

California State University, Northridge

THE AUTHOR THEORY:  
II  
AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in

MASS COMMUNICATION

by

Paul Michael Sedelnik

January, 1975

The thesis of Paul Michael Sedelnik is approved:

California State University, Northridge

January, 1975

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

		Page
	ABSTRACT. . . . .	v
Chapter		
1.	INTRODUCTION	1
	<u>La Politique des Auteurs</u> . . . . .	3
	Andre Bazin. . . . .	6
	France's New Wave. . . . .	8
2.	<u>LA POLITIQUE DES AUTEURS IN AMERICA</u>	10
	Sarris and Bazin . . . . .	12
	Sarris's Three Criteria. . . . .	15
	The America Cinema . . . . .	17
	The Forest and the Trees . . . . .	18
	The Auteur Theory . . . . .	22
	Sarris's Categories. . . . .	24
3.	PAULINE KAEL'S CIRCLES AND SQUARES	27
	The Outer Circle . . . . .	28
	The Middle Circle . . . . .	29
	The Inner Circle . . . . .	31
	Dwight Macdonald . . . . .	35
	Some Additional Views. . . . .	40
	Coup De Grace . . . . .	43

4.	CONCLUSIONS . . . . .	44
	FOOTNOTES . . . . .	49
	BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	62

ABSTRACT

THE AUTEUR THEORY:  
AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

by

Paul Michael Sedelnik

MASS COMMUNICATION

January, 1975

This thesis traces the development of the auteur theory of film. Beginning in France, this concept's genesis from an article by Francois Truffaut is discussed and evaluated. The evolution of Truffaut's phrase la politique des auteurs into a conscious policy of favoring certain directors, while opposing others, is probed to determine what criteria were used by Truffaut and his associates. Andre Bazin's comments on la politique des auteurs are discussed; his article was probably the first to critique the auteurist's system of values as developed by the French Critics.

La politique des auteurs was imported to America by the critic Andrew Sarris. In his article "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962," Sarris coined the term "auteur theory" and outlined his version of this theory as a critical device to reassess and elevate the Hollywood director. Sarris's major work in this area, The American Cinema, is appraised for its attempt to utilize the auteur con-

cept as a theory of film history. The Sarris format of ranking and cataloging directors is also evaluated.

The objections to the auteur theory are listed and analyzed. Pauline Kael's famous article "Circles and Squares" is extensively considered. Arguments used by Dwight Macdonald, Stanley J. Solomon, George W. Linden, and others are noted. There is also a review of the structuralist school of auteurism as represented by Peter Wollen's writings.

It was determined that Andrew Sarris's use of the auteur theory was not confined to its application as a device to reassess the American cinema; his employment of this theory to stimulate, debate and help raise the level of film scholarship were other significant factors in his utilization of this approach.

Although Sarris has tended to retreat from his earliest, and most rigid formulation of auteurism, he still embraces the approach as a necessary first step in the scholarly consideration of film. In concluding, the widespread influence of the auteur theory is discussed in relation to its impact on film in general. Suggested areas of further study are indicated as important to understanding the full significance of this theory on film production, aesthetics, and academic study.

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

To begin to understand the auteur theory it is necessary to trace its origins back to the source of its genesis. It is clear that the initial exposition of the attitude that produced this film theory occurred in France during January, 1954. This is the publication date of the film magazine Cahiers du Cinema, No. 31, in which the article "Une Certain Tendance du Cinema Francais" by Francois Truffaut appeared for the first time. <sup>1</sup> This was Truffaut's first major article for this significant film journal, which was then in existence for only three years. It is considered a landmark article not only for Truffaut, but for the magazine itself due to the unifying effect it had on the youthful contributors that had gathered under the Cahiers banner. Truffaut's article gave them a common policy and clear statement of values with which to judge each film they viewed. <sup>2</sup>

Truffaut's article violently attacked the classical French cinema, leveling a broadside attack on this establishment cinema's "tradition of quality." <sup>3</sup> Truffaut traced the development of this tradition from the "poetic realism" of Marcel Carne and Jacques Prevert in the 1930's, through to the "psychological realism" of the post-war French cinema. <sup>4</sup> He characterized an elite group of

directors who made films in this "tradition of quality" as "faceless technicians" who made predictable films of a highly literary nature scripted by a handful of writers. <sup>5</sup> Truffaut blamed these directors for slavishly and unimaginatively allowing a coterie of screenwriters to dictate to the, the directors simply translating their words into images. Not being filmmakers, these writers were neither interested or capable, according to Truffaut, of creating scenarios that were concerned with the visual aspects of the medium. Instead, they were producing literary works that failed to capitalize on the cinema's great potential. The "tradition of quality" this group pursued also led to a corruption of the famous books they concentrated on adapting for the screen as Truffaut saw it. <sup>6</sup>

The vehemence of Truffaut's assault is best shown by this passage:

I cannot see any possibility of peaceful coexistence between this "quality tradition" and a "cinema d' auteurs." It is the former which has turned the public against many of the masterpieces of the latter. . . . To put an end to it, why don't we all . . . turn to adapting literary masterpieces, of which there are probably a few left, and of course add a burial scene here and there? Then we'll all be in the "quality tradition" up to our necks, and the French cinema with its daring "psychological realism," its "harsh truth," its "rigour" and its "ambiguity" will be one great morbid funeral, ready to be heaved out of the Billancourt studios and stacked up in the cemetery so appropriately awaiting alongside. . . . <sup>7</sup>

The intent of Truffaut's article was simply to point out what he considered to be an intolerable situation in the French cinema at that time. Truffaut was concerned however, as were many of his associates on Cahiers du Cinema, with putting their beliefs

3

into practice; they not only wanted to write about movies, but to make their own films.

### LA POLITIQUE DES AUTEURS

The doctrine that sprang from Truffaut's article became known as la politique des auteurs (the politics of authorship). From this point on the Cahiers critics had a common bond as they sought out the directors they felt were cinema's true authors (auteurs). Cahiers du Cinema after this time took a decidedly polemical position on individual film directors. They were for Hitchcock, Hawks Renoir, Ophuls, and against Autant-Lara, Clement and Allegret. Cahiers also began its famous series of interviews with film directors that would help to elucidate the politique des auteurs doctrine. 8

The basis for the framework of la politique des auteurs is usually linked to a remark by the French director Jean Renoir speaking in 1939:

It used to be the era of the actor: the film was equivalent to its star, and so we had the Mary Pickfords, the Douglas Fairbankses, the Greta Garbos. Then we had the age of the directors (metteurs-en scene): and the films of King Vidor, Sternberg, Feyder, Clair. Now a new epoch is beginning: the epoch of the writers (auteurs); because from now on it is the scenarist who will create the film. . . . 9

Although it is not all that clear from this translation of Renoir's words, he was pointing to the need for the director to also write his own films. Another translation of this same statement

4

should serve to clarify this point:

. . . . the time of the directors is over, and that of the author about to dawn: people will write their own scenarios, then go to the studios and realize their own conceptions. 10

Truffaut took this idea of the filmmaker as author and added a passionate commitment to the cinema, outraged that this form was being perverted at the hands of people "who didn't love the cinema" (Truffaut's emphasis, indicating his incredulous view of this state of affairs). 11

By examining Truffaut's reviews of those directors he considered auteurs, it becomes evident what qualities he will try for his own films; a clear and consistent expression of an individual personality. As Truffaut puts it:

x I don't believe in good or bad films; I believe in good and bad directors. . . . Essentially, a gifted and intelligent director remains gifted and intelligent whatever the film he's making. So I'm in favor of judging, when it's a question of judging, not films but directors. I will never like a film by Delannoy. I will always like a film made by Renoir. It seems to me that tomorrow's film will be even more personal than a novel, more individual and autobiographical than a confession or a private diary. . . . Tomorrow's film will be an act of love. 12

Jean Giraudoux, the French writer and friend of Renoir's had said something similar some time before this: "There are no works, there are only authors." 13 Truffaut had also quoted a line from Astruc's famous article on the Camera-style concept: "It's not what he does that makes an artist, it's what he is." 14 Truffaut the critic and Truffaut the director are one personality; he was seeking after higher truths and timeless values that would enable him to

5

distinguish between good and bad, pure and debased. As Truffaut matured as a critic his view of things became less absolute and considerably more flexible. However, for most of his period as a critic on Cahiers du Cinema certain directors were condemned as hopelessly bad, while others, cited as auteurs, were by definition destined to create masterpieces of the cinema. 15

Truffaut also called for the abandonment of the studios, advocating on-location shooting in order to achieve a greater realism as well as lowering production costs. 16

In choosing performers for films, Truffaut was against the use of stars, both on the level of economics (they were too expensive), and aesthetically (they were capable only of stereotyped roles). 17

Furthermore, he was aware of the power that stars wielded, and he was wary of any condition that would erode the director's control over the completed work.

Truffaut felt it was vital to the development of a new personal cinema to reduce the costs of filmmaking to their absolute essentials. In this way, film would be opened up to a vast new generation of potential auteurs; they would be able to express themselves as readily in this medium as any other, without the need for technical competence or commercial backing. Truffaut even went so far as to say:

Anyone can be a director, anyone can be a scriptwriter, anyone can be an actor; it's only the job of the cameraman that requires some rudimentary training. 18

6

ANDRE BAZIN

While Renoir was a model of the true auteur to the Cahiers critics, Andre Bazin, probably France's greatest film critic, was their mentor and a father figure to Truffaut having served as his unofficial guardian for many years. It was under Bazin's aegis that Cahiers du Cinema was formed during 1951 along with Jacques Doniol-  
19  
Valcroze and others.

As it happened, Bazin was the first critic to deal significantly with the assumptions of the auteur position, his article entitled "De la Politique des Auteurs" appearing in the April, 1957  
20  
issue of Cahiers du Cinema.

In his analysis of La politique des auteurs Bazin notes that this "theory" evolved from a body of critical writings and film reviews that appeared in Cahiers du Cinema after Truffaut's initial  
21  
article.

According to Bazin, what the auteur critics were attempting to do in the film medium was to apply the same kind of critical approach that had been used and accepted in other forms such as music, painting, and literature. He felt it was "evident that the Politique des Auteurs is only an application to cinema of a notion  
22  
generally admitted in the individual arts."

Bazin, however, felt that most auteurists went too far in their subjective utilization of this method. Here's what Bazin had to say:

Of the equation Auteur + Subject = Work they wish to retain only the Auteur, the Subject being reduced to zero. Certain ones will pretend to agree with me that, the strength of the Auteur being equal to others, a good subject is obviously worth more than a bad one; but the most frank or the most insolent will swear to me that it is just as if their preference ran on the contrary to little B films, where the banality of the scenario leaves more room for the personal contribution of the Auteur. 23

Bazin also questioned whether an approach that assumes a linear kind of progress is as valid for the cinema as it is for the more traditional arts. As Bazin pointed out, the creative process in music, painting, or literature can be narrowed down to a one-to-one ratio quite easily. In film however it seems to be a much complicated process; in Bazin's view the multitude of artistic variables and an ever changing production mode tend to weaken the claim for the

auteur's cumulative artistic advancement. 24 Bazin also criticized the auteurist's value system for placing the ability to simply identify and explain the director's artistic contribution in a particular work over an evaluation that ideally would be a sensitive, tasteful

appraisal of the total effect. 25 Furthermore, Bazin was bothered by the dogmatic nature of the assertions these auteur theorists were issuing; their subjectivity in determining who would be designated an auteur being all too apparent. Bazin said that he saw "the

danger of an esthetic cult of personality" developing. 26 Also, as was seen in Truffaut's article, he was aware of the negativism inherent in this doctrine when dealing with non-auteur films.

Worst still, Bazin feels, is the policy of applauding movies not worthy of being lauded simply because they were directed by persons

labelled auteurs.

Bazin's final thoughts on the auteur theory (he died not long after this article was written) indicate his ambivalence on the subject. He concludes:

The Politique des Auteurs appears to me to harbor and protect an essential critical truth which the cinema needs more than all the other arts, exactly to the extent that the act of true artistic creation is more uncertain and menaced in it than elsewhere. But its exclusive practice would lead to another peril: the negation of the work to the benefit of the exaltation of its Auteur. . . .

Useful and fruitful, it seems to me thus, independently of its polemic value, that (the politique des auteurs) should be completed by other approaches to the cinematographic fact which would restore to the film its value as a work. This is not to deny the role of the Auteur, but to restore to him the preposition (of) without which the noun Auteur is only a lame concept. "Auteur," without doubt, but of what? 28

#### FRANCE'S NEW WAVE

For many of the critics on the staff of Cahiers du Cinema la politique des auteurs was both a means and an end. From the very beginning, Truffaut and his associates were interested in practicing what they were preaching. As C. G. Crisp describes this early period of Truffaut's:

All his critical activity was based on the propositions contained in the original article, and aimed at transforming the existing cinema into a more personal means of expression in which he and his friends would eventually take part. 29

Truffaut and his fellow film enthusiasts from Cahiers endeavored at every opportunity to assist one another in their com-

mon goal of creating with film. For example, Truffaut made his first film, a sixteen millimeter effort, just this very way sometime during 1955. His cameraman was Jacques Rivette, his film editor Alain Resnais, while the entire film was shot in Jacques Doniecl-

30

Valcroze's apartment. Although these early attempts were often quite amateurish it gave these men the opportunity to work at their chosen craft; it gave them time to learn, to experiment, and to grow.

Slowly building on the periphery of the French film industry, this energetic creative force finally exploded internationally during 1959 with the critical success of France's new generation of filmmakers at the Cannes film festival. Dubbed the Nouvelle Vague (New Wave), they immediately established themselves as an important movement that resurrected the French cinema to a position of inter-

31

national recognition. The French film hasn't been the same since. This New Wave of youthful directors demonstrated exactly what they had in mind; by excercising the very authorial control over their own films they saw themselves as the vanguard of the new personal cinema. Befitting this view of their art and their objectives, these directors "listed their names as if they were, in fact, 'authors': Les Cousins (1959) was un film de Claude Chabrol, as

32

David Copperfield is a novel by Charles Dickens."

## Chapter 2

### LA POLITIQUE DES AUTEURS IN AMERICA

Although la politique des auteurs was by no means unknown in America, it took an article by Andrew Sarris to bring this doctrine to widespread attention in the New World. His article "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962" appeared in Film Culture magazine's Winter 1962-63 edition, beginning an aesthetic tug of war that continues to this day. Sarris popularized the term "auteur theory" in his article which praised the French politique, creating a revolution in American film criticism that resulted in the following condition by 1969:

The New York Times had been converted into a veritable auteur shrine; its first- and second-string critics adhered closely to Sarris' tastes and standards, and its Almanac welcomed the word auteur into the English language. . . . Film societies mounted ambitious retrospectives of directors. . . . Publishers commissioned extended studies. . . . The Revolution was victorious. <sup>1</sup>

It is ironic that by the time Sarris wrote his article of praise Truffaut had disavowed la politique des auteurs, stating that it had been primarily used as a polemical device to help clear a path for the new French cinema.

Describing his paper as being a credo rather than a manifesto "expressed in formless notes rather than in formal brief," Sarris

begins the first part of his article with the same Tolstoy quotation that prefaced Andre Bazin's "De la Politique des Auteurs":<sup>2</sup>

Goethe? Shakespeare? Everything signed with their names is considered good, and one wracks one's brains to find beauty in their stupidities and failures, thus distorting the general taste. All these great talents, the Goethes, the Shakespeares, the Beethovens, the Michalangelos, created, side by side with their masterpieces, works not merely mediocre, but quite simply frightful.<sup>3</sup>

Sarris notes that la politique des auteurs antedates the cinema, citing the Tolstoy observation as partial evidence.<sup>4</sup> To give an example, Sarris mentions the historical politique that has been utilized in assessing Elizabethan drama. This policy decreed that every Shakespearean play be read before proceeding to any of his contemporaries.<sup>5</sup> Sarris wonders aloud if this procedure isn't unjust to a Jonson or a Marlowe. He decides that it really isn't unfair, since artistic reputations are superficialities, and on this level the auteur theory is only a figure of speech.<sup>6</sup> Sarris concludes that even as a figure of speech, the auteur theory is more beneficial than harmful, since it serves as a cultural reference point for the layman, providing contact with art that, however tenuous, might otherwise not exist.<sup>7</sup>

Next, Sarris discusses what he calls the iconoclastic argument that is sometimes used to oppose this figure of speech:

We will be solemnly informed that The Gambler was a pot-boiler for Dostoyevsky in the most literal sense of the word. The trouble with such iconoclasm is that it presupposes an encyclopedic awareness of the auteur in question. If one is familiar with every Beethoven composition, Wellington's Victory,

in itself, will hardly tip the scale toward Mozart, Bach, or Schubert. Yet that is the issue raised by the auteur theory. If not Beethoven, who? And why? 8

Sarris defends the ranking of film directors by asking: "Is it possible to honor a work of art without honoring the artist involved?" 9 Sarris doesn't think so. He also feels that many critics have condescended to the medium, which helps to explain their defensive attitudes concerning the concept of film as an art form, a contention still debatable to some of them.

Sarris says that he is aware of the potential for abuse inherent in the auteur theory's formulation. He even acknowledges the fact that, at their worst, auteur critiques are inferior to standard film reviewing as practiced in America. 10

SARRIS AND BAZIN

Sarris goes on to discuss what he calls Andre Bazin's "friendly critique" of la politique des auteurs which appeared in the Cahiers du Cinema edition of April, 1957. 11 Since he regards Bazin as "the greatest film critic who ever lived," Sarris goes out of his way to accommodate Bazin's argument. 12 He notes Bazin's conception of film as a universal entity, which to Sarris accounts for Bazin's need to criticize the politique; Sarris implies that Bazin was equally criticizing the deliberate overstatement used for dramatic effect by the French auteurists. Sarris describes Bazin as a generous critic, which, he says, helps to explain his defense of

even secondary directors.

A discussion of the careers of John Huston and Vincente Minnelli is used as a test case for the auteur theory. Sarris characterizes Huston as "a forgotten man with a few actor's classics behind him," while Minnelli "does represent something in the cinema today." 13  
 Bazin was "wrong" in his comparative analysis of these two directors, being equally just in his assessment of both, says Sarris, while 14  
 auteur critics in 1957 denigrated Huston and were kind to Minnelli. Sarris feels that history has borne out the correctness of the auteur position in this matter:

As Santayana has remarked: "It is a great advantage for a system of philosophy to be substantially true." If the auteur critics of the 1950's had not scored so many coups of clairvoyance, the auteur theory would not be worth discussing in the 1960's. I must add that, at the time, I would have agreed with Bazin on this and every other objection to the auteur theory, but subsequent history, that history about which Bazin was always so mystical, has substantially confirmed most of the principles of the auteur theory. 15

In the end, Sarris emphasizes the subtlety of Bazin's reasoning along with its tentative probable nature. He mentions that Bazin may be suspects himself as one of the Cahiers group, as far as some contemporary critics of the auteur theory are concerned. This is due, Sarris believes, to the qualified approval that Bazin has held for the auteur theory as a "relatively objective method of evaluating film," as opposed to the dangers inherent in impressionistic and ideological 16  
 criticism.

The most important revision of la politique des auteurs made by Sarris was in redirecting the argument solely toward the American film and its corps of directors. Sarris mentions that the auteur

theory has been restricted in its application by some critics to a handful of directors specializing in very personal films, to the exclusion of the Hollywood director who normally works by assignment. Sarris even admits that he himself was so inclined to this view not long before. He says that at this time he would have considered it "unthinkable" to discuss, in the same context, "a 'commercial' director like Hitchcock and a 'pure' director like Bresson."<sup>17</sup>

However, Sarris now believes Hitchcock to be a greater film artist than Bresson:

. . . . by every criterion of excellence and, further, that, film for film, director for director, the American cinema has been consistently superior to that of the rest of the world from 1915 through 1962. Consequently, I now regard the auteur theory primarily as a critical device for recording the history of the American cinema, the only cinema in the world worth exploring in depth beneath the frosting of a few great directors at the top. (Emphasis mine.)<sup>18</sup>

Sarris ends the first part of his article in a tentative tone, stating that the auteurist's propositions have yet to be proven.

Sarris expects debate on the auteur theory, in fact he seems to relish the thought, while indicating that proving his points will be difficult since "direction in the cinema is a nebulous force in literary terms."<sup>19</sup>

He emphasizes the fuzziness inherent in talking about the director's craft by referring to cinema's jargon as well as the jargons of all the other arts which produce a "generally futile attempt to describe the indescribable."<sup>20</sup> Sarris goes on to stress this inadequacy of language, using terms such as "approximation" and reasonable preponderance" to show the limitations of

21  
of critical writing. He states that he is aware of the exceptions  
to the auteur theory, and he mentions how the "temptations of cyni-  
cism, common sense, and facile culture-mongering" are always great,  
but that, "somehow, I feel that the auteur theory is the only hope  
for extending the appreciation of personal qualities in the cinema." 22  
Perhaps these lines best express the Sarris scheme:

By grouping and evaluating films according to directors,  
the critic can rescue individual achievements from an unjusti-  
fiable anonymity. If medieval architects and African sculptors  
are anonymous today, it is not because they deserved to be.  
There is no justification for penalizing Hollywood directors  
for the sake of collective mythology. 23

#### SARRIS'S THREE CRITERIA

As Sarris points out in the second part of his article he  
calls "What is the Auteur Theory?," there was at this time no defin-  
ition of the auteur theory in the English language, at least any of  
either American or British origin. He acknowledges Truffaut's  
current disavowel of the politique, the Frenchman insisting it was  
merely a polemical device used in a unique time and place in film's  
development. This fact doesn't seem to disturb Sarris; he gives  
due credit to the Cahiers critics for reshaping his vision of the  
cinema. Next, he talks briefly about a common fear many critics  
seemed to hold concerning possible abuses of this theory. Sarris  
wants to set the record straight on what the auteur theory actually  
claims to do, as he notes numerous misunderstandings that developed  
due to the imprecise nature of the theory's formulation.

Sarris begins by saying that, as he views it, the auteur theory "claims neither the gift of prophecy nor the option of extra-  
 24 cinematic perception." After once again considering the possible exceptions to the politique, Sarris begins to list the basic premises of the auteur theory as he views them. His three criteria are:

1) . . . . the technical competence of the director as a criterion of value. A badly directed or an undirected film has no importance in a critical scale of values. . . . Now, by the auteur theory, if a director has no technical competence, no elementary flair for the cinema, he is automatically cast out from the pantheon of directors. A great director has to be at least a good director.

2) 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 certain recurring characteristics of style, which serve as his signature. The way a film looks and moves should have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels.

3) The third and ultimate premise of the auteur theory is concerned with interior meaning, the ultimate glory of the cinema as an art. Interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension between a director's personality and his material. This conception comes close to what 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 imbedded in the stuff of the cinema and cannot be rendered in noncinematic terms. 25

In order to understand his structure, Sarris gives the following description as an aid:

The three premises of the auteur theory may be visualized as three concentric circles: the outer circle as technique; the middle circle, personal style; and the inner circle, interior meaning. The corresponding roles of the director may be designated as those of a technician, a stylist, and an auteur. 26

Sarris goes on to list those directors he considers auteurs,

a list that Sarris admits is biased in favor of directors with established reputations and a considerable list of credits. He talks about the enormous task ahead in seeking to reevaluate thousands of films in order to properly assess individual careers and unearth potential auteurs. Sarris was to waste no time in accepting the challenge of this critical undertaking.

### THE AMERICAN CINEMA

In the Film Culture issue of Spring, 1963, Andrew Sarris published a follow-up article on the auteur theory. In this controversial article he first set about to categorize film directors according to his earlier announced plans. This Film Culture article served as the framework for a later book, The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968, in which Sarris not only retains his categories but expands them. Why categorize directors at all? Sarris answers this question with the response that there can be no truly objective film history:

The historian's categories are usually implicit in the text, but he usually strives to preserve the spurious facade of "objectivity" by not seeming to have strong opinions. 27

He also believes that marginal distinctions are the most significant distinctions a critic can offer. To Sarris, these distinctions indicate a critical entity at work assimilating film's total range, not only areas currently the vogue.

In The American Cinema Sarris lists and classifies two hundred Hollywood directors and others that affected its vast film output. He lists individual filmographies, italicizing the best films of each director no matter how they are categorized. These italics are used as guideposts for the film enthusiast who lacks the time to personally view each of the thousands of films he discusses. Finally, Sarris places limitations on the kind of movies he is discussing. Although "Flaherty is mentioned arbitrarily for the sake of an aesthetic principle," he excludes consideration of documentary, animated, and experimental film, along with the two-reeler, serials and TV films.<sup>28</sup> What has come to be known as the feature film is the subject of his analysis.

THE FOREST AND THE TREES

Sarris calls his introduction to The American Cinema "Toward a Theory of Film History."<sup>29</sup> The first section of this he calls "The Forest and the Trees."<sup>30</sup> In this section he discusses the need for a comprehensive analysis of cinema, since he sees a correlation between numbers and worth in that "the notion of quality is difficult to grasp apart from the context of quantity."<sup>31</sup> As more and more movies are seen responsibility is more readily ascertained; personal styles become clearly visible.

This approach, however, presumes both a dedication and a positive response to the film stimulus. Sarris therefore feels that it is essential that the film historian be, above all, a film enthu-

siast. Although Sarris feels this enthusiasm should be linked with some degree of taste, he offers no criteria for either judging or attaining this aspect.

Sarris is most critical of what he describes as the sociological approach to film history:

The sociologically oriented film historians—Jacobs, Grierson, Kraucauer, Rotha, Griffith, Leyda, Sadoul, et al.—looked on the Hollywood canvas less as an art form than as a mass medium. (Emphasis mine.) 32

Sarris criticizes these men for dealing with individual films in a topical, synoptic manner rather than treating them as works that required individual evaluation. He does however credit these writers with bringing to film scholarship a praiseworthy analytical method befitting an important form or medium.

The problem with the sociological approach, according to Sarris, is that by its very nature it assesses the collective film rather than the specific movie. Sarris says it amounts to:

. . . . not seeing the trees for the forest. But why should anyone look at thousands of trees if the forest itself be deemed aesthetically objectionable? . . . the forest. . . . is called Hollywood, a pejorative catch-word for vulgar illusionism. Hollywood is a foresty word rather than a treesy word. It connotes conformity rather than variation. The condescending forest critic confirms his preconceptions by identifying those elements that Hollywood movies have in common. Thus he justifies his random sampling of Hollywood's output. (Emphasis mine.) 33

Sarris doesn't deny the myriad conventions that Hollywood films are filtered through; he acknowledges the mark that the studio, the censor, and the public have placed on film history.

What upsets Sarris about the forest critic is his unconcern with particulars because "it is the system he despises." <sup>34</sup> Somehow these forest critics view the Hollywood system as having in some way betrayed the cinema. Sarris feels that this sense of betrayal accounts for the paranoid quality of many forest histories.

Sarris does not deny some of the negative results of the so-called system under discussion. He points to the sufferings of men like Griffith, Welles, von Stroheim, and Keaton as evidence of Hollywood's culpability. However:

The problem with these examples is that in most instances the forest critics repudiated the afflicted directors long before the industry curtailed their careers. Forest critics have never championed individuality for its own sake. <sup>35</sup>

Sarris feels that ultimate irony of forest criticism is that the highest trees (Griffith, Welles, von Stroheim, et al.) are usually levelled so that the principle of the forest can be maintained:

Far from welcoming diversity, the forest critic seeks a new uniformity. He would have Hollywood march off en masse like Birnam Wood to whatever Dunsinane the forest critic desires. Instead of one version of The Grapes of Wrath, there would be three hundred. <sup>36</sup>

Sarris is specific when it comes to some other snobberies that the forest critics are inclined to foster. He lists three of them:

- 1) The Foreign Film is Better.
- 2) Documentary Films are more Realistic than Fictional Movies, Hence Morally and Aesthetically Superior.
- 3) Avant-garde Films Point the Way for Commercial Movies.

Sarris reviews the history of the first presumption tracing the foreign film cultist's predilections across the face of Europe as the various national cinemas rose and fell. He characterizes the current xenophilia as being more eclectic than before; instead of localizing their tastes they single out the Bergmans, Dreyers, Kurosawas, and Wajdas to document the artistic superiority of foreign films over the Hollywood variety.

As far as documentary films are concerned, "one might just as well say that books of nonfiction are more truthful than novels." Sarris attributes this confusion as semantic, caused by the camera's dual nature as both a recording device and as an artistic tool when in the director's control.

Sarris challenges the third point by contending that the avant-garde has tended to channel its energies toward areas normally too sensitive for mainstream film; therefore, they have been more concerned with content than with technical or stylistic innovations.

Sarris ends the first part of his introduction by indicting the motives of the forest critics. Sarris feels that they are allowing themselves to be kidded about the preferences of the masses, who in Sarris's view only want to be entertained. So, although the forest critic wants to "save" the masses, "he himself is fascinated by the vulgar spectacles he deplores in his scholarly treatises." The forest critic, according to Sarris, "conceals his shame with such cultural defense mechanisms as pop, camp, and trivia, but he continues to sneak into movie houses like a man of substance visiting a painted woman."

Sarris ends this first part by chiding the forest critics for crediting the film medium with making a "bad movie seem entertaining. Sarris claims that this view overlooks "the collectivity of creation in which 'good' and 'bad' can coexist."<sup>43</sup> Finally, he discusses the relative nature of value judgements in motion pictures, noting the abundance of possible pleasures to be obtained:

The collectivity that makes the cinema the least personal of all the arts also redeems most movies from complete worthlessness. But collectivity is not necessarily impersonality. Collectivity may just as easily be a collection of distinctive individualities. Ideally the strongest personality should be the director, and it is when the director dominates the film that the cinema comes closest to reflecting the personality of a single artist. . . . a history of film directors. . . . would certainly be a good start toward a comprehensive film history, but it would hardly explain everything to be found in thousands of movies.<sup>44</sup>

#### THE AUTEUR THEORY

In the second part of his introduction Sarris discusses the auteur theory once again; he brings the reader up to date concerning the theory's history in light of the controversies that developed over the five years since his original Film Culture article.

Sarris feels that the attacks on the auteur theory only confirm the provincialism of film criticism as practiced in America. He doesn't believe auteurism is beyond criticism, but he does feel that the debate should be conducted in a respectful and scholarly manner. Sarris finds any such virtues to be absent in American film criticism.

Sarris reaffirms his conception of the auteur theory as one of film history rather than one of predicting the future performance of directors. Because of this history orientation, he feels it's natural that the work of older directors will tend to be richer in associations than new directors.

"But why," Sarris asks, "rank directors at all?" <sup>45</sup> One reason he gives is to establish some kind of priority system for the student of film. Another compelling reason is the absence of an academic tradition in film that has been long established in other art forms and disciplines. Film historians are required to perform the menial tasks normally assumed by drudges in these older arts. These listings, categories, and rankings are important too, Sarris believes, because they "establish first of all the existence of my subject and <sup>46</sup> then my attitude toward it."

Briefly reviewing the history of the term "auteur," Sarris acknowledges the trouble this term has caused him. "'Author' is neither adequate nor accurate as a translation into English mainly because of the inherent literary bias of the Anglo-American cultural <sup>47</sup> Establishment." Therefore, the idea that a director who is not a writer could somehow be the author of his films, Sarris says, has been hard put to gain acceptance in America. He portrays most American film critics as being either literary or journalistic types with no interest whatsoever in becoming film directors; no wonder, he says, the visually oriented auteur theory met such tough opposition.

In summing up the intent of The American Cinema Sarris traces the history of film's development as an art form. At first, he

says, there were no clear-cut standards to apply to movies; the idea of what constituted a film work of art was quite vague. It was only with the production of more and more films that relative standards could be developed and imposed. <sup>48</sup> Sarris cites D. W. Griffith as the first great director because his films were vastly superior to what was being done by others. In Birth of a Nation we have the first example "of a feature film as a work of bits and pieces unified by a central idea." <sup>49</sup> As Sarris sees the auteur theory's purpose, it is that of a method by which these diverse elements can be unified into central ideas.

The art of the cinema is the art of an attitude, the style of a gesture. It is not so much what as how. The what is some aspect of reality rendered mechanically by the camera. The how is what the French critics designate somewhat mystically as mise-en-scene. Auteur criticism is a reaction against sociological criticism that enthroned the what against the how. However it would be equally falacious to enthrone the how against the what. The whole point of a meaningful style is that it unifies the what and the how into a personal statement. <sup>50</sup>

#### SARRIS'S CATEGORIES

The main body of Sarris's work contains eleven distinct categories into which are placed the two hundred directors he evaluates. "Patheon directors" are those great filmmakers that "have transcended their technical problems with a personal vision of the world." <sup>51</sup> They are the giants of the cinema: Chaplin, Griffith, Renoir, Welles, to name just a few. These directors are the undisputed auteurs, the sublime practitioners of film artistry.

The next category of "the far side of paradise" is a listing of those directors that fail to attain the pinnacle of the "Pantheon either because of a fragmentation of their personal vision or because of disruptive career problems." <sup>52</sup> This is a diverse group, ranging on the one hand from the likes of vonStroheim and Preston Sturges, to Douglas Sirk and Samuel Fuller on the other.

The third grouping of directors Sarris calls "expressive esoterica." <sup>53</sup> This is a category of directors who styles not only did them in, but who had the misfortune to work in genres that were out of fashion. "Their deeper virtues are often Obscured by irritating idiosyncrasies on the surface, but they are generally redeemed by their seriousness and grace." <sup>54</sup> Other Sarris categories include "fringe benefits," a grouping of eleven foreign directors generally admired by the author, and "lightly likable," a category of "talented but uneven directors with the saving grace of unpretentiousness." <sup>55</sup>

Directors that might otherwise fall into the "lightly likable" category were it not for their "mortal sin of pretentiousness" <sup>56</sup> are tagged and placed in the "strained seriousness" category.

This group includes men like Richard Brooks, Sidney Lumet, Tony Richardson, and Stanley Kubrick. Another put down category that contains senior directors like Huston, Kazan, Wellman, Wilder, Wyler and Zinneman was titled "less than meets the eye." <sup>57</sup>

Sarris feels their reputations are in excess of what they were able to ultimately place on the screen. His main criticism of these directors is their common lack of visual style. For example, he

attacks Huston's technique for being "evasive and declares that, at his best, Huston failed to project his personality through his material." <sup>58</sup> He follows up this reasoning with a pointed attack on Zinneman's superficial personal commitment to film, while in this same vein charging Carol Reed and William Wellman with an "objectivity" in their approaches to filmmaking which Sarris characterizes as "the last refuge of mediocrity." <sup>59</sup>

For directors defying precise classification Sarris has the category "oddities, one-shots, and newcomers;" while "subjects for further research" is a classification for those directors whose careers are in an aesthetic limbo due to the need for further evaluation before a final assessment can be made. <sup>60</sup>

Of the last two classes, one deals exclusively with nondirectorial auteurs in the field of comedy, while the final category is one called "miscellany," in which Sarris treats an assortment of varied careers. <sup>61</sup>

As a final comment on Sarris's scheme his own words best express the intent and ultimate purpose of his book:

Ultimately, the auteur theory is not so much a theory as an attitude, a table of values that converts film history into directorial autobiography. The auteur critic is obsessed with the wholeness of art and the artist. He looks at a film as a whole, a director as a whole. Obviously, the auteur theory cannot possibly cover every vagrant charm of the cinema. Nonetheless, the listing of films by director remains the most reliable index of quality available to us short of the microscopic evaluation of every film ever made. <sup>62</sup>



reappear in their work." <sup>3</sup> But, "repetition without development is decline," Kael points out, using the films of Alfred Hitchcock as an example of this condition. <sup>4</sup> Kael wonders if Sarris would have noticed the repetition in these films of Walsh without the auteur theory: "Or shall we take the more cynical view that with out some commitment to Walsh as an auteur, he probably wouldn't be spending his time looking at these movies?" <sup>5</sup>

Kael goes on to say that to attempt to utilize any theory in the arts without an unusual degree of discernment, intelligence, and taste is to risk the perils of rigidity that can result when a theory sinks to the level of a formula. <sup>6</sup>

THE OUTER CIRCLE

In a subsection called "The Outer Circle," Kael examines the initial proposition that Sarris posits as the first criterion of the auteur theory. <sup>7</sup> Although Sarris's line, "A great director has to be at least a good director," sounds reasonable and basic, Kael believes this seemingly commonplace premise to be on questionable ground. <sup>8</sup> She says that "sometimes the greatest artists in a medium bypass or violate the simple technical competence that is so necessary for hacks." <sup>9</sup> She argues that there is considerable doubt that an Antonioni could manage a routine assignment of the type she credits director John Sturges as being so proficient with. <sup>10</sup> So the greatness of men like Antonioni and Cocteau, Kael says, "has nothing to do with mere technical competence. . . . greatness is being

able to achieve his own personal expression and style." <sup>11</sup> Citing further evidence from literary sources, she points to the technical problems writers like Dreiser and Melville overcame, "and who were, as artist, incomparably greater than the facile technicians of their day." <sup>12</sup>

Technique itself is not that important, Kael declares. In some cases it may actually impede the new director searching for a style by "leading them to a banal slickness, instead of discovery of their own method." <sup>13</sup> She quotes Jean Cocteau in this regard as possibly being correct: "The only technique worth having is the technique you invent for yourself." <sup>14</sup>

Kael winds up her assessment of this first criterion by adding the following amendment to Sarris's premise: "In works of a lesser rank, technical competence can help to redeem the weaknesses of the material." <sup>15</sup> Kael believes that it is this category of films that auteur critics are most attracted to: routine material that can be turned into a fast-paced entertaining movie by a stylish film craftsman. <sup>16</sup> Her final comment on this is a reflection on the auteur critic's "truly astonishing inability to exercise taste and judgement within their area of preference," while stating that even "movie going kids" are more reliable judges of quality in this area than are auteurist. <sup>17</sup>

THE MIDDLE CIRCLE

Pauline Kael's next subsection deals with the second Sarris premise or "The Middle Circle." <sup>18</sup> Kael hasn't been able to detect

any theory so far, and she views this second premise as a platitude since it is naturally assumed in any art that there is an artistic personality or "signature" that can be seen and evaluated. But to say "that the distinguishability of personality should in itself be a criterion of value completely confuses normal judgment." <sup>19</sup> Kael goes on to say:

Often the works in which we are most aware of the personality of the director are his worst films-when he falls back on the devices he has already done to death. When a famous director makes a good movie, we look at the movie, we don't think about the director's personality; when he makes a stinker we notice his familiar touches because there's not much else to watch. <sup>20</sup>

Kael compares the films of Hitchcock to those of Carol Reed in attempting to illustrate her contention. She admits it's true that Hitchcock's personality is more distinguishable in Dial M for Murder, Rear Window, and Vertigo, than Reed's in The Stars Look Down, Odd Man Out, The Fallen Idol, The Third Man, An Outcast of the Islands, "if for no other reason than because Hitchcock repeats <sup>21</sup> while Reed tackles new subject matter."

Kael also believes it could be argued that, in Hitchcock's case, we have more of an audience manipulator than an artist at work. So that what we have is "not so much a personal style as a personal theory of audience psychology." <sup>22</sup>

Kael also doubts that Sarris seriously tries to apply this second premise to each film, since she accuses him of shamelessly ignoring it when it serves his purpose. A case in point is the career of John Huston; Sarris had dismissed him with: "Huston is

virtually a forgotten man with a few actor's classics behind  
 him. . . ." <sup>23</sup> What is a director's film, if not The Maltese  
 Falcon, a film Huston both wrote and directed, asks Kael? And if  
 this film and The Treasure of Sierra Madre "are actor's classics,  
 then what makes Hawk's To Have and Have Not and The Big Sleep  
 (which were obviously tailored to the personalities of Bogart and  
 Bacall) the work of an auteur?" <sup>24</sup>

The last detail of the second criterion that Kael discusses  
 is the Sarris remark "that what makes an auteur is 'an elan of the  
 soul.'" <sup>25</sup> After harshly putting Sarris down for his "barbarous"  
 use of language, Kael comments that it is "ironic that a critic  
 trying to establish simple 'objective' rules for critics who he  
 thinks aren't gifted enough to use taste and intelligence, ends up  
 where, actually, he began—with a theory based on mystical insight." <sup>26</sup>  
 As she puts it:

Their decisions are not merely not based on their own theory;  
 decisions are beyond criticism. It's like a woman's telling us  
 that she feels a certain dress does something for her; her feel-  
 ing has about as much to do with critical judgment as the auteur  
 critics' feeling that Minnelli has "it," but Huston never had  
 "it." <sup>27</sup>

#### THE INNER CIRCLE

"The Inner Circle" is Kael's title for the section of her  
 essay that treats the third and final premise of the auteur theory  
 according to Sarris. <sup>28</sup> Kael says that:

This is a remarkable formulation: it is the opposite of what we have always taken for granted in the arts, that the artist expresses himself in the unity of form and content. What Sarris believes to be "the ultimate glory of the cinema as an art" is what has generally been considered the frustrations of a man working against the given material. 29

For Kael, this final criterion serves to clarify what she believes to be the interests of the auteur critics: their dedication, by virtue of this formulation, "in becoming connoisseurs of trash." 30

Her characterization of the auteurist's perfect model of what a director should be is acidly stated:

Their ideal auteur is the man who signs a long-term contract, directs any script that's handed to him and expresses himself by shoving bits of style up the crevasses of the plots. If his "style" is in conflict with the story line or subject matter, so much the better—more chance for tension. 31

All this helps Kael to see why inferior movies are often most admired by the auteur critics. If style, tension, and "personality" are the criteria then it doesn't matter what you have as your subject. 32 To her, it explains the contemptuousness with which Huston is treated. Imagine, he tried to make a film of Moby Dick; obviously Huston is an "ambitious director" "interested in substance rather than sensationalism." 33

Pauline Kael is angry, but she wonders if she's really being unjust; to answer her own question, she quotes Sarris:

A Cukor who works with all sorts of projects has a more developed abstract style than a Bergman who is free to develop his own scripts. Not that Bergman lacks personality, but his work has declined with the depletion of his ideas largely because his technique never equaled his sensibility. Joseph

L. Mankiewicz and Billy Wilder are other examples of writer-directors without adequate technical mastery. By contrast, Douglas Sirk and Otto Preminger have moved up the scale because their miscellaneous projects reveal a stylistic consistency. 34

To Kael it is obvious that the auteur critics want it both ways. On one side, writer-directors are disqualified from attaining "interior meaning," since with 'no tension between his personality and his material, . . . there's nothing for the auteur critic to extrapolate from." 35 On the other half, she asks, what's this about extrapolating "interior" meaning through the "tension" between the director and his material? 36 "Where is the tension in Howard Hawk's films?" 37 And 'what 'interior meaning' can be extrapolated from an enjoyable, harmless, piece of kitsch like Only Angels Have Wings?' 38

From all this Kael finds she can only "assume that Sarris's theory is not based on his premises (the necessary causal relationships are absent), but rather that the premises were devised in a clumsy attempt to prop up the 'theory'." 39 She accuses these auteur critics with attempting to give their common pursuit of "mindless, repititious commercial products" an intellectual respectability by their devising "elaborate theories to justify soaking up their time." 40

Kael says she understands the reasons for the original purpose of the auteur theory as formulated in France. The French auteur critics "rejecting the socially conscious, problem pictures" became connoisseurs of the American action films that "were often

much more skillfully made and far more interesting visually than the movies with a message which Americans were so proud of considered so adult."<sup>41</sup> She sees la politique des auteurs as having been a corrective; the French were able to see through our films some of the qualities that their own cinema lacked.<sup>42</sup> She cites the films Breathless and Shoot the Piano Player as examples of how the French were able to assimilate and triumph in this melodramatic, action film genre.<sup>43</sup>

However, she sees the Anglo-American formulation of auteurism as playing an anti-intellectual, anti-art role.<sup>44</sup> And although she says she realizes that the auteur theory, like all theories, distorts experience in order to ultimately clarify it, she feels that this charge of being anti-art "is the most serious charge that can possibly be brought against an aesthetics."<sup>45</sup> So while this theory probably aided the French in freeing their artistic impulses, Kael suggests, in America it has degenerated to the point where praising a director for his "virility" (the highest auteur praise possible according to Kael's analysis), "is some kind of assurance that he is not trying to express himself in an art form."<sup>46</sup>

Finally, Kael writes about the sameness of auteur criticism, and what she finds to be an ironical situation:

. . . . for a group that discounts content and story, that believes the director is the auteur of what gives the film value, they show an inexplicable fondness—almost an obsession—for detailing plot and quoting dialogue. With all the zeal of youth serving an ideal, they carefully reduce movies to trivia.<sup>47</sup>

DWIGHT MACDONALD

Dwight Macdonald's involvement in the auteur theory controversy came about when he reviewed Otto Preminger's The Cardinal in the October, 1964 issue of Esquire magazine. Macdonald felt that the defects of this film were so obvious that they would "present a real problem to the politique des auteurs ideologues—<sup>48</sup> since in their canon Otto Preminger is a very 'in' director."

Dealing with Sarris's "bold and ingenious" solution to Preminger's admitted box office orientation by linking him to (in Sarris's words) other "shrewd businessmen like Shakespeare, Durer, Ibsen, Shaw, Brahms, Picasso, "Macdonald says that he imagines that these men will be "remembered less for the shrewdness they share with Preminger than for the talent he does not share<sup>49</sup> with them."

Sarris has praised The Cardinal as having merit due to "the sheer size and audacity of its conception."<sup>50</sup> Macdonald questions this, noting that Sarris has made many of the same carps about the film as he did. Sarris has failed, he says, to explain where he finds either "audacity of conception" or "grandeur of design" anywhere in this film.<sup>51</sup> But Sarris's main justification for the film is what Macdonald takes issue with. Macdonald quotes the following lines from Sarris's review in The Village Voice:

The primarily visual critics will hail it and the primarily

literary critics will deplore it. If I side with the visual critics on Preminger, it is because we are in the midst of a visual revolution which the literary establishment is apparently ignoring if not actually resisting. 52

Sarris's inference that writing has been rendered obsolete by the visual media (Sarris had pointed to the "pitifully inadequate" written accounts of President Kennedy's funeral), is noted by Macdonald. Sarris had then gone on to say: "At long last, the image has made the Word superfluous." 53 Macdonald scores Sarris on this point, remarking on the fallacy inherent in this concept noting that what gave "the image of a riderless black horse. . . . a visual power far beyond any literary meaning" as Sarris contends, was nothing but this very "literary meaning." 54 How else, Macdonald asks, did we learn of this symbol for a fallen leader if not through books that told of times "when the seat of power was the saddle rather than the swivel chair." 55

Macdonald relates this to the cinema:

As long as the movies are the hybrid art they have been up to now, so long will they continue to share plot and dialogue with the novel, composition and tonal values with painting, and the rhythms of montage with music. The "visual-vs.-literary" antithesis is thus false to the nature of cinema. Also to the nature of art in general. . . .in Mr. Sarris' new aesthetic. . . . there is implicit a dichotomy between form ("visual") and ("literary") which exists only in theory—and bad theory at that. In practice, the form is the content, while the content is so profoundly affected by the form in which it is expressed as not to be separable from it. 56

Macdonald finishes with an objection to the triumphant tone of Sarris's "at long last" with which he has informed us that words are no longer necessary. Macdonald says he is not critical mainly

because he is a writer (so is Sarris he points out), but "because it expresses an anti-intellectual, primitivistic tendency which seems to me affectation since the circles in which it is fashionable are— not wholly unexpectedly—intellectualistic and nonprimitive to the point of decadence."<sup>57</sup>

#### SOME ADDITIONAL VIEWS

Other critics have followed up on the auteur critics tending to impose literary criteria on the film. Stanley J. Solomon in The Film Idea is critical of the auteurist approach for its proclivity, as he sees it:

. . . . to apply literary analysis and . . . . never. . . . a consistent cinematic approach to criticism. Their criticism persistently aligns film with literature inasmuch as the emphasis falls on the general theses and motifs of a director's works as evidenced by a particular film. Yet unlike literary critics, they seldom evaluate the quality of the ideas, merely the implementation of them in the films under analysis. <sup>58</sup>

It is therefore understandable to Solomon that a director like Bergman will be ranked under a Howard Hawks, since: "Hawks ideas are indeed limited, but the application of his notions is clearly established and can be treated easily from film to film."<sup>59</sup>

Richard Corliss has taken on the auteur theory as laid down by Andrew Sarris. In his article, "The Hollywood Screenwriter," Corliss blames the auteur critics for retarding the investigation and study of other film crafts by their elevation of the director to the primal role in the film's creation. <sup>60</sup> Corliss sees the usual

director as an interpretive artist rather than a creative one,  
 "because the Hollywood film is a corporate art, not an individual  
 61 one." In Corliss's mind this accounts for the formulation of  
 Sarris's version of the auteur theory:

The theory used to be that the solitary, creative artist produced Art, and the corporate, interpretive craftsman produced Entertainment—a prejudice that kept people from examining the Hollywood movie. The auteur theory says, in effect, "What you thought was just Entertaining is really Art, because it is the work of an individual creator—an auteur. Therefore the Hollywood movie is worthy to be examined." 62

Corliss views the filmmaking process as one primarily of collaboration. When the fortuitous combination of talents occurs,  
 63 the results are a great Hollywood film. What Corliss contends is that there can be more than one dominant force in a successful movie; the director may be the auteur, but it could be the actor or writer. And although he says that the critic's first concern should be to appreciate film art instead of quarrelling over individual signatures, he notes that "when a fine film is signed by a mediocre director, the film's distinctive qualities can be traced to the  
 64 screenwriter."

Corliss feels that the screenwriter played a crucial role in the American sound film; his "Acropolis" at the end of his article is the initial ranking he offers for some of the finest screenwriters  
 65 Hollywood has known. His recent book Talking Pictures does for the screenwriter what Sarris's The American Cinema did for the director: catalogue the contributions of the unique art of the Hollywood screenwriter.

Another evaluation considers film as being too complex for any "simple" auteur theory of film to be valid. <sup>66</sup> But while admitting that film is "essentially a director's rather than an actor's or writer's medium," George W. Linden says it is the unifying source, not necessarily always the director, that makes for a meaningful work: <sup>67</sup>

If the style of a film is the function of the visual-aural value system and editorial rhythm, if these provide the necessary unity of theme, then the auteur is the director. If, on the other hand, the tautness of narrative line provides the cumulative unity, then one must look to the writer, for he is the auteur not merely of the script but of the film. <sup>68</sup>

Linden believes that a cameraman may even be the auteur under special circumstances; he cites the "unmistakable mark" of James Wong Howe's photography in films like Champion and Hud. <sup>69</sup>

Richard Koszarski has also criticized the auteur point of view for limiting their focus to the director's contribution. He notes how film criticism generally has focused on those aspects of cinema's diversified nature that were dealt with most readily with literary terms. <sup>70</sup> His article, "The Men with the Movie Cameras," was an attempt to begin a systematic study of those men behind the cameras who, he feels, were greatly responsible for the visual style of:

. . . . the Hollywood golden age, the classic period of the American studios, from 1915 up to the Fifties. It becomes clear that here was the key unifying element of the Hollywood style, a visual hallmark which effectively evaded the attentions of most previous historians. <sup>71</sup>

There have been many diverse reactions to Sarris's lauding the Hollywood director. One of the first appeared in the Summer 1963 issue of Film Culture magazine, then Sarris's home territory. In his article called "The Camera as a God," Charles Boultenhouse characterizes the Hollywood director as a craftsman who uses his considerable skills to primarily protect a financial investment. 72 Just because some of the skills developed through repetition can be identified, he states, does not turn these men into artists. For him, critical analysis of the typical Hollywood director is a waste of time. He feels the study of style in the cinema should be restricted to genuine authors like Welles, Cocteau, Fellini, and 73 others who have written their own scripts.

Gene Youngblood has discussed the auteur theory in relation to his consideration of the artist as design scientist. 74 As he puts it, the auteur theory "indicates those instances when the filmmaker's design science transcends the parameters of his genre; our comprehension of that genre, that human condition is thus expanded." 75 Just as there are no new plots in drama or fiction, Youngblood points to the lack of new ideas in great films like L'Avventura.

#### SIGNS AND MEANINGS

Peter Wollen's Signs and Meaning in the Cinema, revised and enlarged in its 1972 edition, charts the course of auteurism's British version of this approach with its link to semiology, the

study of signs.

Probably more influenced by the French auteur critics than Sarris, Wollen explains the development of la politique des auteurs as he sees it:

. . . . owing to the diffuseness of the original theory, two main schools of auteur critics grew up: those who insisted on revealing a core of meanings, of thematic motifs and those who stressed style and mise en scene. The work of the auteur has a semantic dimension, it is not purely formal; the work of the metteur en scene, on the other hand, does not go beyond the realm of performance, of transposing into the special complex of cinematic codes and channels a pre-existing text: a scenario, a book or a play. As we shall see, the meaning of the films of an auteur is constructed a posteriori; the meaning—semantic, rather than stylistic or expressive—of the films of a metteur en scene exists a priori. 76

Despite all the attacks, Wollen says the auteur theory "has survived because it is indispensable." 77 In his view, the auteur theory is "normally presented" as Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has summed it up: 78

One essential corollary of the theory as it has been developed is the discovery that the defining characteristics of an author's work are not necessarily those which are most readily apparent. The purpose of criticism thus becomes to uncover behind the superficial contrasts of subject and treatment a hard core of basic and often recondite motifs. The pattern formed by these motifs. . . . is what gives an author's work its particular structure, both defining it internally and distinguishing one body of work from another. 79

This is the "structural approach," which Wollen finds so "indispensable for the critic." 80 Wollen does not, however, share Sarris's view of the auteur theory; Wollen wants to detach the theory from any idea that it concerns the cinema as an "art." 81 Wollen feels

the auteur concept reflects a "radical break" with the idea that film is an artistic medium, so he rejects Sarris's attempt to "transplant. . . . traditional ideas about 'art' into Hollywood" via the auteur theory.

82

Here is Wollen's argument for his version of the auteur theory:

. . . . any film, certainly a Hollywood film, is a network of different statements, crossing and contradicting each other, elaborated into a final "coherent" version. . . . by a process of comparison with other films it is possible to decipher, not a coherent message or world-view, but a structure which underlies the film and shapes it, gives it a certain pattern of energy cathexis. The film is not a communication, but an artefact which is unconsciously structured in a certain way.

(Emphasis mine.) 83

Wollen's auteur theory discounts the idea of either organic unity or integral content being possible in a work. Evaluation is therefore difficult, if not impossible, in this context, he believes. To evaluate, states Wollen, one must have criteria; film's very nature seems to rule this out however, "Timeless and universal" criteria, he suggests, would therefore be too rigid for any useful purpose to be served. 84 This being the case, it follows that he rejects the idea of an exhaustive interpretation of film. In Wollen's view film is a text, or machine, for producing meaning; he therefore feels the proper focus should be on the productivity of the work.

## COUP DE GRACE

One of the most ruthless comments on the appeal of the auteur theory was made by the critic John Simon. In typical acerbity of style he said:

Auteurism appeals to all quasi - and para-intellectual game players—its tie-in with the voguish disciplines of structuralism and semiology is evident—while trashism, especially when backed up by intimacy with film history and an amusingly authoritative tone, has great appeal as a culture-surrogate. 85

## Chapter 4

### CONCLUSIONS

There can be no definitive summary of the controversies between the auteur theorists and their opposite numbers: the verbal battles rage on to this day. The situation is further complicated by the internecine battles being fought among the various factions within the auteur camp.

One possible key to Sarris's version of the auteur theory is simply to consider his use of auteurism as an antidote to critical writing that was then the norm. For example, shortly before his original auteur article he wrote an essay critical of John Russell Taylor's Sight and Sound essay "The High Forties."<sup>1</sup> In his critique, Sarris faults Taylor for his use of the term "popular" to describe the films he is discussing, since he feels this term is "an epithet which justifies a suspension of value judgements by removing Hollywood from the stream of serious film history."<sup>2</sup> He likes Taylor's attempt at comprehensiveness, but not his technique of seeking out "typical" films of the period.<sup>3</sup> As Sarris puts it: "the gist of Mr. Taylor's article implies an inability to distinguish (or remember) individual films."<sup>4</sup>

In his article Sarris says that sociological approaches to film history like Taylor's work against the notion of film's artis-

tic capabilities:

The chronological division of the cinema as one entity tends to perpetuate what may be called the pyramid fallacy of many film historians. This fallacy consists of viewing the history of cinema as a process by which approved artisans have deposited their slabs of celluloid on a single pyramid rising ultimately to a single apex, be it Realism, Humanism, Marxism, Journalism, Abstractionism, or even Eroticism. Directors are valued primarily for their "contributions" to the evolution of a Utopian cinema efficiently adjusted to a Utopian society. <sup>5</sup>

Sarris goes on later to say:

The patent system of the pyramid generally holds that silent directors invented forms while sound directors perfected styles, and in the pyramid histories, particularly those oriented to realism, stylists are the drones of the cinema. <sup>6</sup>

Asking himself what the alternative to this pyramid structure would be, Sarris answers that is a cinema of directors: "an inverted pyramid opening outward to accomodate the unpredictable range and diversity of individual directors." <sup>7</sup> The following winter he would publish his "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962" formalizing this idea.

La politique des auteurs must have seemed to Sarris to be just the device he needed to reevaluate the neglected and (to him) underrated Hollywood film. He hoped to both raise the status of the Hollywood director and the level and tone of film criticism. He hoped to foster scholarly debate with a "theory" he audaciously threw down, like a gauntlet, to challenge the forest critics. If he was to be taken too literally, if his initial essay was too rigidly structured and obscure at the same time, well, such are the perils of battle.

It is significant that Sarris has never specifically either listed or referred to his list of criteria in any of his subsequent auteur writings. And if we accept Pauline Kael's interpretation of his third and ultimate premise, a case can be made for a substantial altering of his notion about "tension" and "interior meaning:"

Ideally the director should write his own films and, failing that, should at least be in emotional and intellectual sympathy with his scripts. <sup>8</sup>

Sarris's critics have found him an easy target at times; his habit of making rash statements for polemical effect often backfiring. Sarris was unprepared for Pauline Kael's unremitting attack on auteurism, but his dedication to the intent of his theory rather than his belief in its being infallible or unalterable has sustained him.

Paradoxically, along with his dogmatic aspect Sarris has also had his flexible, tentative tone. Even in the initial essay when he discusses the fact that one can never assume that a "bad" director will always make bad films he says: "No, not always, but almost always and that is the point." <sup>9</sup> He seems often to stress the preponderant reasonableness of auteurism, willing to accept the many admitted exceptions as quite natural. In this sense his writings have, if anything, become less restrictive when discussing the auteur conception.

Before, ironically, most of the countering essays were written criticizing Sarris for his elevation of the director over the other contributors to the completed film work, he had written:

"Ultimately, the search for meaningful authorship on the screen does not denigrate the roles of writer, actor, composer, cameraman and editor." <sup>10</sup>

I believe that Sarris felt the search for authorship should begin where it would be most fruitful for illuminating the art of film, and director seemed the logical place to start. But he recognizes, for example, that in films like The Hospital and The Americanization of Emily it is not the hand of the director, Arthur Hiller, that is revealed, but rather the writing of Paddy Chayefsky. <sup>11</sup>

Sarris's last writing on the subject of auteurism in Film Quarterly stresses a certain magnanimity in his approach that has always been present, even at his most polemical:

Auteurism was never meant to be an exclusionary doctrine, nor a blank check for directors. It was stated at the outset that it was more the first step than the last stop in film scholarship, and I think its basic approaches have stood up remarkably well over the years. <sup>12</sup>

It was determined that Andrew Sarris's use of the auteur theory was not confined to its application as a device to reassess the American cinema; his employment of this theory to stimulate debate and help raise the level of film scholarship were other significant factors in his utilization of this approach.

The auteur theory has not simply held its own over the years, it has flourished. Despite the numerous controversies, the dogmatic rhetoric, and the many paradoxes, the auteur theory's dissemination and steady progression has been relentless.

Whatever the reasons for this circumstance, there is no denying the pervasiveness which characterizes this influence. A

cursorious examination of the movie ads in local newspapers everywhere reflects the ascent of the film director to a prominent position in today's film marketplace. Television talk shows now regularly devote entire programs to the careers of individual Hollywood directors; meanwhile, the number and variety of books dealing with directors and their films continues to multiply dramatically.

How has this theory affected the self-image of the film industry in general, and the director in particular? This question seems to be worthy of further research and analysis. The answer might help us better understand the developments in both American and world cinema during the 1960's and 1970's.

The auteur theory's influence, either acknowledged or not, also, seems to be a factor in much of the recent literature of film. This influence includes not only works of a specialized nature, but extends to such standard works as Gerald Mast's A Short History of the Movies, a book used widely in colleges and universities as a textbook in introductory film courses.

Has auteurism influenced the ways in which film courses are structured, or affected the kinds of films rented and discussed? These are some of the questions that come to mind; certainly there are others that should be posed. If we are to fully understand not only the process by which auteurism has been assimilated into film's mainstream, but this theory's influence on its course as well, these questions must not only be raised, they must be answered.

FOOTNOTES

Chapter 1

- 1  
C. G. Crisp, Francois Truffaut. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972.), p. 10
- 2  
Ibid.
- 3  
Ibid.
- 4  
Ibid., p. 11.
- 5  
Ibid., p. 10.
- 6  
Ibid.
- 7  
Ibid., pp. 10-11.
- 8  
Ibid., p. 11.
- 9  
Leo Braudy, Jean Renoir, The World of his Films. (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1972.), p. 15.
- 10  
C. G. Crisp, Francois Truffaut. P. 11.
- 11  
Ibid., p. 15.
- 12  
Ibid.
- 13  
Ibid., p. 11.

14  
Ibid.

15  
Ibid., p. 12.

16  
Ibid., p. 16.

17  
Ibid.

18  
Ibid.

19  
Ibid., p. 10.

20  
Donald E. Staples, "The Auteur Theory Re-examined,"  
in The Emergence of Film Art. Edited by Lewis Jacobs. (New York:  
Hopkinson and Blake, 1969.), p. 394.

21  
Ibid.

22  
Ibid., p. 395.

23  
Ibid.

24  
Ibid.

25  
Ibid., p. 396.

26  
Ibid.

27  
Ibid.

28  
Ibid., p. 397.

29  
C. G. Crisp, Francois Truffaut. P. 11.

30  
Ibid., p. 141.

31

Roy Huss and Norman Silverstein, The Film Experience: Elements of Motion Picture Art. (New York: Harper and Row, 1968.), P. 11.

32

Ibid.

## Chapter 2

1

Richard Corliss, "The Hollywood Screenwriter," in Film Theory and Criticism. Edited by Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen. (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1974.), P. 542

2

Andrew Sarris, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962," Film Culture, No. 27, (Winter, 1962-63 ), p. 1

3

Ibid.

4

Ibid.

5

Ibid.

6

Ibid.

7

Ibid., p. 2.

8

Ibid.

9

Ibid.

10

Ibid.

11

Ibid.

12  
Ibid.

13  
Ibid., p. 3.

14  
Ibid.

15  
Ibid.

16  
Ibid., p. 5.

17  
Ibid.

18  
Ibid., pp. 5-6.

19  
Ibid., p. 6.

20  
Ibid.

21  
Ibid.

22  
Ibid.

23  
Ibid.

24  
Ibid.

25  
Ibid., p. 7.

26  
Ibid.

27  
Andrew Sarris, The American Cinema: Directors and Directions  
1929-1968. (New York: Dutton, 1969), p. 17.

28  
Ibid., p. 16.

- 29  
Ibid., p. 19.
- 30  
Ibid.
- 31  
Ibid.
- 32  
Ibid., p. 15.
- 33  
Ibid., p. 20.
- 34  
Ibid., p. 21.
- 35  
Ibid.
- 36  
Ibid., p. 22.
- 37  
Ibid., pp. 22-23.
- 38  
Ibid.
- 39  
Ibid., p. 23.
- 40  
Ibid.
- 41  
Ibid.
- 42  
Ibid., p. 24.
- 43  
Ibid.
- 44  
Ibid.
- 45  
Ibid., p. 27

- 46  
Ibid.
- 47  
Ibid.
- 48  
Ibid., p. 35.
- 49  
Ibid., p. 36.
- 50  
Ibid.
- 51  
Ibid., p. 39.
- 52  
Ibid., p. 83.
- 53  
Ibid., p. 123.
- 54  
Ibid.
- 55  
Ibid., p. 171.
- 56  
Ibid., p. 189.
- 57  
Ibid., p. 155.
- 58  
Ibid., p. 156.
- 59  
Ibid., p. 165.
- 60  
Ibid., p. 227.
- 61  
Ibid., p. 251.
- 62  
Ibid., pp. 30-31.

## Chapter 3

1  
Movies. Pauline Kael, "Circles and Squares," I Lost it at the  
(New York: Bantam Books, 1966.), p. 264

2  
Ibid.

3  
Ibid., p. 265.

4  
Ibid.

5  
Ibid., pp. 265-66.

6  
Ibid., p. 266.

7  
Ibid., p. 267.

8  
Ibid.

9  
Ibid.

10  
Ibid.

11  
Ibid.

12  
Ibid.

13  
Ibid.

14  
Ibid.

15  
Ibid., p. 268.

16  
Ibid.

17  
Ibid.

18  
Ibid.

19  
Ibid.

20  
Ibid., p. 269.

21  
Ibid., pp. 268-69.

22  
Ibid., p. 269.

23  
Ibid., p. 270.

24  
Ibid., p. 271

25  
Ibid.

26  
Ibid.

27  
Ibid.

28  
Ibid., p. 272.

29  
Ibid.

30  
Ibid.

31  
Ibid., p. 273

32  
Ibid.

33  
Ibid.

34  
Ibid.

35  
Ibid., p. 274.

36  
Ibid.

37  
Ibid., p. 275.

38  
Ibid.

39  
Ibid., p. 276.

40  
Ibid., p. 277.

41  
Ibid., p. 281.

42  
Ibid.

43  
Ibid.

44  
Ibid., p. 280.

45  
Ibid.

46  
Ibid., p. 287

47  
Ibid., p. 280

48  
Dwight Macdonald, Dwight Macdonald on Movies (New York:  
Berkley Publishing, 1961.), p. 178

49 Ibid., pp. 178-79.

50 Ibid., p. 179.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., p. 180.

57 Ibid.

58 Stanley J. Solomon, The Film Idea, (New York: Harcourt  
Brace Jovanovich, 1972), p. 227.

59 ibid.

60 Richard Corliss, "The Hollywood Screenwriter," in  
Film Theory and Criticism. Edited by Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen.  
(London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1974 ), P. 542.

61 Ibid., p. 543.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid., p. 545.

64 Ibid., p. 545.

65  
Ibid., p. 550.

66  
George W. Linden, Reflections on the Screen. (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 1970), p. 62

67  
Ibid.

68  
Ibid.

69  
Ibid.

70  
Richard Koszarski, "The Men with the Movie Cameras," in Film Theory and Criticism. Edited by Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen. (London, New York, Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 561.

71  
Ibid., p. 562

72  
Charles Boultenhouse, "The Camera as a God," Film Culture Reader, P. Adams Sitney, editor. (New York: Praeger, 1970), p. 138.

73  
Ibid., p. 139

74  
Gene Youngblood, Expanded Cinema, (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970), pp. 71-72.

75  
Ibid.

76  
Peter Wollen, Signs and Meaning in the Cinema, (Bloomington, London: Indiana University Press, 1972), p. 78.

77  
Ibid., p. 80.

78  
Ibid.

79  
Ibid.

80  
Ibid.

81  
Ibid., p. 167.

82  
Ibid.

83  
Ibid., pp. 167-68.

84  
Ibid., p. 171.

85  
John Simon, Movies into Film. (New York: Dial Press, 1971.), pp. 21-22.

#### Chapter 4

1  
Andrew Sarris, "The High Forties Revisited,"  
in The Primal Screen. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973)  
pp. 21-37.

2  
Ibid., p. 22.

3  
Ibid., p. 23.

4  
Ibid.

5  
Ibid., p. 25.

6  
Ibid., p. 26.

7  
Ibid., p. 27.

8  
Andrew Sarris, Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema  
1955-1969. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970.), p. 364.

9

Andrew Sarris, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962," in Film Culture, No. 27, (Winter, 1962-63)

10

Andrew Sarris, Confessions of a Cultist, p. 364.

11

Andrew Sarris, The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968. (New York: Dutton, 1969), p. 37.

12

Andrew Sarris, "Auteurism is Alive and Well," in Film Quarterly, Vol. 28, No. 1, (Fall, 1974), p. 63.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Boultenhouse, Charles. "The Camera as a God," in Film Culture Reader. Edited by P. Adams Sitney. New York: Praeger, 1970.
- Braudy, Leo. Jean Renoir, The World of his Films. Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1972.
- Corliss, Richard. "The Hollywood Screenwriter," in Film Theory and Criticism. Edited by Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen. London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1974.
- Crisp, C. G. Francois Truffaut. New York: Praeger, 1972.
- Halliwell, Leslie. The Filmmaker's Companion. New York: Avon Books, 1970.
- Hess, John. "Auteurism and After, A Reply to Graham Petie," in Film Quarterly, Vol. 27, No. 2, Winter 1973-74.
- Huss, Roy and Norman Silverstein. The Film Experience: Elements of Motion Picture Art. New York: Harper and Row, 1968.
- Kael, Pauline. I Lost it at the Movies. New York: Bantam Books, 1966.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Raising Kane," in The Citizen Kane Book. Boston: Little Brown, 1971.
- Koszarski, Richard. "The Men with the Movie Cameras," in Film Theory and Criticism. Edited by Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen. London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1974.
- Leprohon, Pierre. Jean Renoir. New York: Crown Publishers, 1971.
- Linden, George W. Reflections on the Screen. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 1970.
- Macdonald, Dwight. Dwight Macdonald on Movies. New York: Berkley Publishing, 1971.
- Mast, Gerald. A Short History of the Movies. New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971.

Petrie, Graham. "Auteurism: More Aftermath," in Film Quarterly,  
Vol. 27, No. 3, Spring 1974

Sarris, Andrew. The American Cinema: Directors and Directions  
1929-1968. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Auteurism is Alive and Well," in Film Quarterly,  
Vol. 28, No. 1, Fall 1974.

\_\_\_\_\_. Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema, 1955-1969.  
New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Rise and Fall of the Film Director," in Hollywood  
Voices: Interviews with Film Directors. Indianapolis, New  
York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962," in Film Culture,  
No. 27, Winter 1962-63.

\_\_\_\_\_. The Primal Screen. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973.

Simon, John. Movies into Film. New York: Dial Press, 1971.

Solomon, Stanley J. The Film Idea. New York: Harcourt Brace  
Jovanovich, 1972.

Staples, Donald E. "The Auteur Theory Re-examined," in The  
Emergence of Film Art. Edited by Lewis Jacobs. New York:  
Hopkinson and Blake, 1969.

Wollen, Peter. Signs and Meaning in the Cinema. Bloomington,  
London: Indiana University Press, 1972.

Youngblood, Gene. Expanded Cinema. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1970.