

Auteur Theory

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1. “*Auteur*” is French for “author”; the *auteur* theory refers to a school of film criticism that originated in France in the 1950s from the work of a group of critics for the very influential journal, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, many of whom went on to become prominent directors of the French New Wave cinema of the late 1950s and early 1960s. (In other words, these were critics who practiced what they preached which is rarely seen in film or, for that matter, in any of the arts.) For these critics, films are dominated by directors as *auteurs*.
 - The roots of this school go back to the ideas of the critic-director, Alexandre Astruc in the 1940s and his emphasis on the *caméra-stylo* or camera as pen wielded by the director (Astruc 1948; Konigsberg 1987). Astruc urged directors to think of themselves as creating a textual narrative.
 - However, the argument for *auteurism* was first forcefully developed by Truffaut (1954) who is regarded as one of the principal founders of French New Wave. We will consider Truffaut’s piece in some detail below.
 - However, even within *Cahiers du Cinéma* there was dissent from André Bazin (1957), one of the revered co-founders of the magazine and most important film critics in history. We have encountered Bazin before because of his advocacy of Italian neo-realism, in particular, *Bicycle Thieves* (1948). We will look at Bazin’s (partial) dissent below.
 - The term “*auteur* theory” is due to Andrew Sarris (1962) who introduced *auteurism* to the U.S. and became its most vocal defender in this country indulging in many polemics in the 1960s and 1970s. We will also look at his version of *auteurism* below.
2. What is *auteurism*? In the words of an encyclopedia entry it is “type of film criticism that sees the director as the controlling force in a film, as an artist who infuses the whole work with his or her personality and point of view and all of whose films can be related in terms of similar techniques” (Konigsberg 1987, p. 21). This is an accurate statement; thus two themes are paramount:
 - i. The emphasis being put on the director who is supposed to be the determining force with all other participants, including the screenwriter(s) and actor(s) playing subordinate roles. Later on, we will ask the question: is this correct?
 - ii. The claim that there is a formal or “stylistic” unity to a director’s corpus. Once again, we can question: how true is this? However there is a clear *prima facie* case for it and we will examine it in some detail.
- Each of these themes has tangible consequences for the practice of criticism:
 - In assessing an individual film, the critic must focus on the director over all other participants. How a film fits into the director’s corpus emerges as a matter of interest. For Truffaut, and some other *auteur* critics, issues of social relevance (or of ethics) become less important—a point that will be important when we look at the ways in which *auteurism* was socially reactionary.
 - A focus on directors is a good way to organize the vast array of films that have been produced. It provides an informative categorization of films. Sarris (1968) attempts such a project in his *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929 -1968*.
- *Auteurism* also has consequences for the making of films as shown brilliantly by the *auteur* critics who turned director: Godard, Chabrol, and Rohmer, besides Truffaut. The ways are as expected: they exerted maximal control of their films and pursued a personalized vision in what they did across the different films that make up their corpus.

3. Truffaut's (1954) original statement of *auteurism* reads like an accidental manifesto (and it is only regarded as a manifesto in retrospect) and has become obscure over the years because much of it is spent criticizing French films and directors from the 1940s and early 1950s who are now (probably justly) forgotten. The following six themes emerge from Truffaut's piece:
 - The *auteur* must be a "man of the cinema," that is, someone with hands-on experience of making films in contrast to, for instance, professional authors who turn to writing film-scripts.
 - In this context, Truffaut is particularly critical of films based on literary works.
 - These "men of the cinema" must have familiarity with all of film-making rather than be technicians devoted to single tasks.
 - The emphasis on the director and not on a mere "*metteur en scène*" who carries out the vision of someone else.
 - In support of these ideas, Truffaut establishes a canon of contemporary French *auteur*-directors: Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson, Jean Cocteau, Jacques Becker, Abel Gance, Max Ophuls, Jacques Tati, Roger Leenhardt. Most of these are still considered to be major directors. Here, Truffaut had clearly identified something important.
 - Many socially conservative themes are emphasized to which we will return below.
4. Bazin (1957) provided some skepticism, or at least some words of caution in the pages of *Cahiers du Cinéma* three years later. As always, his provocative claims deserve serious attention.
 - As Bazin notes at the beginning of his article, by then *Cahiers du Cinéma* had come to be regarded as the official organ of *auteur* criticism.
 - Yet Bazin (who was one of the co-founders of the magazine and had dominated its editorial perspective until Truffaut's piece) felt compelled to critique what he called the "*politique des auteurs*." (The ambiguity of *politique* served him well.)
 - Bazin perceptively notes his crucial disagreement with the *auteur* critics immediately: for him, a work of art can transcend its creator, that is, a movie can transcend its director.
 - What bothered Bazin is the *auteur* critics' deification of their favorite directors and denigration of others (including John Huston).
 - Worse was the assumption that great directors necessarily made great films which led to implausible praise for mediocre products.
 - Works of art reflect society. Individuals personify social forces.
 - "the individual transcends society, but society is also and above all *within* him. So there can be no definitive criticism of genius or talent which does not first take into consideration the social determinism, the historical combination of circumstances, and the technical background which to a large extent determine it. That is why the anonymity of a work of art is a handicap that impinges very slightly on our understanding of it."
 - Indeed, this social determinism makes it possible that there may be "flashes in the pan of otherwise mediocre film-makers." (Perhaps this is what happens with Huston in *Chinatown* [1974]? Though dismissing Huston as mediocre is somewhat hasty.)
 - In Bazin's final assessment: the *auteur* theory is "an aesthetic personality cult."
5. Sarris (1962) is a response to Bazin, the first systematic exposition of the *auteur* theory in the Anglo-phone world. (The title of his piece, "Notes on the *auteur* theory in 1962," must surely be one of the most uninspired ever for an important work of aesthetics or art criticism.)
 - "Auteur theory" is Sarris' term, his translation of "*politique des auteurs*" and Sarris intentionally does not translate "*auteur*" because the French connotations of "*auteur*" are not the same as English "author." Sarris does not even attempt to deal with the rich ambiguity of "*politique*."
 - Against Bazin, Sarris urges:

- The importance of authorship for any work of art: “is it possible to honor a work of art without honoring the artist involved? I think not.”
 - Against social determinism: “I suspect somewhat greater reciprocity between an artist and his *zeitgeist* [*sic!*] than Bazin would allow.”
 - Of course, Sarris is quite respectful of Bazin, regarding the latter as the greatest film critic to have ever worked. So, he accepts many of the points made by Bazin and reformulates the *auteur* theory’s claims in a relatively more reasonable version than what its proponents within *Cahiers du Cinéma* had done. He accepts mediocre directors may occasionally produce great films. He even accepts that great directors may make uneven films. And that, on occasion, interesting films may be produced with little directorial input. However, Sarris insists, such cases are extremely rare. He takes this to be a decisive reason to accept the *auteur* theory.
 - We may question whether the *auteur* theory any longer has teeth.
 - What may be most valuable is that Sarris explicitly states three premises of the *auteur* theory:
 - i. “[T]he first premise of the *auteur* theory is the technical competence of a director as a criterion of value.” This goes back to Truffaut’s “man of the cinema” principle.
 - ii. “The second premise of the *auteur* theory is the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value.” Once again, this goes back to Truffaut.
 - iii. “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.” To Sarris’ credit, he recognizes these claims as mystical though it is far from clear that he succeeds in dispelling the mystery. He offers suggestions such as Truffaut’s reference to the director’s “temperature” on the set. He calls it the “*élan* of the soul.”
 - Sarris’ advocacy of the *auteur* theory provoked unprecedented controversy among film critics in the U.S., including famously an ill-tempered diatribe from Pauline Kael of the *New York Times*. That controversy died out by the 1970s in spite of the fact that Sarris wrote a book using this theory to reconstruct the history of American cinema, as we saw earlier. By and large, the *auteur* theory was forgotten even as its assumptions became part of much mainstream criticism and other interpretive writing on film.
6. Truffaut’s (1954) exposition of *auteursim* embraced many socially reactionary themes:
- Truffaut’s critique of contemporary French films include rejecting their anti-clericalism, endorsement of provocative language, depiction of homosexuality—the list seems endless.
 - His sarcasm targets their pretensions to support anti-bourgeois values.
 - What is more interesting is the extent to which these reactionary themes pervade *auteur* criticism over all and, also, the French New Wave.
 - We should not underestimate the diversity in the group: what is often called Truffaut’s “romanticism” stands in sharp contrast to Godard’s more radical stance.
 - Nevertheless, the pursuit of an artistic vision seems to over-ride all social, political, or ethical concerns in *auteur* criticism (and in the French New Wave).
 - Arguably, the *auteur* succeeds by generating aura, contrary to Benjamin’s admonitions about the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction.
 - We seem to glide inexorably and retrogressively into art for art’s sake; the French New Wave is *not* immune to this criticism.
7. Was the *auteur* theory so influential only because so many of the auteur-critics went on to become immensely successful directors of the French New Wave?
- We cannot question that the French New Wave was one of the more important developments in the history of film.

- As we saw earlier, it was explicitly inspired by auteur-critics who turned directors: Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol, and Rohmer.
 - However, others who are now recognized as great French New Wave directors, most notably Jacques Rivette (who was also a very incisive *Cahiers du Cinéma* critic), have a more nuanced relationship to *auteurism* beyond pure advocacy.
 - Indeed, if we take the major emphasis of the *auteur* theory to be its emphasis on the personal vision of the director, its real importance was felt transnationally in promoting directors with a certain aura. If this is how we view *auteur* theory, then its importance lies beyond what its proponents achieved through the French New Wave. (And, so, it does not matter how deep the connection between *auteurism* and the French New Wave actually was.)
8. So, finally, we turn to the question of what value the *auteur* theory continues to have when it comes to understanding film.
- (a) First, we should ask: how plausible is it?
- Let us start with one potentially devastating line of criticism, going back to Panofsky's emphasis on the co-operative role of film-making with the necessary involvement of a wide variety of contributors:

“It might be said that a film, called into being by a co-operative effort in which all contributions have the same degree of permanence, is the nearest modern equivalent of a medieval cathedral; the role of the producer corresponding, more or less, to that of the bishop or archbishop; that of the director to that of the architect in chief; that of the scenario writers to that of the scholastic advisers establishing the iconographical program; and that of the actors, cameramen, cutters, sound men, make-up men and the divers technicians to that of those whose work provided the physical entity of the finished product, from the sculptors, glass painters, bronze casters, carpenters and skilled masons down to the quarry men and woodsmen. And if you speak to any one of these collaborators he will tell you, with perfect *bona fides*, that his is really the most important job—which is quite true to the extent that it is indispensable” (Panofsky 1947).
 - Panofsky emphasizes co-operation. But, it is also plausible that tensions between the major contributors can add to a film's complexity and thereby enhance its value by promoting interpretive diversity. We have already encountered a striking example in *Do the Right Thing* (1989). The director, Spike Lee, who also wrote the film script, viewed the character Sal as a racist. The actor who portrayed Sal, Danny Aiello, decided (on the basis of the script) that Sal was not a racist. It is attractive to view that this tension results in Sal's portrayal as a far more complex—and interesting—character than what Lee had intended (or thought that he had achieved). The claim (to be debated) is: *Lee's failure as an auteur adds to the value of the film.*
 - Nevertheless, the *auteur* theory does capture one routine aspect of how we, in general, view films: by identifying them with directors and their corpus. Think of Orson Welles, Sergei Eisenstein, Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, Elia Kazan, Jean Renoir, Satyajit Ray, Federico Fellini. Akira Kurosawa, Ingmar Bergmann, Louis Malle, Stanley Kubrick, Roman Polanski, Francis Ford Coppola, Spike Lee . . . This list could go on indefinitely and I have deliberately mostly left out those such as Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, or Woody Allen who largely directed themselves as actors. (I have also left out the *auteur*-directors.) We will leave as an open question whether this director-centered perspective was already established before the emergence of the *auteur* theory or became established as part of the influence of that theory. In either case, the theory appears to capture something important about how we judge films. (The contrast here is with theater where we are much more likely to think of great playwrights and actors even though plays clearly reflect very deeply the contributions of directors.)
 - Yet, when it comes to films we also often classify them with actors. Think of Ingrid Bergmann, Marilyn Monroe, John Wayne, or Clint Eastwood films or action films involving the like of

Bruce, Lee, Arnold Schwarzenegger; Sylvester Stallone, or (my favorite), Jackie Chan. We also think of what we many loosely call film genres, Hollywood Westerns or Bollywood comedies. In other words there are multiple ways of organizing the film universe that do not conform to the demands of the *auteur* theory. However there remains a legitimate question: do the prime exemplars of each category from these other classifications (for instance, the best John Wayne film or the best Bollywood comedy) belong to the canon no matter what their popularity? Or do they do so only when they have a director who is superb? If we observe that only films with great directors make it to the canon, then that would also be a triumph of the *auteur* theory. We may need a similar move to accommodate within this theory films that undoubtedly belong to the canon but have directors who are also the lead actors.

- The *auteur* theory has also been severely criticized for not paying attention to the socio-economic or other cultural contexts of film making (Königsberg 1987). What is at stake is understanding the ways in which money constrains (or provides opportunities for) Hollywood or Bollywood. Once again, those sympathetic to the *auteur* theory will respond by asking whether films enter the canon without great directors.
 - But we cannot get away from the nagging question that the *auteur* theory is far too simplistic. It leaves too much out of the complex productive process that is film making, how scripts can be revised continually, how films are censored to meet different contexts (the “director’s cut” is often not the one that most audiences saw before the digital era) and how creative tensions between directors, script writers, and actors play a role in a film. These tensions may be better and yet creative—think of the rape scene of *Last Tango in Paris* (1972) though, of course, there is a question whether it was even creative in the way it contributes over all to the film.
- (b) Next, we should ask: what role did it play in the history of film? The first point to note in this context is that the *auteur* theory is largely forgotten today even if some of its assumptions have become implicitly part of how films are conceived of—and I am intentionally relying on an ambiguity of “conceived” here, that between “thought of” by critics and other consumers and “produced” by film artists.
- At least at a superficial level, today, the studio does not dominate the director in the way it did prior to the *auteur* theory. We are unlikely to have as economically successful a director as Buster Keaton losing control of his film making to a studio as happened in the early 1930s. The question of the extent to which the *auteur* theory contributed to this change requires more empirical study than has so far been afforded to it.
 - We have already noted the role of the *auteur* theory in the genesis of the French New Wave. We can go on to ask the extent to which the French New Wave has influenced film since then. I would like to suggest that this influence is stronger than usually acknowledged—but a full discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this lecture.
 - A related but logically different question is how the *auteur* theory’s advocacy of the individual vision of directors has influenced subsequent film making, perhaps because of the example of the success achieved by the French New Wave. Once again, a full discussion is beyond the scope of this lecture but we do have examples of such visions from Louis Malle, David Lean, Spike Lee, and a host of other prominent directors.
 - Finally, by valorizing the work of a large number of earlier directors (including U.S. directors who are now regarded as being among the best, such as Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, Jerry Lewis, Robert Aldrich, Nicholas Ray, and Fritz Lang) the *auteur* critics of *Cahiers du Cinéma* such as Rivette helped the careers of these figures, in some cases resuscitating them from potential oblivion. But that is a long story for another day.
- (c) Finally, we should ask what it has contributed to film criticism, film theory, and the philosophy of film.
- From what we have already said, the significance of the *auteur* theory for film criticism should be obvious. No other school of film criticism has ever achieved the same status (though, of course, clearly identifiable schools of film criticism are rare).
 - For film theory, the relevance is more modest, mainly being limited to a focus on the role of the director—but that is not particularly original.

- For philosophy of film the *auteur* theory is critically important because attempts to understand it raises the very interesting question: What is film authorship? Clearly, it is very different from authorship of literary texts especially since it subordinates the role of the author of the film script. It is also different from being an artist responsible for a sculpture, painting, etc., because of the co-operative effort required from many individuals. Much has been written on this topic in recent years and we will take it on in a future lecture.
9. It is time for a final summary assessment: In spite of the many valid criticisms of the *auteur* theory that it does not capture all aspects either of film making or what makes a film aesthetically successful, it does capture the central role played by directors as the most important determinant of a film. It has also encouraged attention to directors' entire corpus as an integral whole and lauded the pursuit of individual visions in film-making. Here, it has had a pervasive influence on how we analyze films ever since.

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