like fragmentation and transience. Her profile has thus far expressed an anti-promotional stance, a distinctive design aesthetic, and the highly autobiographical part of her 'work' is indicative of Instagram's authorial potential for filmmakers.

Keywords: profile, digital media, promotional, social media, *caméra-stylo*.

What is a work? What is this curious unity which we designate as a work? Of what elements is it composed? – Michel Foucault (1969)[1]

Introduction

What constitutes a part of an auteur film director's 'body of work' or 'oeuvre' in today's social media era? Specifically, how can we contextualise an auteur's use of the popular photo and video-sharing platform Instagram within their 'corpus'? How does an auteur's Instagram profile fit into the auteur models analysed in earlier and more contemporary scholarship? To address these questions, this article focuses on the Instagram profiles of selected auteurs,

primarily the French director Claire Denis, who have formed careers in the film industry and on the international festival circuit. These directors are considered ‘auteurs’ by film critics because of their modes of practice, their consistent or idiosyncratic styles, themes, and techniques, or their singular vision. I argue that Instagram profiles, like Denis’ profile, can also play a significant part in contemporary auteurism in the digital era. Commercially and aesthetically, the auteur’s use of Instagram extends their expressivity and agency beyond the confines of filmmaking. What we describe as an auteur’s ‘work’ in the digital era should encompass their creative and promotional processes on social media platforms like Instagram.

How audiences consume cinema in the digital era is very much influenced by the promotion and discussion of auteurs and auteurism online. Auteur theory was first developed in French film criticism in the 1950s, particularly with the magazine *Cahiers du cinéma* and by figures including Alexandre Astruc and François Truffaut, who championed artistic vision in the film industry. Writing in 2007, John Caughie points out the audience’s continuing impulse to seek authenticity and originality in this mass-produced art, a hunger for the ‘biography which precedes and explains the motives behind the film’, citing Roland Barthes’ view on the pervasive authority of the author who precedes and exists beyond their text.[2] The figure of the auteur cannot be ignored because ‘a culture of celebrity obsessed with the biography and psychology of the artist seeps into any discussion of contemporary authorship’.[3] This statement rings even truer today as social media platforms like Instagram help shape celebrity culture, in which notable auteurs take part to varying degrees. Having begun as a discourse in ‘old media’ (print, film, television, etc.), auteurism is now also an online ‘new media’ discourse, where auteurs and auteurism are perhaps more visible and discussed than ever, using the technologies of online publishing, streaming sites, and social media. Auteurism, as Catherine Grant argues, ‘is a matter of supply and demand. It is a way of both making and experiencing films, and increasingly of selling them.’[4] And as Adrian Martin states in 2004, ‘this is the era of the auteur as commodity, as brand name’.[5] Therefore, the study of contemporary auteurism must acknowledge how auteurism or a particular auteur’s ‘brand’ develops on popular social media platforms, currently used by over half the global population.[6]

In the first two sections of this article, I aim to contextualise the auteur’s use of Instagram by engaging with auteur criticism and Lev Manovich’s influential theorisation of digital media and Instagram. I recall Astruc’s manifesto on ‘caméra-stylo’ (‘camera-pen’) from 1948, which compares the director to a writer. The caméra-stylo is evoked in the use of Instagram through its independent editing functions, text (captions), and touchscreen interface. I also revisit Timothy Corrigan’s influential article on the ‘commerce of auteurism’ from 1990,

which considers the auteur's extra-textual self-promotion and agency in interviews and star persona. Although Corrigan could not have predicted social media's impact on auteurism, his position is even more pertinent today, as promotion, agency, and public engagement with auteurs are greatly expanded by platforms like Instagram. The study of digital media, Instagram, and other platforms is a relatively new development in auteur criticism. Catherine Grant has previously discussed internet-based auteur promotion in 'www.auteur.com?' (2000) and the authorial agency of director DVD commentary tracks (2008). In 'La Camera-Crayola' (2007), Devin Orgeron examines Wes Anderson's ancillary media and DVD extras. More recently, Tomas Elliott's (2021) and Matt St. John's (2021) respective articles analyse Agnès Varda's presence on Instagram for the promotion of her documentary *Visages Villages* (Faces Places, 2017) and how her Instagram reflects her authorial style. However, a theorisation of auteurs on Instagram has yet to be published.

In the case study section, I argue for the further inclusion of directors' Instagram profiles within conceptions of contemporary auteurism, looking at the fascinating example of Denis' profile and its relation to her films, Instagram design aesthetics, and the profiles of other directors. Her account (@clairedenis6) is of particular interest because of its anti-commercialism, its intertextuality with the themes and aesthetics of her filmography, and its portrayal of her day-to-day personal life.[7] Since her first post in April 2019, Denis' Instagram has been a highly autobiographical part of her authorship. Her Instagram encapsulates many facets of her films, like ambiguity and transnationalism, which scholars have extensively examined in her filmography, while representing qualities unique to her Instagram, such as self-portrayal ('selfies') and Instagram photography aesthetics. Scholarship on Denis' work tends to focus on her feature films, while her creative pursuits on Instagram have not yet been investigated. I argue that Denis' Instagram is worthy of analysis as part of her wider corpus and is representative of how a given auteur's Instagram may be similarly analysed.

It is important to note that auteurism remains problematised because of the theoretical limitations of author-centrism and its tension within the studio system and the collaborative environment of filmmaking. Auteur theory is challenged by poststructuralism and reception theory (which instead focuses on the viewer's relation to the text with certainly fruitful results). In his critique of contemporary auteur studies, Martin proposes that 'auteurism is only useful as a critical tool as long as it generates good, exciting results – helping us to make new discoveries'.[8] Considering Martin's position, I recognise that analysing an auteur's corpus, like Denis' for instance, can be potentially repetitive. That said, Instagram represents a new and mostly overlooked area for research into auteurism. By analysing director Instagram profiles, I partly reflect the proponents of auteurism in the 1950s, who sought to

gain a vast knowledge of directors and their works. In their view, as Caughie notes, auteur criticism is 'not simply a sampling along an already approved crest line, but a kind of profligate intemperance of viewing in which nothing could be left out in case that is where the key lay' or, in other words, to view every work a director makes as part of a corpus that can be read for its consistencies and development over time.[9] As a contribution to scholarship on Denis' continuing work and for film and digital media scholars interested in contemporary media convergence, it is important to acknowledge how cinema and popular audio-visual platforms like Instagram are connected commercially and aesthetically.

Instagram, cinema, and auteurs

A contemporary director's 'work' is impacted by the technology, commerce, and aesthetics of the internet. The internet expands access to information about directors to us as audiences, fans, and critics. Accessible information about directors was once limited to monographs, retrospectives, interviews, or print and television appearances. Today, directors typically have IMDB pages, Wikipedia pages, and sometimes personal websites with information about their work. Websites and social media profiles managed by production, distribution, and online streaming companies (e.g., A24; MUBI) also promote their films. As global networks for textual and visual communication, social media crucially offer the director expansive agency beyond their filmic texts, for self-promotion and self-expression. The personal public accounts of directors are visible on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok. Then, why focus specifically on Instagram in this article?

First, Instagram is ostensibly a popular social media platform among directors. Directors who use Instagram are diverse in background, age, gender, style, and practices within Hollywood cinema or independent, arthouse, and national cinemas. These directors and their films have been well-received at film festivals and by critics. Several directors listed, like Martin Scorsese, and their films have been studied extensively in scholarship and are considered auteurs and auteurist films. Apart from Denis' profile, which I will discuss in my case study, other public Instagram profiles of directors include, but are certainly not limited to: @martinscorsese_, @officialspikelee, @jafar.panahi, @sallypotter.director, @pagliji (Mira Nair), @jim.jarmusch, @bakermovies (Sean Baker), @agnes.varda, @gasparnoeofficial, @matidiop, @alfonsocuaron, @celine_sciamma, @chloezhao, @halhartleyfilm, @darioargento_official, @alejandrorodrowksy, @paolosorrentino_real, and @nwrefn (Nicolas Winding Refn).[10] Many of the profiles listed have 'blue ticks' to signify the authenticity of the account. According to Instagram's website: 'Verified badges help people more easily find the public figures, celebrities, and brands they want to follow.'[11] These accounts are run personally by the director or through assistance. This

distinction is not always obvious at first glance but is generally made explicit through selfies, first-person pronouns in captions, and personal content. Interestingly, a director does not have to be living to have a verified Instagram account coordinated on their behalf as a virtual 'self' that encompasses the director's corpus. For example, Stanley Kubrick's (@stanleykubrick) account run by the Official Stanley Kubrick Collection promotes and archives his work, enacting posthumous agency for his auteurism. Instagram, therefore, seems to appeal to a wide variety of directors for promotional and aesthetic purposes.

Apart from Instagram's popularity among directors, my focus on Instagram is influenced by other factors. First, Instagram is a well-established platform, as it was launched globally for the Apple iPhone in 2010, compared to growing competitor TikTok, a video-sharing (but not photo-sharing) app, that was launched globally in 2018.[12] Instagram has over 1.3 billion monthly active users. TikTok has approximately 1 billion MAU. Second, TikTok is a so-called 'Generation Z' app, predominantly used by the under 18s (28%) and the 19-29 (35%) demographics.[13] The age demographics of Instagram users are slightly older, meaning the app is likely more popular among directors with fully-fledged careers.[14] This is not to say directors do not use TikTok, as Refn does (@nicolaswindingrefn), or that TikTok does not encourage creativity. Importantly, on an aesthetic level, as St. John argues in an article on Varda's use of Instagram, 'as a platform that allows both photography and video in combination with text captions, Instagram [allows] the artists the greatest continuity with their other [film] work'.[15] Indeed, Instagram explicitly shares more artistic qualities with cinema than Facebook or Twitter, which are certainly used by directors but are primarily text-based platforms (i.e., statuses and tweets). Instagram is primarily a photographic and audio-visual platform. Manovich notes: 'If... Twitter is for news and links exchange, Facebook is for social communication... Instagram is for aesthetic visual communication [original emphasis].'[16] Although Twitter and Facebook do in fact facilitate visual content, Manovich accurately differentiates their primary functions. As studied by Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin, an Instagram profile may have a distinguishable 'curation' that reflects the user's tastes. This desire to individualise the Instagram medium is expressed in filters, themes, or compositions.[17] Having an individual aesthetic is also a significant part of auteurism. And because auteurs may make films with autobiographical elements, Instagram is a highly appropriate platform to extend subjectivity, self-representation, and self-reflection by sharing one's face ('selfies'), personal life, and memories.

Indeed, for the purposes of including Instagram posts within an auteur's 'work' (which typically connotes 'films'), it is important to acknowledge how films and Instagram share certain formal and commercial aspects, while remaining firmly distinctive. Unlike standard cinema, video framing for Instagram Reels (edited videos), Instagram TV (long-form video),

and Instagram Stories (posts that last 24 hours) is typically vertical in aspect ratio. Instagram images and videos can be posted as squares (1:1), evoking the polaroid, or in the portrait and landscape format introduced in 2015 to achieve a more 'cinematic' effect.[18] Digital images and videos uploaded to Instagram are translated in numeric code as pixels on computer device screens, and since the 1990s cinema has also become an increasingly digital medium in the production, post-production, and projection stages. Perhaps ironically, because digital media translates artworks as numeric data, a filmmaker's digital feature film (shot on a professional digital camera) shares more formal properties with a digital Instagram video (shot on a smartphone) than it does with material film stock. Instagram and cinema are both 'multimedia', as Instagram users and filmmakers combine moving images, sound, and text.[19] And significantly, both cinema and Instagram are forms of mass entertainment. Initially launched by founders Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger as a photo-sharing app, Instagram has since become driven towards marketing and entertainment. CEO Adam Mosseri is quoted in a tweet from 2021:

At Instagram we're always trying to build new features that help you get the most out of your experience. Right now we're focused on four key areas: Creators, Video, Shopping and Messaging.[20]

Words like 'experience' and 'creators' in Mosseri's statement suggest that Instagram, like the cinema, is an artistic space (albeit a virtual one) and entertainment commodity where viewers enjoy themselves and creators (or 'influencers') are also valued for their work. Indeed, the addition of Reels and Instagram TV by 2021 has allowed creators to record, edit, and display long-form videos on their profiles, semantically converging old media (cinema and television) with new media. Instagram is simultaneously a marketplace that facilitates advertising, sponsorship, and shopping and a platform for individual self-expression. This mirrors to a certain degree the film and television industry models, where art, mass entertainment, and business meet, and where, for some critics, auteurism serves as a creative core.

The Instagram 'Caméra-stylo'

One motivation behind 'politique des auteurs' was to 'cut through the complications of mass entertainment and to locate the expressive core of the film art', according to Corrigan.[21] In his 1948 manifesto, Astruc posits that the true auteur is capable of 'writing' meaning into a film through the mechanism of the camera. In this way, cinema transforms from solely being a form of industrialised mass entertainment into a 'language' that can be taken seriously:

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By language, I mean a form in which and by which 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... Direction is no longer a means of illustrating or presenting a scene, but a true act of writing.[22]

Astruc's theory, then, is based on the concept that a director is a film's author. Indeed, a film is typically described as 'by' the director, despite the creative influences and labour of others. Instagram manifests this sense of individualism, despite its globalised, commercial use. For filmmakers who work in industrial settings, and even those who make independent arthouse films, self-expression on Instagram is possibly a new, more personal way of pursuing a 'caméra-stylo' through the uploading of their own photos and videos for online audiences (followers). For auteurs, Instagram offers an extended media landscape to experiment with various design and editing features beyond the medium of cinema. As one example of auteurs embracing the tangibility of the 'caméra-stylo' effect in touchscreen devices, Refn, who directed *Drive* (2011), often posts images that feature his digital handwriting or digital painting over photos, likely done by hand or with a stylus (Figure 1).

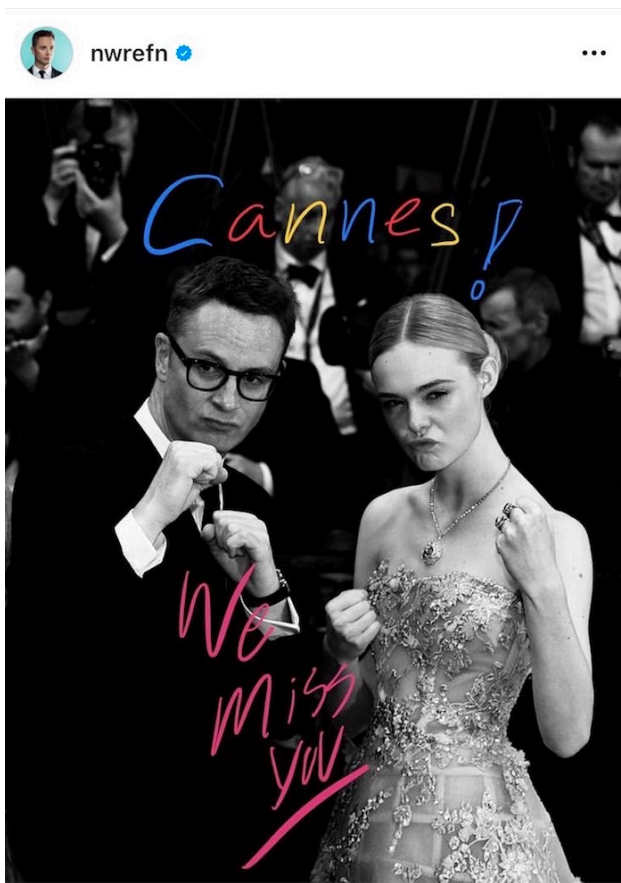


Fig. 1: An example of digital handwriting on Refn's Instagram profile (posted on 14 May 2020).

Astruc's manifesto optimistically predicts the ubiquity of screens today: 'With the development of 16mm and television, the day is not far off when everyone will possess a projector.'^[23] Astruc's statement suggests that the means of viewing audio-visual media will eventually become independent of cinemas. This is true of Instagram, which serves the dual function of production and spectatorship. Manovich accurately notes, 'in contrast to cinema, where most "users" are able to "understand" cinematic language but not "speak" it (i.e., make films), all computer users can "speak" the language of the interface'.^[24] Manovich's research into 'Instagramism' (the particular form and content of Instagram) partly extends the efforts of film critics, like Astruc, in the 1920s to 1960s who were concerned with legitimising cinema as an art and language worthy of study.^[25] Manovich consistently describes the Instagram profile owner as an 'author', regardless of the types of posts they upload and despite the platform's status as a mass medium.^[26] Even the selection

of predetermined elements, like choosing inbuilt filters on the app's interface, is a key operation for Instagram authors. Manovich notes of digital media:

It makes end users feel that they are not just consumers but 'authors' creating a new media object or experience... Even though a modern artist may only be reproducing, or, at best, combining preexisting texts, idioms, and schemes in new ways, the actual material process of art making, nevertheless, supports the Romantic ideal.[27]

The expanded notion of authorship (or at least the feeling of authorship) in digital media suggests that posting images and videos on Instagram can be viewed as an artistic activity, a type of *caméra-stylo*, despite the pre-set features of its interface designed by the company (not to mention the variety of other editing apps available to Instagram users). This tactility with digital media, despite its virtual, ostensibly immaterial identity, has been noted by other critics. In his analysis of postdigital art, which addresses our rapidly changing relationship with digital technologies, Mel Alexenberg highlights the inherent tactility of 'digital' from 'digits' (fingers).[28] Examining the history of tactility, touchscreens, and cinema, Alexandra Schneider posits that although the smartphone is a screening and filming apparatus derived from cinematic technology, the touchscreen signifies a return to pre-cinematic tactility (i.e. before motion picture's ability to visually capture material reality). The touchscreen is a hybrid object that enables a handcrafting function, while the digital objects on the screen are immaterial: 'the iPhone marks a shift from the knob to the switch to the screen as a semantically loaded technical skin'.[29] This suggests that Instagram, as an app that facilitates touch and autonomy, manifests a part material and part virtual *caméra-stylo*, which has profound creative potential for all users, including auteurs, on Instagram.

On the one hand, Instagram offers a new creative platform for auteurs, while bringing audiences (followers) 'closer' to them and their work. Although Instagram is not the priority of an auteur-director's career, (as it is for Instagram influencers and artists) or indeed the reason they are known as auteurs, analysing their Instagram profile offers a larger scope of their oeuvre. There are certainly clear differences between the mediums of cinema and Instagram. Unlike standard film productions, Instagram facilitates a solitary creative experience. The *caméra-stylo* is evoked in the use of hands and fingers in touchscreen smartphone photography, recording, writing, viewing, and media distribution. While a director may typically work on a feature production for months or even years, an Instagram video or image post can be an almost instant process (e.g. Instagram Live). Posting on Instagram does not require studio influence, funding, crew labour, or distribution on streaming sites or in cinemas. Instagram is free to download and use. Unlike traditional filmmaking practices, Instagram can facilitate every stage of production and postproduction

on a smaller scale. Instagram combines the function necessary for recording, in-app editing features (filters, colouration, etc.), and distribution (posting publicly and receiving likes and views). In a sense, access to audiences is greatly advanced by Instagram. Whereas general audiences could not previously engage directly with auteurs, apart from at festivals or panel discussions, Instagram creates a semblance of proximity and intimacy between the audience (followers) and the auteur. The Instagram follower can comment on and like an auteur's post or even, hypothetically, message the auteur with a question in Direct Messages (although a response is certainly not guaranteed). Crucially, Instagram can serve as an autonomous aesthetic technology for the auteur.

On the other hand, Instagram is undeniably commercial. It may be surprising that independent arthouse directors, like Denis, choose to use this dominant, mainstream platform. However, even arthouse auteurs participate in commerce to varying degrees to sell and promote their films and can successfully adapt to new, popular technologies, like streaming and social media. In 'The Commerce of Auteurism', Corrigan argues that interviews, auteur stardom, production feats, and promotional technology have become the new *caméra-stylo*, comparing our cultural, commercial, and social investment in directors to how on-screen stars are elevated. Reversing Barthes' notable call for the 'death of the author', Corrigan claims: 'In today's commerce we want to know what our authors and auteurs look like or how they act; it is the text that may now be dead.'^[30] And as Grant reflects on Corrigan's article, 'we can quite satisfactorily, indeed lovingly and pleasurably, "consume" the director-auteur... simply by reading or viewing directorial interviews or press commentaries on their work, along with other related ancillary discourse and media forms'.^[31] While Corrigan's focus is the directorial interview and Grant's is the director DVD commentary track, extra-textual agency for an auteur's public persona is highly applicable to social media. Instagram followers can see what auteurs look like and how they act, 'consuming' the auteur by simply viewing their posts. Compared to interviews, typically structured by questions and answers, directors have potentially more control over their own publicity on Instagram, where they can represent their life and work how they choose. Instagram therefore reflects Astruc's vision of *caméra-stylo* and Corrigan's model.

The auteur's Instagram username is an online brand-name that may not necessarily be the same as their name that appears in film titles. A username nonetheless encompasses the auteur's texts, especially their Instagram posts' username specificity and unique URLs. For instance, there can only be one profile called *clairedenis6* on Instagram and all her posts bear that name. The verifying blue tick beside the director's username also foregrounds the director as brand-name. This signifier helps distinguish the personal profiles of directors from fan-made profiles or imposters. While not the focus of this article, fan-run Instagram

profiles that celebrate a director's work do serve as important extra-textual agents. The profile @accidentallywesanderson features crowd-sourced images of locations that evoke the distinctive compositions of Anderson's films. It is paradoxically independent of Anderson (who does not publicly use Instagram) as a structuring force but is nonetheless centrally influenced by his personal vision. Peter Wollen differentiates the director as individual from the director as a type of discourse: "Fuller or Hawks or Hitchcock, the directors" and "Fuller" or "Hawks" or "Hitchcock", the structures named after them.' [32] Foucault similarly writes: 'The author's name serves to characterise a certain mode of being of discourse.' [33] Today, there are directors, the discourses named after them, and the directors' Instagram (or other social media) usernames, that can function independently of each other semiotically, but are nonetheless unified by their recognisable name and work. The ways in which an auteur-director's personal use of Instagram, however, can vary in style and self-promotion, as Denis' profile exemplifies.

Case study: Claire Denis and Instagram

In this case study section, I examine the commercial and aesthetic qualities of Denis' Instagram profile as a source for textual and intertextual analysis within her wider corpus. As one example of a well-established arthouse director, Denis is considered by critics to be an auteur, having started her career in the 1980s. Judith Mayne notes: 'Denis certainly belongs to a tradition of auteurist cinema, a phrase that is unfortunately vague but which nonetheless applies to the consistently personal vision that she brings to her cinema.' [34] Echoing proponents of auteurism, such as those at Cahiers, Martine Beugnet argues:

In their superimposition of the personal (the distinctive style, recurrent themes, and the presence of autobiographical elements) and the historical (in the sense of a wider cultural, political, and socio-economical framework in which the films are elaborated) Denis' films may usefully be described as auteur cinema. [35]

An auteur's oeuvre is arguably not limited to filmic work. Film directors have successfully pursued other forms of expression, including television (e.g. David Lynch) and theatre (e.g. Ingmar Bergman). Auteurs have also pursued photography, like Varda, whose photos feature in her documentaries and on her Instagram profile; and Andrei Tarkovsky, who took Polaroid photos that share aesthetic qualities with his films, thus expanding the authorship and creativity of the auteur's caméra-stylo. As St. John argues regarding Varda's mixed media background, it is not surprising that auteurs use Instagram, as the platform facilitates photography, writing, and recording. [36] Although Denis does not come from a notable background in photography, she is clearly interested in a variety of artforms other than film,

such as music, literature, opera, and dance. Her collaboration with choreographer Bernardo Montet and use of music from Benjamin Britten's opera *Billy Budd* (1951) in *Beau Travail* (1999) demonstrate her interest in combining different artforms. Acknowledging the problems of auteurism, Beugnet points out that Denis' filmmaking is a collaborative process that implicates a crew and audiences. Indeed, Denis almost consistently works with cinematographer Agnès Godard, editor Nelly Quettier, and screenwriter Jean-Pol Fargeau, whose contributions to Denis' cinema are significant.[37] Because of its personal content, selfies, and first-person captions, Denis' profile is most likely personally managed by her. Since her first Instagram post in April 2019 and as of May 2022, Denis has uploaded over 400 photos and four videos and has amassed over 6,600 followers.[38]

Interestingly, Denis' Instagram profile stands out as one that does not reflect the typical approaches to maintaining a public figure's profile. This is best exemplified by the absence of a 'profile picture' on her profile (Figure 2). This creates anonymity among other Instagram users called 'Claire Denis' who appear in search results. Unlike other director profiles, the absence of a 'blue tick' and profile picture on Denis' profile also create a sense of anonymity. The profiles of Scorsese, Refn, Varda, and others are verified. A profile must have a profile picture to be verified. Nevertheless, Denis' selfies and images of work on set and personal life indicate her ownership. Additionally, Denis' profile is followed by verified film industry figures who know her, including Jim Jarmusch, whose films Denis has worked on as assistant director and Béatrice Dalle, who starred in *Trouble Every Day* (2001). Compared to other directors, Denis has a low Instagram follower count at just over 6,600, as of May 2022. In comparison, Scorsese has 1.4m followers; fellow arthouse directors Noé and Varda both have around 150k; and Refn with 69k. This disparity is partly down to mainstream notoriety. It may also be because Denis has not verified her profile. Some directors also have Twitter or Facebook accounts with even more followers, while Denis seemingly only has a public Instagram profile, therefore limiting her social media exposure. For now, self-promotion on Instagram or other platforms is not a priority for Denis and she appears to simply enjoy the creative tools Instagram offers.

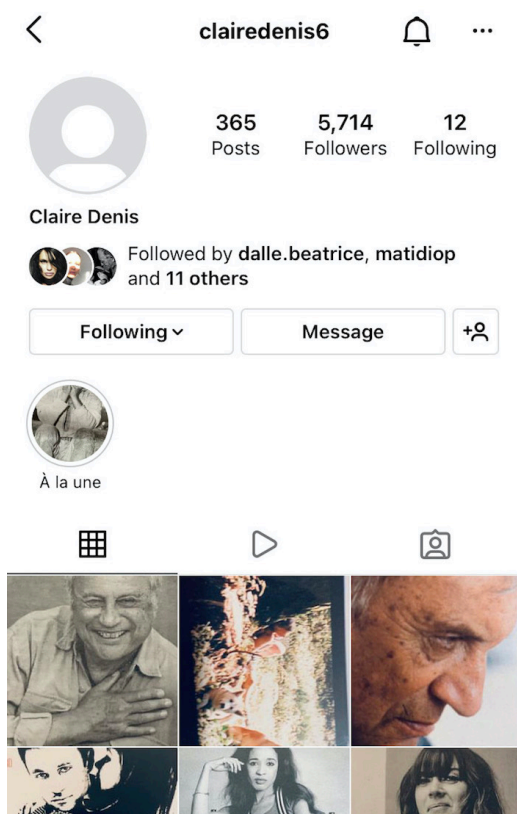


Fig. 2: Denis' Instagram profile, showing no profile picture (28 January 2022).

Denis' apparent aversion to commercial auteurism on Instagram is also visible in her profile's lack of promotional material, as seen on other director profiles, like Varda's, Refn's, and Noé's. Denis does not explicitly promote her work on Instagram, preferring to document her life. On Instagram, Denis has rarely referred to the production processes of her latest features *Both Sides of the Blade* (2022) and *Stars at Noon* (2022). The first was in competition at Berlinale in February 2022 and the second production was delayed for a year because of the COVID-19 pandemic and is competing at Cannes in May 2022.[39] Denis has not shared ancillary media (posters, interviews, press, retrospectives, Q&As, etc.) for these films or any of her fourteen features made prior to her first Instagram post in 2019. Although distribution company Wild Bunch (@wildbunchdistribution) shared extensive promotional materials for Denis' *High Life* (2018) on Instagram, Denis has not adopted this approach. Vague, visual references to production on her Instagram profile include several images and videos of herself and actors on set, international filming locations, and camera set-ups, often without expository captions. Without information from ancillary discourse (i.e. film journalism) or

personal interest, Instagram users may not be aware of these projects or that Denis is even a well-known auteur.

It is interesting to contrast Denis with other arthouse directors who embrace both promotional and creative approaches on Instagram. Instagram promotional materials include poster graphics, film review snippets, and trailers that draw attention to auteur films, often during festival or awards campaigns. These materials are often shared by the director on their profile and by the film's distributor or streaming platform. For example, No  posted eye-catching and humorous promotional designs and slogans for his film *Climax* (2018) during its festival run, strategically co-ordinated as a colour-matching grid on his profile (Figure 3). These images were also extensively shared on Instagram by Wild Bunch. Refn similarly posts colourful graphics promoting his projects on Instagram (Figure 4) (as well as selfies and images of work and family). Refn and No  show skilful use of the platform's dual commercial-creative identity. Whether or not their enthusiastic approach to vivid self-promotion is motivated by generation or gender (seeing as Refn and No  are younger male directors) is difficult to discern for now. As a female director in her 70s, Denis may approach Instagram from a different perspective.



Fig. 3: Promotional materials for *Climax* on Noé’s Instagram profile.

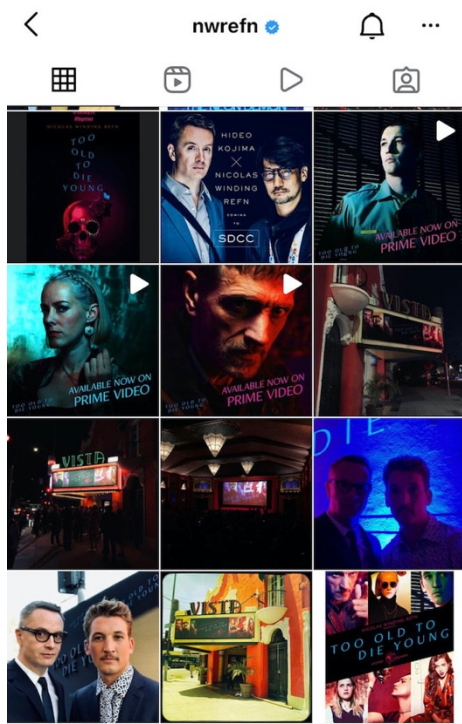


Fig. 4: Promotional materials for Amazon series *Too Old to Die Young* (2019) on Refn's Instagram profile.

St. John argues that during the festival circuit promotion of Varda's *Visages Villages*, her recognisability beyond the arthouse and into a more mainstream lens was propelled by her Instagram activity, assisted by younger male artist JR. According to St. John, despite having worked in the industry for decades as a pioneering female auteur, Varda only became a visible celebrity in Hollywood at the age of 89, during the awards campaign and promotion for her documentary with JR. Varda's profile shows amusing cartoons, selfies, and a cardboard cut-out of the director that appeared at festivals and awards ceremonies in her place, becoming an internet meme. Varda's creative presence on Instagram before her death in 2019 was important in bringing her work to wider and younger audiences.[40] This humorous online persona is not apparent in Denis' profile. In fact, there is very little visual or textual information indicating to the average Instagram user that this account belongs to a filmmaker, thus creating a sense of exclusivity. Only those in-the-know can tell because they are already familiar with Denis and her films. Although Varda and Denis are well-known names in arthouse cinema, Varda's Instagram foregrounds that its namesake is an auteur, while Denis as auteur is not explicitly promoted by her Instagram. This demonstrates two different yet innovative ways of approaching the Instagram profile as a function of

authorship. Although this contrast may become blurred, Denis' profile has expressed a comparatively anti-promotional tendency since April 2019.

Denis' unconventional approach to maintaining a public Instagram profile mirrors her filmmaking. Although Denis has received attention from critics, scholars, and cinema institutions and has worked with international stars like Robert Pattinson, she remains outside of Hollywood. Her mainly French-language, transnational co-production mode of practice takes her across borders and continents. Her designation as an arthouse director can be attributed to her films' often challenging subject matter, pensiveness, open-ended and elliptical structure, or complex characters with ambivalent motivations. As Beugnet writes: 'Denis' films generally fail to meet many of the expectations associated with more traditional work... they provide a wealth of connections and potential interpretations'; and her films often shun expository dialogue and cinematic conventions of articulating time and space.[41] Indeed, Denis is quoted as saying about her filmmaking: 'To simply utter words is boring to me.'[42]

Like her films, Denis' Instagram photography is often ambiguous, transient, fragmented, and leaves certain aspects to her Instagram follower's interpretation. Like most of her film scripts, Denis prefers to write captions in French (Instagram automatically translates captions with varying accuracy). Denis' posts often leave out pieces of textual information that are part of the conventions of Instagram. This means she shuns accompanying captions to explain or refer to what is visible in the image, tagged geographical locations, and hashtags that have become the norm (but certainly not the rule) of Instagram posting. Denis also does not appear to use Instagram's inbuilt filters. This is not unusual, as the Instagram vernacular has developed since 2010, according to Leaver & Highfield & Abidin, who note more recent resistance among users who see filters and hashtags as unappealing and tired clichés.[43] In her photos, Denis sometimes de-frames bodies or renders visual identification indistinctive through the pixelated fuzziness of the smartphone zoom function, blurry, low light 'digital noise', or by decentring or slicing part of the object out of frame in 'empty' space. This effect has been observed by Beugnet in Denis' films as 'décadrage' (de-framing), quoting Pascal Bonitzer, one example being the exercise sequences in *Beau Travail*. [44] Examples of *décadrage* on Denis' Instagram profile include close-up faces, tilted or upside-down portraits, and de-framed workmen on Paris roofs (Figure 5). Denis' first Instagram post from April 2019 consists of a blurry high angle nocturnal shot (presumably from a hotel or other tall building) with the caption titled simply 'Boston'. Denis does not state why she is there or on which street the shot is taken, creating ambiguity. It recalls nocturnal, anonymous streets and hotels in *Vendredi Soir* (Friday Night, 2002) and *Trouble Every Day*. A preoccupation with hotels, vehicles, and other locations of transience is clear in Denis' films, which largely focus

on mobile or exiled characters who cross borders and move between spaces, including tourists, migrants, and transport workers. Her Instagram posts are also emblematic of the transnational nature of her style, work, and travels as a filmmaker. Her Instagram posts therefore share tendencies with her filmic corpus.



Fig. 5: An example of *décadrage* in Denis' Instagram photography (posted on 12 March 2021).

Aside from not featuring promotional materials, Denis' Instagram content can be categorised as so: the everyday; selfies; landscapes, travels, and cities; and images of friends, public figures, and family. These categories are typical of Instagram photography in general. Regardless of categorisation and the un-staged nature of some images, particularly in her ephemeral, mobile street photography, her Instagram appears to be curated. Denis has developed a distinctive aesthetic that reflects Instagram design trends but also shares qualities with her films. Because of her fragmented and spontaneous style, Denis' Instagram photography cannot be described as professional, as per Manovich's description of Instagram trends. Professional photography on Instagram takes into consideration high contrast/saturation, balanced composition, and photo-realism. Designed Instagram

photography, meanwhile, privileges flat-lay compositions, minimalism, low saturation, empty spaces, textures, and soft colours. Casual photos are more concerned with content than aesthetics, and select everyday moments deemed worth documenting. These categories are fluid, as Manovich notes, because Instagram users may decide to put more aesthetic or technical effort into certain posts.[45] Denis' profile is evidently both designed and casual. For instance, Denis' flat-lay still life compositions of fruit evoke designed photography. Mundane objects like dishes, weedy plants growing on a path, or clothes hangers with an amateurish, naturalistic, unfiltered look and spontaneous moments, such as selfies or street life, are more casual. The distinctive, consistent colour palette of her Instagram posts (sky blue, natural greens, cream, greys, pastels, and beige) suggests a certain curatorship, and reflects the colour palette of landscapes, cities, apartment interiors, and textures in her films. As an interesting parallel, Noé's (Figure 3) and Refn's (Figure 4) Instagram profiles feature multiple posts with a glowing, hued, or filtered lighting that evokes their consistently stylised mise-en-scène, as seen in Noé's *Climax* and Refn's *Drive*. Therefore, Instagram aesthetics can connect the auteur with the personal vision of their films.

One interesting example of a designed composition with casual content is a fourteen-second video posted by Denis consisting of a flat-lay shot of cleaning items in a kitchen sink, without words (Figure 6). The banality of this short video and other posts is also a feature of Denis' filmic work. As Beugnet highlights, with cinematographer Godard, the camera in Denis' films often picks up on the minutiae of daily life, selecting seemingly humble objects in the mise-en-scène and rendering them the frame's focus (e.g. a sunken tyre in *Beau Travail*).[46] Samples of Denis' Instagram compositions and colour palette are visible in Figure 7, which also show the repetition of some posts, like multiple images of clouds and rooftops from different angles, as well as mundane household objects like cups and plants. This repetition highlights a preoccupation in Denis' photography with pensively studying simple domestic objects, likely captured in her own home, kitchen, and through her window looking out at the cityscape from her point-of-view. While not promotional, Denis' Instagram is intimate and aesthetically rich.

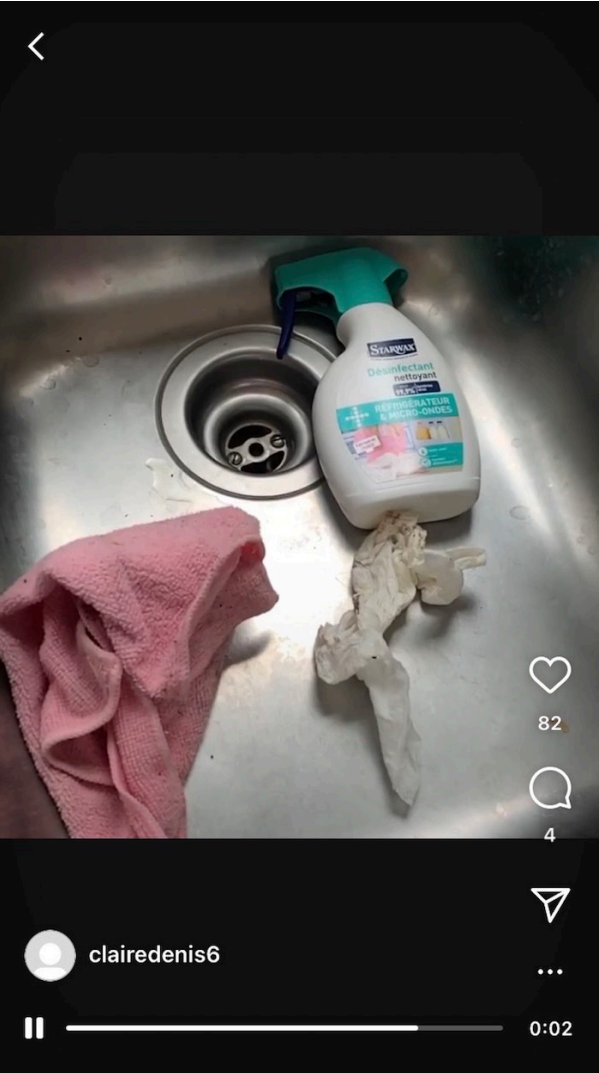


Fig. 6: A short video posted by Denis consisting of a flat-lay composition of a kitchen sink and cleaning items (posted on 24 April 2020).

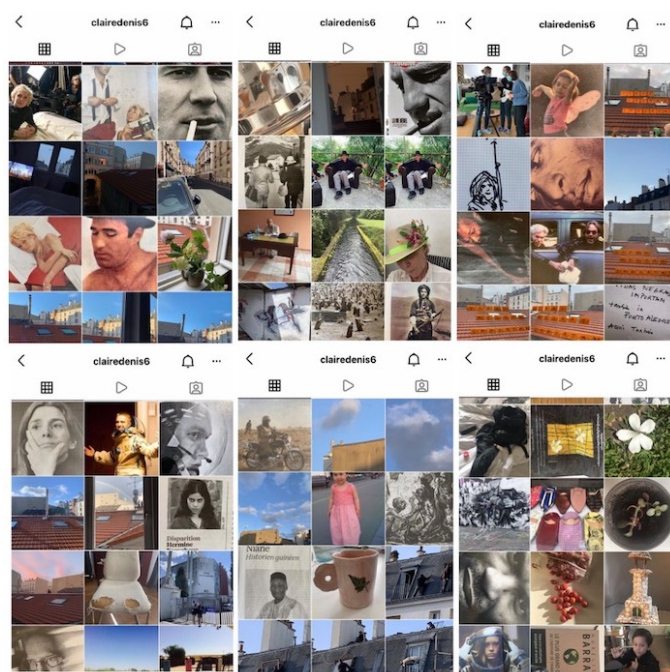


Fig. 7: Samples of Denis' Instagram colour palette and content.

Two features of Denis's Instagram – autobiography and intertextuality – are unique in the full spectrum of her oeuvre. Denis' Instagram profile is, in a sense, autobiographical because it documents her daily activities, memories, ideas, and interests. The theme of autobiography in her films has been discussed by critics since her debut feature *Chocolat* (1988), evoking partial elements of her childhood as the daughter of a French colonial administrator in Cameroon in the 1950s. However, Denis rarely inserts her own life into her films the way auteurs like Varda have. As St. John notes: 'Autobiographical elements are a narrative and stylistic preoccupation in [Varda's] work, from her marriage and motherhood to her friendships and career, and her Instagram maintains this interest.'^[47] Although Denis has shared thoughts and memories in interviews about her upbringing and career, this overt introspection and retrospection does not extend to her films. With the minor exceptions of her documentaries *Man No Run* (1989) and *Jacques Rivette, le veilleur* (Jacques Rivette, the Watcher, 1990), Denis does not appear in her own films. However, I argue that a more direct form of autobiography in Denis' corpus is her Instagram profile. Denis represents herself first and foremost when she posts selfies or her daily activities. Unlike her films, she is the main subject of her selfies (Figure 8). In selfies, her authorship is foregrounded and singular. The selfie necessitates self-representation and self-handling of the camera, made visible by an outstretched arm or in a mirror. Julia Eckel notes the 'displayed authorship' of selfies – 'a

photograph that shows its photographer in the moment of making the photo, thereby being at the same time a visual documentation of an act of authorship and its result'.[48] Selfies are an extremely common aspect of Instagram and one of its emblematic features. Through Instagram, Denis manifests a subjectivity that is less visible in her films. While not otherwise invested in self-representation, Denis' Instagram alternatively offers that fascinating source to followers, audiences, and critics.



Fig. 8: One of Denis' Instagram selfies (posted on 11 April 2021).

And, as a final insight into how Denis' oeuvre extends to her Instagram, intertextuality is an important part of her profile. Her Instagram posts connect to her films and form a curated gallery of visual interconnections. Although Denis often works with the same actors and collaborators, in similar locations, and with shared themes, her films are not overtly intertextual. Meanwhile, other auteurs like Varda refer to their own work to the point of self-reflexivity and in retrospective documentaries like *Varda, par Agnès* (2019). Like Varda's Instagram posts, Denis' use of Instagram's inherently autobiographical and intertextual linkages is valuable. Denis' Instagram profile features images of figures she admires, like the writer Frantz Fanon and actor Jean-Paul Belmondo (Figure 7), and those she has frequently

worked with, foregrounding a sense of retrospection, sentimentality, and personalism. When philosopher, writer, and friend Jean-Luc Nancy died in August 2021, Denis posted photos of Nancy to express her dismay and fondness for him (one caption simply states 'Merci') (Figure 7). Denis' *L'Intrus* (The Intruder, 2004) is based on Nancy's writing and Nancy has theorised Denis' *Beau Travail*.^[49] Their intellectual and creative connections are extended to the Instagram medium. Denis also announced friend and actor Michel Subor's death in January 2022 on Instagram (Figure 2), nostalgically citing his dual roles as Bruno Forestier in Jean-Luc Godard's *Le petit soldat* (The Little Soldier, 1963) and later in *Beau Travail*. Denis' handheld, shaky Instagram video of a Tindersticks concert also connects with her films (Tindersticks often score her films). Interestingly, the iPhone pictured in Denis' selfie (Figure 8) is likely the same one used by protagonist Sara (Juliette Binoche) as a prop in *Both Sides of the Blade*, because of its distinctive cover – David Hockney's painting 'A Bigger Splash' (1967). The recent presence of smartphones in Denis' cinema offers new interpretations for critics on the pervasive role of technology and often fractured communication in her films, particularly *Both Sides*, where smartphone communication enables the central affair. Denis' recent adoption of Instagram now also provides a medium for analysis of her developing oeuvre. Through the seemingly insignificant, everyday (but highly personal and intimate) object of the smartphone, Denis' cinema and her Instagram become intertextual and convergent. Denis' profile is therefore a novel glimpse into her life and work and possibly her most personal, autobiographical, retrospective, and intertextual work to date.

Conclusion

The analysis of Instagram as an extension of auteurism opens new discoveries into the contemporary aesthetic and commercial practices of notable auteurs in digital media. An auteur's work encompasses not only the films they make, but indeed as Corrigan, Grant, St. John, and others have argued, auteurs and auteurism can be observed and consumed beyond their films. Astruc's *caméra-stylo* is tangible in the touchscreen functions of Instagram. Corrigan's model on the 'commerce of auteurism' is emphasised by the promotional capabilities of the platform. Instagram offers auteurs the technological tools to create media that reflects their personal aesthetic.

While Instagram and cinema have contrasting functions, both are forms of aesthetic visual communication. Authorship can be front and centre to the auteur's processes of Instagram posting, whether in the form of selfies, photography, or self-promotion. Denis' profile does not embrace the promotional practices of other auteurs on the platform but expresses a recognisable aesthetic that shares tendencies with her filmic corpus and is reflective of Instagram photography trends. Autobiography and intertextuality in her Instagram also

offer new glimpses into her oeuvre. Therefore, it is important for the purposes of analytical discovery that Instagram in particular, as a popular social media platform, is discussed in contemporary auteur criticism.

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- [31] Grant 2008, p. 102.
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