Film Theory
An Introduction

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The Phenomenology of Realism

nal (La Revue internationale de filmologie), and a collective text
(L’Univers filmique). The movement’s inaugural tome was Gilbert
Cohen-Scat’s Essai sur les principes d’une philosophie du cinéma (Essay
on the Principles of a Philosophy of the Cinema, 1946). Partly
inspired by phenomenology, the “filmologists” sought to organize
various academic disciplines – sociology, psychology, aesthetics, lin-
guistics, psychophysiology – around the project of a comprehensive
and scientific theory of film. At their First International Congress,
the filmologists defined five categories of interest: (1) Psychological
and Experimental Research; (2) Research in the Development of
Cinematic Empiricism; (3) Aesthetic, Sociological and General
Philosophical Research; (4) Comparative Research on Film as a Means
of Expression; and (5) Normative Research – application of studies
of the filmic fact to problems of teaching, of medical psychology,
etc. (Lowry, 1985, p. 50). In subsequent years Henri Agile wrote on
“Cinematic Equivalences of Literary Composition and Language,”
Anne Souriau wrote on “Filmic Functions of Costumes and Dec-
or,” and Edgar Morin and Georges Friedman wrote on “Sociology
of the Cinema.” In his paper “Filmologie et esthétique comparée,”
Souriau argues, somewhat problematically, that four structural prop-
erties of the novel – time, tempo, space, and angle of approach –
render it difficult to “translate” into film.

The filmology group undertook a systematic study of all aspects
of the cinema, from the “cinematic situation” (theater, screen, and
spectator) to the social rituals surrounding the cinema, to the phe-
nomenology and even the physiology of spectatorship. The filmologists elaborated a number of concepts – “cinematic situation
(Cohen-Scat), “diegesis” (Etienne Souriau), “cognitive mechanisms
(Rene and Bianka Zazzo) – which were subsequently deployed (and
reworked) by both Metzian semiotics and, much later, cognitive
theory. In Souriau’s proposal (in La Correspondance des arts, 1947)
for a comparative study of the specifics of the various arts, for
example, we see the partial source of Metz’s attempts to classify and
differentiate media in terms of their “specificity,” just as Romano’s
work on the “character of reality” provoked by film anticipates Metz’s
work on “the impression of reality.” Filmology’s investigation of

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such issues as the perception of movement, the impression of depth,
the role of immediate and deferred memory, motor reactions, em-
pathic projections and the physiology of spectatorship, by the same
token, prefigured many of the concerns of cognitive theory in the
1980s.

The Cult of the Auteur

In the late 1950s and early 1960s a movement called auteurism came
to dominate film criticism and theory (Auteurism was in some ways
the expression of an existentialist humanism inflected by pheno-
menology. Echoing Sartre’s pithy summary of existentialism – “ex-
istence precedes essence” – Bazin claimed that the cinema’s “existence
precedes its essence.” Bazin’s vocabulary, moreover, as James
Naremore points out, was a Sartrean one, fond of words like “fre-
dom,” “fate,” and “authenticity” (Naremore, 1998, p. 25). Bazin’s
essays “Ontology of the Photographic Image” and “Myth of Total
Cinema” were roughly concurrent with Sartre’s essay entitled “Ex-
istentialism and Humanism.” Sartre and Bazin share a fundamental
tenet: “the centrality of the activity of the philosophical subject, the
premise of all phenomenologies” (Rosen, 1990, p. 8). Auteurism was
also the product of a cultural formation which included film
magazines, ciné-clubs, the French cinématéque, and film festivals,
and it was fueled by the screening of newly available American films
during the Liberation period.

Novelist and filmmaker Alexandre Astruc prepared the way for
auteurism with his 1948 essay “Birth of a New Avant-Garde: The
Camera-Pen,” in which he argued that the cinema was becoming a
new means of expression analogous to painting or the novel. The
filmmaker, Astruc claimed, should be able to say “I” like the novel-
ist or poet.1 The “camera-pen” formula valorized the act of
filmmaking; the director was no longer merely the servant of a pre-
exiting text (novel, screenplay) but a creative artist in his/her own
right. François Truffaut also played an important role with his stra-
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tegic aggressions against the established French cinema. In his famous manifesto-essay, “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema,” published in 1954 in *Cahiers du cinéma*, Truffaut eulogized the “tradition of quality” which turned the classics of French literature into predictably well-furnished, well-spoken, and stylistically formulaic films. Truffaut dubbed this arcaic cinema, in a rather oedipal manner, the “cinéma de papa” (the proponents of New German Cinema, at Oberhausen in 1962, also spoke of “Daddy’s Cinema”). Truffaut derided the tradition of quality as a stuffy, academic screenwriters’ cinema, while lauding the more vital American popular maverick cinema of Nicholas Ray, Robert Aldrich, and Orson Welles. The tradition of quality, for Truffaut, reduced filmmaking to the mere translation of a pre-existing screenplay, when it should be seen as an open-ended adventure in creative mise-en-scène. Although French cinema pride itself on being “anti-bourgeois,” Truffaut taunted, it was ultimately made “by the bourgeois for the bourgeois,” the work of *littérateurs* who despised and underestimated the cinema. (It is difficult to overstate the provocative nature of Truffaut’s intervention, and especially his support for American cinema in the era of Sartrean “engagement” and the left’s domination of French culture, when the US, for French intellectuals, evoked McCarthyism and the cold war, and when “Hollywood” evoked the powerful dream factory that had destroyed great talents like von Stroheim and Murnau.

For Truffaut, the new film would resemble the person who made it, not so much through autobiographical content but rather through the style, which impregnates the film with the personality of its director. Intrinsically strong directors, auteur theory argued, would exhibit over the years a recognizable stylistic and thematic personality even when they work in Hollywood studios. In short, real talent will “out” no matter what the circumstances. *Cahiers* defended the American films of Lang against the prejudice that his work declined in Hollywood. In the case of Hitchcock, *Cahiers* not only supported his American films, but two of its members, Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol, argued in a book-length study that Hitchcock was both a technical genius and a profound metaphysician whose work revolved around the implicitly Catholic theme of a Christ-like “transfer of guilt.” “Once the principle of directorial continuity is accepted even in Hollywood,” Andrew Sarris wrote, “films can never look the same again” (Sarris, 1973, p. 37).

(With its first issue in 1951 *Cahiers du cinéma* became a key organ for the propagation of auteurism. The *Cahiers* critics saw the director as the person responsible, in the last instance, for a film’s aesthetics and mise-en-scène. *Cahiers* initiated a new policy of interviewing admired directors; between 1954 and 1957 Renoir, Buñuel, Rossellini, Hitchcock, Hawks, Ophuls, Minnelli, Welles, (Nicholas) Ray, and Visconti all passed through the *Cahiers* interview machine. In a 1957 article, “La Politique des auteurs,” Bazin summarized auteurism as “choosing in the artistic creation the personal factor as a criterion of reference, and then postulating its permanence and even its progress from one work to the next.” The auteur critics distinguished between metteurs-en-scène, i.e., those who adhered to the dominant conventions and to the scripts given them, and auteurs who used mise-en-scène as part of self expression. (Although auteurism came into vogue in the 1950s, the idea itself was in many ways a traditional one. The perennial characterization of the cinema as the “seventh art” implicitly granted film artists the same status as writers and painters. In 1921 the filmmaker Jean Epstein, in “Le Cinéma et les lettres modernes,” used the term “auteur” to apply to filmmakers, and directors like Griffith and Eisenstein had compared their own cinematic techniques to the literary devices of writers like Flaubert and Dickens. In the 1930s Rudolf Arnheim was already lamenting the “exaltation” of the director (Arnheim, 1997, p. 65). In postwar France, however, the auteurist metaphor became a key structuring concept in film criticism and theory. In Sartrean terms, the film author strives for “authenticity” in the face of the castrating “regard” of the studio system. On the other side of the Atlantic, meanwhile, American film journals of the late 1940s had anticipated the auteurist discussion by debating the relative importance of the diverse collaborators on the filmmaking team. Lester Cole defended the scriptwriter—director, while Stanley Shofield com-
pared the collaborative art of filmmaking to the collective construction of a cathedral. All these arguments were attempts to claim artistic origins and were animated by a desire to show that film could transcend its artisanal, industrial form of production and incorporate a singular, signed vision. One can also detect a romantic auteurist impulse in the writings of American avant-gardists like Maya Deren and Stan Brakhage. The former speaks in a 1960 essay of the cinema’s “extraordinary range of expression,” its affinities not only with dance, theater, and music, but also with poetry in that “it can juxtapose images” and with literature generally in that “it can encompass in its soundtrack the abstractions available only to language.” Brakhage, in a 1963 essay, projects the artist not so much as auteur but rather as visionary, the creator of a wordless world “shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color.” Cinema for Brakhage is an adventure in perception, where the director can deploy transgressive techniques – overexposure, improvised natural filters, spitting on the lens – to provoke a transperspectival vision of the world.

In the postwar period, film discourse, like literary discourse, became oriented around a constellation of concepts such as écriture, writing, and textuality. This graphological trope dominated the period, from Astruc’s “camera-stylus” (camera-pen) to Metz’s later discussion of “cinema and écriture” in Language and Cinema (1971). The French New Wave directors were especially fond of the scriptural metaphor – scarcely surprising, given that many of them began as film journalists who regarded articles and films as simply two forms of expression. “We are always alone,” Godard (1958) wrote somewhat melodramatically, “whether in the studio or before the blank page.” Agnès Varda, when she was about to make La Pointe Courte, announced that she would “make a film exactly as one writes a book” (quoted in Philippe, 1983, p. 17). The films by the New Wave directors “embodied” this writerly theory. It is no accident, for example, that Truffaut’s first film, Les Quatre Cents Coups, abounds with references to writing; Antoine’s mimicry of his mother’s penmanship; his theft of a typewriter; his pastiche of Balzac which elicits accusations of plagiarism

— all point to the undergirding trope which subsumes his vision of filmmaking. At the same time the New Wave was profoundly ambivalent about literature, which was both a model to be emulated, and, in the form of literary scripts and conventional adaptations, the enemy to be abjured.

A product of the conjunction of cinephilia (cellulaphagie) and a romantic strain of existentialism, auteurism must be seen partially as a response to (a) the elitist putdowns of cinema by some literary intellectuals; (b) the iconophobic prejudice against cinema as a “visual medium”; (c) the mass-culture debate which projected the cinema as the agent of political alienation; and (d) the traditional anti-Americanism of the French literary elite. Auteurism was in this sense a palimpsest of influences, combining romantic expressive notions of the artist, modernist-formalist notions of stylistic discontinuity and fragmentation, and a “proto-postmodern” fondness for “lower” arts and genres. The real scandal of the auteur theory lay not so much in glorifying the director as the equivalent in prestige to the literary author, but rather in exactly who was granted this prestige. Filmmakers like Eisenstein, Renoir, and Welles had always been regarded as auteurs because they were known to have enjoyed artistic control over their own productions. The novelty of auteur theory was to suggest that studio directors like Hawks and Minnelli were also auteurs. American cinema, which had classically been the dialectical “other” of French film theory, that against which it had defined itself, just as the putative “vulgarity” of American culture had long provided the dialectical counterpart for French national identity, now became, surprisingly, the model for a new French cinema.

Born in an atmosphere of violent polemics, “la Politique des Auteurs” translates literally as the “author policy” rather than “theory.” In France auteurism formed part of a strategy for facilitating a new kind of filmmaking. Auteurism was thus both inspiration and strategic instrument for the filmmakers of the New Wave, who used it to dynamite a place for themselves within a conservative, hierarchical French film scene where aspiring directors had to wait a lifetime to direct films. Critics-directors like Truffaut and Godard were attacking the established system, with its rigid production hi-
erarchies, its preference for studio shooting, and its conventional narrative procedures. They were also defending the rights of the director vis-à-vis the producer; Godard’s Contempt, which pits the humane, cultivated, and polyglot auteur Fritz Lang against the vulgar, barely literate Hollywood producer Prokosch, filmically encapsulates this “director’s lib” side of auteurism. Paradoxically, a theory that had its ideological roots in pre-modernist romantic Expressionism helped undergird a cinema, exemplified by epoch-making films like Hiroshima Mon Amour and Breathless, which was resolutely modernist in aspiration and aesthetics.

In its more extreme incarnations auteurism can be seen as an anthropomorphic form of “love” for the cinema. The same love that fans had formerly lavished on stars, or that formalists lavished on artistic devices, the auteurists now lavished on the men — and they largely were men — who incarnated the auteurists’ idea of cinema. Film was resurrected as secular religion; the “aura” was back in force thanks to the cult of the auteur. At the same time Bazin distanced himself from the splenetic excesses of the young Turks. With his usual prescience he warned in 1957 against any aesthetic “cult of personality” which would erect favored directors into infallible masters. Bazin also pointed out the necessity of complementing auteurism with other approaches — technological, historical, sociological. Great films, he argued, arise from the fortuitous intersection of talent and historical moment. Occasionally a mediocre director — Bazin cites Curtiz and Casablanca — might vividly capture a historical moment, without qualifying as an authentic auteur. The quality control guaranteed by the well-oiled Hollywood industrial machine, furthermore, virtually assured a certain competence and even elegance. Bazin pointed out the paradox that auteurists admired the American cinema, “where the restrictions on production are heavier than anywhere else,” while they failed to admire what was ultimately most admirable about it, “the genius of the system, the richness of its ever-vigorous tradition, and its fertility when it comes into contact with new elements” (Hillier, 1985, pp. 257–8).

The Americanization of Auteur Theory

Auteurism took a different turn when it was introduced to the United States by Andrew Sarris in his “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962.” Like Paris, New York had a strong tradition of ciné-clubs, repertory theaters, and film journals such as Film Culture. Sarris picked up on the French critics’ emphasis on style as creative expression: “The way a film looks and moves should have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels.” A meaningful style, Sarris argued, unites the “what” and the “how” into a “personal statement” where the director takes risks and struggles against standardization (ibid., p. 66). The critic must therefore be alert to the tensions between the directorial personality and the materials with which the director works. In Sarris’s hands the auteur theory also became a surreptitiously nationalist instrument for asserting the superiority of American cinema. Sarris declared himself ready to “stake his critical reputation” on the notion that American cinema has been “consistently superior” to what Sarris dismissively and ethnocentrically called the “rest of the world.” Sarris struggled against the Europhilic prejudice that saw “art” in stuffy adaptations of European literary classics, but saw only “entertainment” in the films of a Hitchcock or a John Ford. At its best, Sarris’s work turned film buffery and connoisseurship into an art form, deploying his broad knowledge of cinema to convey the genuine achievements of Hollywood cinema.

Sarris proposed three criteria for recognizing an auteur: (1) technical competence; (2) distinguishable personality; and (3) interior meaning arising from tension between personality and material. In The American Cinema Sarris constructed a nine-part schema which invited privileged directors into a “pantheon” while it relegated the lower ranks into circles reminiscent of Dante’s hell.

Pauline Kael debunked Sarris’s three criteria in her response article “Circles and Squares” (1963). Technical competence, she argued, was hardly a valid criterion, since some directors, such as Antonioni, went beyond mere technical competence. “Distinguishable personality” was meaningless since it favors repetitious direc-
tors whose styles are recognizable precisely because they never try anything new. The distinctive smell of skunks, she analogized, does not make their smell pleasant or superior to that of roses. Kael dismisses "interior meaning," finally, as impossibly vague and favoring "hacks who shove style into the crevices of plots." (Kael's attempt to deprive Orson Welles of legitimate authorship of Citizen Kane attributing it instead to Herman Mankiewicz, was also aimed at Sarris and auteurism.) But the heat of the Sarris-Kael debate masked the fact that they did share a key premise: the idea that film theory/criticism should be evaluative, concerned with the comparative ranking of films and directors. At its most crass, this approach led to sterile quarrels about relative merit, a kind of reckless gambling on critical reputations, as arbitrary tastes were elevated into supposedly rigid hierarchies. In Sarris, metaphors of war and gambling and staking claims were in this sense symptomatic, redolent of the rough-and-tumble frontier atmosphere of competitive journalism.

Auteurism was also criticized on more practical grounds. Critics pointed out that it underestimated the impact of production conditions on authorship. The filmmaker is not an untrammeled artist; he or she is immersed in material contingencies, surrounded by the Babel-like buzz of technicians, cameras, and lights of the "happening" which is the ordinary film shoot. While the poet can write poems on a napkin in prison, the filmmaker requires money, camera, film. [Auteurism, it was argued, downplayed the collaborative nature of filmmaking. Even a low-budget feature can involve more than a score of people working over an extended period. A genre like the musical requires the strong creative participation of composers, musicians, choreographers, and set designers. No single writer can claim that honour, not even the author of the original book, Mervyn LeRoy and Arthur Freed, the producers, both have their champions. At least four directors worked on the picture, most notably Victor Fleming. ... The truth is that this great movie, in which the quarrels, sackings and near-bungles of all concerned produced what seems like pure, effortless, and somehow inevitable felicity, is as near as dammit to that will-o'-the-wisp of modern critical theory: the authorless text. (Rushdie, 1992)

Given this kind of collaboration, some argued that producers like Selznick, performers like Brando, or writers like Raymond Chandler could be seen as auteurs. Any coherent theory of authorship must take into account these diverse intructions in terms of material circumstances and personnel within filmic authorship. Authorship on complex legal issues of ownership concerning copyright, "fair use," "substantial similarity." When Art Buchwald sues Eddie Murphy over the plot of Coming to America, when French producers of The Three Musketeers refuse to acknowledge Alexander Dumas's "moral rights" as "inalienable author," we are far from the realm of unsullied inspiration and unencumbered genius evoked by romantic notions of authorship.

Auteurism also required modification to apply to television. In television, some argued, the real auteurs were producers like Norman Lear and Stephen Bochco. What happens to a person's status as authors when TV commercial directors (Ridley Scott, Alan Parker) move into feature films, or when consecrated directors (David Lynch, Spike Lee, Jean-Luc Godard) move into commercials, or when Michelangelo Antonioni choreographs a psychedelic spot for Renault? Are they always and in every circumstance auteurs, or does their auteur status depend on medium, context, format? Industry-oriented critics like Thomas Schatz, meanwhile, spoke not of the genius of authors but rather of what Bazin had called the "genius of the system," i.e. the capacity of a well-financed and talent-filled industrial machine to turn out high-quality films. While auteurs emphasized personal style and mise-en-scène, Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson in their work on "classical Hollywood cinema" emphasized the impersonal and standardized ("group style") of a homogenous corpus whose main features were (narrative unity, realism, and invisible narration.)

Auteurism ultimately was less a theory than a methodological focus. In any case, it clearly represented an improvement over antecedent critical methodologies, notably Impressionism (a kind of...
neuro-glandular response to films based solely on the critic's sensibilities and tastes) and sociologism (an evaluative approach based on a reductive view of the perceived progressive or reactionary political thrust of the characters or story line). Auteurism also performed an invaluable rescue operation for neglected films and genres. It discerned authorial personalities in surprising places—especially in the American makers of B-films like Samuel Fuller and Nicholas Ray. It rescued entire genres—the thriller, the western, the horror film—from literary high-art prejudice. By forcing attention to the films themselves and to mise-en-scène as the stylistic signature of the director, auteurism clearly made a substantial contribution to film theory and methodology. (Auteurism shifted attention from the "what" (story, theme) to the "how" (style, technique), showing that style itself had personal, ideological and even metaphysical reverberations. It facilitated film's entry into literature departments and played a major role in the academic legitimation of cinema studies. But with the subsequent emergence of semiotics, as we shall see, auteurism came under attack for its romantic, apolitical valorization of authorial genius, gradually transmuting into a hybrid called "auteur-structuralism." We will address auteur-structuralism in a subsequent section.

Third World Film and Theory

Simultaneous with the development of auteurism and film phenomenology in Europe are the first stirrings of what later came to be known as "third cinema" theory, and here too both auteurism and realism were relevant to the discussion. While there had always been diverse forms of film-related writing in Latin America, Africa, and Asia—books, film magazines, and film columns in newspapers—it was in the 1950s that such writing cohered into a theory inspired by nationalist concerns. Originally coined by French journalist Alfred Sauvy in the 1950s by way of analogy to the revolutionary "third estate" of France, i.e. the commoners in contrast with the first estate (the nobility) and the second estate (the clergy), the term "Third World" posited three geopolitical spheres: the capitalist First World (nobility) of Europe, the US, Australia, and Japan; the Second World (clergy) of the socialist bloc; and the Third World proper (the commoners). "Third World" refers to the colonized, neo-colonized or decolonized nations and "minorities" of the world whose economic and political structures have been shaped and deformed within the colonial process. The term itself challenged the colonizing vocabulary which posited these nations as "backward" and "underdeveloped," fired in a presumably static "tradition." As a political coalition, the Third World broadly coalesced around the enthusiasm generated by anti-colonial struggles in Vietnam and Algeria, and specifically emerged from the 1955 Bandung Conference of non-aligned African and Asian nations. The fundamental definition of the Third World had more to do with structural economic domination than it had with crude humanistic categories ("the poor"), developmental categories (the "non-industrialized"), (binary) racial categories ("the non-white"), cultural categories ("the backward"), or geographical categories ("the East"). Such notions of the Third World were seen as imprecise because the Third World is not necessarily poor in resources (Mexico, Venezuela, Nigeria, Indonesia, and Iraq are rich in petroleum), nor culturally backward (as witnessed by the brilliance of Third World cinema, literature, and music), nor non-industrialized (Brazil and Singapore are highly industrialized), nor non-white (Ireland, perhaps the first British colony, is predominantly white, as is Argentina).

The way for filmic third-worldism was prepared, in Latin America at least, by the popularity of Italian neo-realism, partially facilitated by Italian immigrant populations but also by certain analogies between the Italian social situation and that of Latin America. The social geography of Italy, divided into rich North and poor South, uncannily homologized the world at large. Indeed, there was a good deal of cross-fertilization between Italian neo-realism and film theory and practice in Latin America (and elsewhere, for example the case of Satyajit Ray in India and Youssef Chahine in Egypt). Not only did a number of the neo-realist filmmakers visit Latin America—