

Crafting the Spy Thriller: Auteurism and Narrative Control in Aditya Dhar's *Dhurandhar*

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Abstract-- Cinema increasingly functions as a site of ideological negotiation where popular narrative forms intersect with political discourse and authorial expression. In contemporary Indian cinema, *Dhurandhar* (2025), written and directed by Aditya Dhar, represents a significant intervention in the spy-thriller genre through its scale, narrative ambition, and explicit engagement with questions of nationalism, intelligence ethics, and state power. Featuring an ensemble cast including Ranveer Singh, Akshaye Khanna, Sanjay Dutt, R. Madhavan, and Arjun Rampal, the film foregrounds covert operations and institutional decision-making while resisting simplistic hero-centric storytelling.

Grounded in Auteur Theory, this paper examines *Dhurandhar* as a director-driven cinematic text shaped by a coherent authorial vision.

Drawing upon qualitative textual analysis and thematic interpretation supported by secondary data, the study analyzes narrative structure, visual strategy, character architecture, and ideological framing to demonstrate how Dhar asserts narrative authority within a commercially dominant genre. The paper argues that *Dhurandhar* transcends formulaic action cinema by functioning as an authored political narrative in which style, theme, and narrative control operate in concert. By situating the film within global spy cinema traditions and contemporary Indian socio-political discourse, the study contributes to auteur scholarship in non-Western contexts and expands critical understanding of authorship in industrially complex popular cinema.

Keywords: Auteur Theory, Indian Spy Cinema, Directorial Vision, Narrative Authority, Nationalism, Political Thriller, Contemporary Bollywood



I. INTRODUCTION: CINEMA AS AN AUTHORED TEXT

Aditya Dhar has emerged as a seasoned filmmaker in contemporary Indian cinema through works marked by thematic consistency and narrative discipline. Beginning with *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (2019), he established a directorial focus on nationalism, institutional power, and individual sacrifice, articulated through controlled storytelling and psychological realism. *Dhurandhar* represents a significant progression in this trajectory, refining his auteurial signature through layered espionage narrative structures and morally complex characterization. Together, these films position Dhar as an evolving auteur who has contributed to the formal and ideological maturation of the Indian political thriller and spy genres.

Spy thrillers occupy a distinctive position within popular cinema, functioning simultaneously as entertainment spectacles and as narrative spaces where political anxieties, national identity, and institutional power are negotiated. Unlike conventional action films that privilege physical conflict and heroic excess, espionage narratives are structured around secrecy, information control, moral ambiguity, and strategic delay. These qualities make the spy thriller a fertile terrain for examining directorial authorship, as narrative authority is exercised not only through what is shown on screen, but also through what is concealed, postponed, or selectively revealed.

In this context, auteur theory offers a critical framework to investigate how individual creative vision operates within an industrially driven genre.

In contemporary Indian cinema, the spy thriller has undergone a significant transformation, evolving from formulaic patriotic narratives into more layered political texts that engage with surveillance culture, intelligence ethics, and the psychological cost of national service. Aditya Dhar's *Dhurandhar* (2025) emerges as a notable intervention within this evolving landscape. Written and directed by Dhar, the film positions espionage as a system of institutional decision-making rather than individual heroism, foregrounding narrative control, ideological tension, and ethical conflict. Featuring an ensemble cast and an expansive narrative structure, *Dhurandhar* resists a singular protagonist-driven arc and instead constructs a network of intersecting perspectives shaped by power, loyalty, and consequence.

Auteur theory, originating in mid-twentieth-century French film criticism and later refined by Anglo-American scholars, conceptualizes the director as the organizing intelligence behind a film's thematic coherence and stylistic consistency. Rather than treating authorship as personal expression alone, contemporary auteur criticism examines how directors assert narrative authority within collaborative and commercial production systems.

In this regard, *Dhurandhar* provides a compelling case study. Dhar's control over pacing, spatial design, ensemble orchestration, and ideological framing reveals a sustained authorial presence that transcends genre convention and market expectation.

This paper examines *Dhurandhar* through an auteurist lens to analyze how narrative structure, visual strategy, and character configuration function as instruments of directorial control. By situating the film within both global spy cinema traditions and the socio-political context of Indian popular cinema, the study explores how Dhar negotiates nationalism, moral ambiguity, and narrative authority. In doing so, the paper contributes to expanding auteur scholarship beyond Western cinematic frameworks and underscores the relevance of director-centric analysis in understanding contemporary genre cinema as a form of cultural and political discourse.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

The primary objective of this study is to examine how *Dhurandhar* functions as an auteur-driven cinematic text within contemporary Indian popular cinema. The paper seeks to understand the ways in which Aditya Dhar's directorial vision shapes narrative form, ideological meaning, and audience engagement.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does Aditya Dhar assert auteurial control over narrative structure and cinematic form in *Dhurandhar*?

2. In what ways does the film negotiate nationalism, institutional power, and moral ambiguity through genre conventions?
3. How does *Dhurandhar* contribute to the evolution of spy cinema within the context of Indian and global film traditions?

Engaging with *Dhurandhar* is comparable to reading a politically charged novel rather than merely watching an action film. From its opening moments, the film establishes itself as a carefully structured narrative governed by deliberate authorial intent. Auteur theory allows the film to be interpreted as a cinematic text in which meaning emerges through narrative design, visual composition, and thematic consistency rather than isolated scenes or spectacles.

The opening sequence functions as a prologue, employing fragmented imagery, intelligence briefings, and restrained sound design to immerse the viewer in a world of secrecy and surveillance. Rather than offering immediate exposition, the film withholds information, encouraging interpretive engagement. This narrative restraint signals Aditya Dhar's confidence as a storyteller and positions him as an authorial presence guiding the audience through a complex narrative terrain. Approaching *Dhurandhar* through an auteurist lens thus enables an understanding of the film as a cohesive work shaped by a singular creative vision.

Interwoven Narratives And Character Architecture



One of the defining narrative strategies of *Dhurandhar* is its intricate interlacing of multiple character arcs across parallel storylines. The film moves beyond a singular heroic journey to explore a network of ideologically and emotionally charged characters, including Rehman Daccani, a formidable antagonist; conflicted intelligence officials; and operatives navigating loyalty, duty, and personal cost. Performances by Akshaye Khanna, Ranveer Singh, Sanjay Dutt, R. Madhavan, and Arjun Rampal contribute to a textured ensemble where narrative agency is distributed rather than centralized.

These characters do not function as isolated archetypes; instead, their trajectories intersect at crucial moments, generating moral tension and narrative momentum. Dhar's orchestration of these interdependencies reflects authorial control over narrative rhythm and thematic emphasis. Audience responses and critical commentary suggest that this narrative complexity leaves a lasting impression, with viewers recalling not only action sequences but also ethical dilemmas and emotional stakes. The blending of character arcs exemplifies how auteur-driven cinema can create sustained engagement through narrative coherence and psychological depth.

Global Reception and Transnational Readings

The international circulation of *Dhurandhar* highlights how politically inflected cinema encounters varied interpretations across cultural and geopolitical contexts. While the film achieved notable commercial success in several overseas markets, its reception was not uniform. In certain regions, concerns over geopolitical representation influenced distribution decisions, underscoring the sensitivity of spy narratives rooted in contemporary political realities.

Conversely, audiences in Western markets largely engaged with *Dhurandhar* as a high-intensity espionage thriller, focusing on its narrative ambition and production scale. This divergence in reception demonstrates how the film operates simultaneously as a nationally grounded narrative and a globally circulating cultural product. Importantly, despite these contextual differences, Dhar's narrative control and stylistic coherence remain evident, reinforcing the notion of auteurial presence even as meanings shift across borders.

III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Auteur Theory and Indian Cinema

Auteur Theory emerged in the mid-twentieth century as a critical approach that privileged the director's creative agency over studio-driven production models. Scholars such as Truffaut, Sarris, and Wollen argued that recurring thematic concerns and stylistic signatures mark the director as the true author of a film. In the Indian context, auteurist scholarship has explored filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray, Mani Ratnam, and Anurag Kashyap, illustrating how personal vision intersects with socio-cultural realities.

Although academic literature on Aditya Dhar remains limited due to his relatively recent emergence, journalistic and critical discourse identifies consistent patterns in his work. His films frequently engage with nationalism, geopolitical tension, and institutional power, blending real events with fictionalized narratives. *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (2019) established these tendencies, which *Dhurandhar* expands through greater narrative scale and complexity.

Spy Cinema as Auteurial Space

Spy cinema offers a unique terrain for auteurist expression, as it relies heavily on narrative control, delayed revelation, and ideological framing. Unlike spectacle-driven action genres, espionage narratives privilege information, silence, and moral ambiguity. In *Dhurandhar*, Dhar adopts these conventions while structuring the film into chapter-like segments, echoing the rhythm of political thrillers and espionage literature. Surveillance imagery, confined spaces, and abrupt narrative shifts function as stylistic markers of authorial intent, reinforcing the film's literary and political texture.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in film studies and cultural analysis. Qualitative methodology is particularly suited to auteur analysis, as it enables close engagement with cinematic form, narrative construction, and ideological meaning rather than quantifiable measurement. The film is treated as a cultural text situated within industrial, political, and historical contexts.



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Theoretical Framework

The analysis is anchored in Auteur Theory as articulated by François Truffaut and later systematized by Andrew Sarris, with supplementary insights from narrative theory and genre studies. Auteurism is employed not as a romanticized notion of individual genius but as an analytical framework to examine recurring stylistic patterns, thematic preoccupations, and narrative control that signal directorial authorship within collaborative filmmaking practices.

Spy cinema theory and political film studies further inform the framework, allowing the study to contextualize *Dhurandhar* within global traditions of espionage narratives where secrecy, surveillance, and ideological conflict shape cinematic form.

Data Sources and Analytical Procedure

The study relies on triangulated secondary data, including national and international newspaper reports, trade analyses, critical film reviews, and audience discourse from digital platforms. Multiple close viewings of the film were conducted to identify recurring visual motifs, narrative rhythms, dialogue patterns, and character configurations. These observations were coded thematically to examine how narrative authority and ideological meaning are constructed across the film.

In recent interviews and public statements regarding *Dhurandhar*, Aditya Dhar has articulated both his creative philosophy and the intensity of the filmmaking journey. Reflecting on the production process, he noted that “every actor, every HoD gave their heart and soul... everyone worked 16 to 18 hours continuously for one and a half years, and not even once did anyone complain”, underscoring his commitment to rigorous collaboration and collective effort. Dhar’s response to acclaim from veteran filmmaker Ram Gopal Varma further reveals his deep personal and professional investment: “The filmmaker in me feels challenged... the boy who came to Mumbai... finally feels seen”, suggesting both gratitude and a renewed drive for artistic ambition. Additionally, responding to praise from mentor Priyadarshan, Dhar described how the support of established filmmakers shaped his ethos, stating that his mentor “treated me like an equal... gave me dignity, trust, and love... I will forever be your student first”, highlighting the influence of his formative experiences on his directorial outlook.

Scope and Limitations

As *Dhurandhar* is a recent release, the study is limited by the absence of extensive peer-reviewed academic literature and access to primary production materials such as the official screenplay. The analysis therefore emphasizes interpretive depth over empirical generalization. Future research may extend this study through comparative analysis with other contemporary spy films or through audience reception studies using empirical methods.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in textual and thematic analysis. Given the focus on auteurial vision and narrative authority, qualitative methods allow for close reading of cinematic form, narrative structure, and ideological content. The film is treated as a cultural text embedded within industrial, political, and social contexts.

Data Sources

The analysis draws upon secondary data, including newspaper reports, critical reviews, trade publications, and audience responses from digital platforms. Multiple viewings of the film were conducted to systematically document narrative patterns, visual motifs, and dialogue structures. This triangulated approach enhances analytical reliability and situates the film within broader critical and cultural discourse.

Analytical Framework

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring motifs such as nationalism, surveillance, institutional loyalty, and moral ambiguity. These themes were examined in relation to narrative structure, visual style, and character development to assess how they collectively reflect Dhar’s authorial signature.

V. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Narrative Authority and Visual Strategy

Dhurandhar unfolds as a deliberately paced narrative that prioritizes observation over exposition. Long takes, muted color palettes, and controlled sound design establish an atmosphere of tension and uncertainty. Rather than relying on excessive dialogue or rapid editing, Dhar allows visual composition to carry narrative weight, aligning with theories of visual narration.

Action sequences, though large in scale, are integrated into the narrative rather than functioning as isolated spectacles. Spatial coherence and restrained editing ensure that action advances character and theme. This disciplined approach underscores Dhar's narrative authority and distinguishes the film from formulaic genre productions.

National Identity and Moral Complexity

Nationalism emerges as a central thematic axis, but it is articulated through ethical struggle rather than simplistic glorification. Characters are portrayed as institutional agents whose loyalty demands personal sacrifice and moral compromise. This framing humanizes the spy figure and invites audiences to engage with the emotional costs of national service.

While some critical responses interpret the film's ideological stance as assertive, the presence of debate itself attests to the film's cultural significance. By embedding nationalism within personal and institutional dilemmas, *Dhurandhar* reflects an auteurist engagement with ideology rather than uncritical affirmation.

Ensemble Performance and Distributed Agency

The film's ensemble structure reinforces its thematic complexity. Narrative agency is shared among multiple characters, each representing different ideological positions and ethical choices. This distribution of focus allows for a multi-perspectival narrative that deepens engagement and resists singular heroism. Dhar's orchestration of these interactions exemplifies auteurial control over narrative balance and emotional resonance.

VI. CONCLUSION

Through an auteurist lens, *Dhurandhar* emerges as a distinctly authored cinematic text that demonstrates how individual directorial vision can assert itself within the industrial framework of mainstream Indian cinema. Aditya Dhar's control over narrative structure, visual grammar, ensemble orchestration, and ideological framing positions the film beyond conventional genre spectacle and aligns it with politically inflected auteur cinema.

The study demonstrates that *Dhurandhar* employs espionage not merely as a narrative genre but as a storytelling methodology that privileges restraint, ambiguity, and institutional complexity. Nationalism in the film is articulated through ethical struggle and personal sacrifice rather than uncomplicated triumphalism, reinforcing the film's thematic maturity.

By distributing narrative agency across an ensemble cast and structuring the film into chapter-like segments, Dhar reinforces his narrative authority while inviting active audience interpretation.

From a scholarly perspective, this paper contributes to expanding auteur theory within non-Western cinematic contexts, particularly in relation to contemporary Indian popular cinema where director-centric analysis remains underdeveloped. *Dhurandhar* thus serves as a significant case study for understanding how authorship, ideology, and genre intersect in globally circulating commercial films. The findings underscore the continued relevance of auteur theory as a critical tool for analyzing modern cinema shaped by both creative vision and industrial imperatives.

Viewed through the lens of auteur theory, *Dhurandhar* emerges as a director-driven cinematic text marked by narrative ambition, stylistic coherence, and ideological engagement. Aditya Dhar's control over narrative structure, visual language, and thematic emphasis positions him as a significant contemporary auteur within Indian cinema. The film's blend of espionage, political drama, and ensemble storytelling demonstrates how commercial cinema can function as a complex cultural discourse.

By extending auteurist analysis to contemporary Indian spy cinema, this study contributes to broader discussions on authorship beyond Western film traditions. *Dhurandhar* exemplifies how individual creative vision can assert itself within industrial constraints, offering a compelling case for the continued relevance of auteur theory in analyzing modern, globally circulating cinema.

This study set out to examine Aditya Dhar's *Dhurandhar* through the intersecting lenses of auteur theory, ideological representation, and genre evolution. In addressing the first research question, the analysis establishes that Dhar exercises a high degree of auteurial control over both narrative structure and cinematic form. The film's calibrated pacing, interwoven narrative trajectories, restrained visual stylization, and emphasis on psychological realism collectively constitute a coherent authorial signature, positioning Dhar as a significant creative force within contemporary Indian spy cinema.

With respect to the second research question, the findings indicate that *Dhurandhar* negotiates nationalism, institutional authority, and moral ambiguity in a manner that departs from formulaic patriotic discourse. Rather than reaffirming unproblematic state-centric heroism, the film constructs a complex ideological terrain in which loyalty, duty, and ethical responsibility remain persistently contested.



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Through established genre conventions, Dhurembeds critical reflection on power structures and national identity, thereby enhancing the film's political and cultural resonance.

Finally, in response to the third research question, the study demonstrates that *Dhurandhar* contributes meaningfully to the ongoing evolution of the spy thriller in both Indian and global contexts. By synthesizing transnational narrative strategies with culturally specific concerns, the film advances a hybrid model of espionage storytelling that reflects contemporary geopolitical sensibilities while expanding the formal and thematic scope of the Indian spy genre.

Taken together, these findings confirm that *Dhurandhar* operates not merely as a commercial genre product but as a significant auteur-driven text that reconfigures ideological representation and genre practice. The study thus underscores the relevance of auteurist analysis for understanding emerging trends in Indian popular cinema and invites further scholarly engagement with the shifting aesthetics and politics of twenty-first-century spy narratives.

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