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# Andrew Sarris and the Politique des Auteurs (1962-1974): An Assessment and an Analysis

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**Grumbacher,**

**Steven**

**1976**

ANDREW SARRIS AND THE  
POLITIQUE DES AUTEURS (1962-1974):  
AN ASSESSMENT AND AN ANALYSIS

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of the Humanities

Western Kentucky University

Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Steven Grumbacher

July 1976

ANDREW SARRIS AND THE  
POLITIQUE DES AUTEURS (1962-1974):  
AN ASSESSMENT AND AN ANALYSIS

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## PREFACE

I became interested in auteurism in the Spring of 1963 following the publication of Andrew Sarris's article, "The American Cinema," in Film Culture No. 28. For a year, I rejected his controversial theories as being too radical, as did so many of the film critics and enthusiasts of the time. Gradually, however, as my knowledge of film history and aesthetics grew, I came to realize the value of Sarris's methodology; and in 1964 I became a "convert" to the auteur cause. It seemed to clarify and correlate all the disparate knowledge that had been accumulated about film until that time. When Sarris published an expanded version of the earlier article in book form in 1968, his much abused theories suddenly became critically respectable. With each passing year more and more film books have been produced with a predominantly auteurist stance; and up until the last two years, Sarris's variations on the original French politique des auteurs have been the primary source for the methodology of most serious criticism in the field of film. My understanding of Sarris's thought was the primary element in my decision to become a television director, and that decision was the central motivating force which sustained me through my college years after I had already failed in college. I have written this thesis in gratitude to Andrew Sarris with the hope that it will

illuminate for others, as it has for me, the wealth and complexity resident in the world of cinema, the first art form to be developed in this century.

I would like to thank Western Kentucky University's libraries for the surprising wealth of information they hold not only in the field of film but in all the other arts as well, since all the arts at some juncture comment and inform on all the others. I would also like to thank my thesis director Robert Johnston for urging me to improve my scholarship at the expense of my invective. My wife and daughter also deserve unending thanks for their patience, co-operation, and forbearance. My wife, Judy, especially deserves thanks for her acute critical mind which helped me focus upon the weak points of the thesis. Lastly, I want to thank hundreds of people whom I have never met: the filmmakers and critics without whose thought and artistry this paper could not have existed.

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ASSESSMENT AND AN ANALYSIS

Steven Grumbacher

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75 pages

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The politique des auteurs was, from the period 1968 through 1973, the dominant methodology in cinematic criticism. It was tentatively formulated by Francois Truffaut in 1954 and greatly expanded upon by Andrew Sarris in 1962. Briefly, the "auteur theory" (as it is known in English speaking countries) contends that aesthetically important films are the product of an auteur--an equivalent term to author in a work of literature or composer as opposed to conductor in a musical composition--and that that auteur is usually the film's director. The quality of the film under scrutiny is directly related to the ability of that auteur to express his personality on film, his technical expertise, the relation of the film to the auteur's entire oeuvre, and to the tensions between the artist's accomplishments and the circumstances under which he had to work. This thesis is an exploration into and an assessment of the successes and failures of the "auteur theory" as employed by Sarris and those who were influenced by his thought. It concludes with the author's speculations about the future of auteurism as it relates to new cinematic methodologies (specifically genre criticism and structuralism) which are becoming more and more common .

## CHAPTER I

### BACKGROUND TO AUTEURISM

Several inventors have claimed the invention of the motion picture, as the definition of what constitutes a motion picture differs from inventor to inventor. But the history of motion pictures is less a technological history than a history of artists who used the new medium to express themselves. The first filmmakers to produce artworks in the medium were--ironically enough--a technologist, Louis Lumière, and a magician, Georges Méliès. Working during the same period (1895-1915), they produced two totally different kinds of films. Lumière was known mostly for the documentary reality of his works. His Arrivée d'un train en gare (Arrival of a train at station) so terrified first-night audiences that they ran from the theater in fear of being run over. Méliès, on the other hand, was known for his treatment of fantasy. His Le Voyage dans la lune (Trip to the Moon) used special effects, theatrical staging, and charming animation to evoke the spirit, if not the letter, of Jules Verne's famous story. Ever since then critics have been divided as to the true nature of the film medium. The spiritual followers of Lumière claim that the accurate representation of reality is the essence of film because the movie camera is uniquely equipped

to depict the reality of time and space. Méliès's disciples, on the other hand, contend that film also has an uncanny ability to show man's dream state and that the representation of reality has little to do with art.

Arguments for and against the manipulation of reality in film were waged for many years, but no coherent formulation of film aesthetics was forthcoming until the emergence of Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein's various essays on the nature of film, the most famous of which are collected in his two famous textbooks Film Form and Film Sense. Eisenstein's theories cover a very wide range of topics, but the heart of his work is an analysis of various techniques of filmmaking and how these can be used to promote primarily socialist concepts. The central term in Eisenstein's work is montage. Montage has been defined in many ways, but in its essence it means the combination and splicing together of various shots in such a way that the meaning of said combination will be different than each of the shots shown separately. Perhaps the most famous example was the experiment of the Russian Lev Kuleshov. In it, Kuleshov had actor Ivan Mozzhukin sit in front of the camera with no expression on his face. Kuleshov then intercut shots of Mozzhukin with shots of soup, a half-naked woman, and a child's coffin. Audiences praised Mozzhukin's expression of hunger for the soup, lust for the woman, and grief for the child.<sup>1</sup> But there was no expression,

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<sup>1</sup>Steven P. Hill, "Kuleshov--Prophet without Honor," Film Culture 44 (Spring 1967):8.



for what the audience saw had been engineered by skillful manipulation of arbitrary images. Kuleshov experimented further with the art of montage by reconstructing the geography of St. Petersburg. By skillfully intercutting scenes of actors walking down the streets of Russia and up some marble stairs with a shot from an American film of the White House, he was able to convince his audience that the White House was in St. Petersburg.

Eisenstein's adaptation of Kuleshov's experiments resulted in his dialectical theory of montage. In strict Hegelian terms, each shot represented an idea--a molecule--in the vibrant organism of the total film. In dialectical montage, the first shot constituted the thesis, the second was the antithesis and what resulted from the collision of these two images was the synthesis--a new idea. This juxtaposition of images might take various forms for further effect--e.g., metrical montage, wherein each shot is timed and cut to give weighted significance to the length of the longest shot. Eisenstein's approach to film was thus scientific and structurally oriented. What Eisenstein did was make critics and audiences aware of the elements of film and how their skillful combination resulted in the presentation of ideas. He was using the intellectual capacities of the cinema to convey the emotional potentialities of the medium.

Eisenstein's theories, while respected by most critics, were not taken up as working models of criticism

for many years, primarily because close scrutiny of films was only possible for those with access to films and film editing and projecting equipment. But Eisenstein's theories did have the effect of encouraging audiences to take films more seriously as an art form. There is another aspect of Eisenstein's criticism which had an effect on preconceptions about film and, because it was so accessible, it was much more widely taken up than his formalistic preoccupations. That aspect was Eisenstein's dedication to political and socially conscious themes.

Before too long most film reviewers took the expression of some comment on the human condition to be the ultimate criteria of value in film. Such critics and filmmakers as the British documentarians John Grierson and Paul Rotha wrote numerous tracts on the spiritual vacuity of the Hollywood film and the importance of the Russian and German contributions, as well as on the social value of the films which came out of the British documentary school. While reality could be manipulated to convey social themes, the depiction of reality was felt necessary to convince the audience of the rightness of the particular cause which the filmmaker was espousing. It was not until the advent of the French critic André Bazin that the definition of realism was elaborated upon.

Bazin contended that there were two forms of realism: pure realism--that which really exists in front of the naked eye, and spatial realism--the illusion of reality. Thus, fantasy on screen was possible if it conveyed spatial reality.



Bazin gave as an example the following remark: "All trick work must be perfect in all material respects on the screen. The 'invisible man' must wear pyjamas and smoke a cigarette."<sup>1</sup> The invisible man is not a realistic figure. He could not exist on the stage or in everyday life. Yet audiences believe in his reality because the spatial reality which we do know--that people can wear pajamas and smoke cigarettes-- is not violated by what we see. The added realistic detail enhances the reality, not the fantasy, of the situation. Bazin's penchant for spatial reality was not limited to rationalizations for his affection for fantasy. He championed two American directors (Orson Welles and William Wyler) for their understanding of spatial reality rather than for their espousal of social themes. Both directors, in the early 1940's, developed the use of deep-focus photography with the invaluable assistance of Gregg Toland, noted cinematographer. Deep focus resulted from new lenses and lighting techniques which enable both the foreground and background of the action on screen to be seen clearly and distinctly. Bazin gives an example of the value of deep focus from the film The Little Foxes ('41) by William Wyler. In the climactic scene, Regina Hubbard (Bette Davis) is facing the screen. Her husband (Herbert Marshall) has a heart attack and begs Regina to get his medicine, which is upstairs (the stairs are seen in the background). Wanting his money after his death, she

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<sup>1</sup>André Bazin, What is Cinema? (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 108.

refuses to get it for him; and Marshall crawls out of his wheelchair into the background of the frame and up the stairs, passing through a shadow before he dies. Bazin saw this scene as a remarkable example of spatial reality. We see Regina facing the camera, reacting to what she knows is happening, but cannot see. If Wyler had cut away to a shot of Marshall struggling on the stairs, the spell would have been broken. Only by the spatial continuity of Regina and her husband in the frame at the same time was the total impact of Regina's soullessness conveyed. As an added element, the shadow on the stairs which Marshall passed through cogently conveyed both his certain death and the ease with which he would be forgotten by Regina.<sup>1</sup>

Bazin was to have a great influence on the politique des auteurs. Although he wrote his major works in the 1950's, his writings were not translated into English until the late 1960's. Nevertheless, his influence on French critics was great. In the early 1950's he befriended a young cinema enthusiast named François Truffaut, who had been in and out of trouble with the law and the army. Truffaut loved American films and hated the respected French films of the time. When the editor of La Revue du Cinéma died in an auto crash, some of Truffaut's friends--especially Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, Lo Duca, and Leontyne Kiegel--decided to publish their own magazine on film, Cahiers du Cinéma, and

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<sup>1</sup>André Bazin, Qu'est-ce que le Cinéma?, Vol. 1: Ontologie et Langage (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1958), pp.152-4.

the first issue appeared in April 1951.<sup>1</sup> The Cahiers politique (policy) was vague and unorganized until January 1954, when the magazine published Truffaut's article, "Une Certaine Tendence du Cinéma Français." This article marks the introduction of the politique des auteurs in print. The article blamed a post-ware emphasis on 'psychological realism' for the paucity of talent in French film of the time. He castigated such filmmakers as Claude Autant-Lara, Jean Dellanoy, Rene Clément, Yves Allégret--all directors--and writers like Henri Jeanson, Jean Aurenche and Piere Bost, who he felt betrayed their opportunities to film what they wanted. The directors were content merely to illustrate their screenplays, which, in Truffaut's opinion, were "execrable."<sup>2</sup> Truffaut then propagandized for a new kind of film and a new kind of criticism with the following blast:

I cannot see any possibility of peaceful coexistence between this 'quality tradition' and a 'cinéma 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 still a few left . . . Then we'll all be in the 'quality tradition' up to our necks, and the French cinema with its daring 'psychological realism', its 'harsh truths', 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>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Maureen Turim, "The Aesthetic becomes Political--A History of Film Criticism in Cahiers du Cinéma," The Velvet Light Trap Review of the Cinema 9 (Summer 1973):14.

<sup>2</sup>C. G. Crisp, François Truffaut (New York:Praeger, 1972), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Ibid., pp. 10-11.

This hyperbole helped enrage the leading critics in France against Truffaut and the Cahiers staff. In 1958 he was the only important French film critic who was not invited to the prestigious Cannes Film Festival. (The following year, however, he won first prize for his film, Les Quatres Cents Coups.) Truffaut enraged his peers because of his hatred of the respected French directors. To him they were little more than "illustrators of texts."<sup>1</sup> In place of these metteurs-en-scène, Truffaut proposed a cinema of auteurs:

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 . . . I will never like a film made by Delannoy. I will always like a film made by Renoir.<sup>2</sup>

Even more strenuously Truffaut "insisted. . . . that the worst film of Renoir was more interesting than the best film of Delannoy . . ."<sup>3</sup> This was to become a watchword of the Cahiers group. It said that a director who expressed his personality in his work was inevitably superior to a mere craftsman. From there Truffaut and his colleagues (who now included many future respected filmmakers--e.g., Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol, and Jacques Rivette) proceeded to examine the American cinema in light of Truffaut's discoveries. From the beginning, Cahiers had no qualms about praising

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>3</sup>Andrew Sarris, "Auteurism is alive and well," Film Quarterly 17:4 (Summer 1974):62.



hitherto ignored American filmmakers. The four Americans they most respected were Orson Welles, Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, and Howard Hawks. In recent years, all of these men have been awarded either Special Academy awards or the American Film Institute Lifetime Achievement Award, or, in the case of Orson Welles, both. But at the time each of these men had little critical clout elsewhere. Orson Welles was regarded as the creator of one great film--Citizen Kane--and numerous failures. Hitchcock was thought to have left his best films behind him when he left England in 1940. Ford was noted for some early masterpieces--specifically The Informer(1935) and Stagecoach(1939)--but was then thought to have degenerated into merely a maker of John Wayne Westerns. Hawks was a special case. Because he worked so effortlessly in all genres, he was regarded as a mere journeyman director who made a few entertaining films. But the critical praise of these men by the Cahiers group was by no means their most controversial act. They also had great respect for such unknown directors as Nicholas Ray, Douglas Sirk, Samuel Fuller, Robert Aldrich, and Jerry Lewis. This last named director became an easy mark for the anti-auteurists, especially in English-speaking countries where Jerry Lewis was considered a low-brow comic, perhaps not worth viewing, certainly not worth the detailed critical analysis Cahiers was giving him. Furthermore, the very language of Cahiers opened itself up to attack for its presumptuousness. For example:

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"There was theatre (Griffith),  
(Rossellini), dance (Eisenstein  
there is the cinema. And the c  
from the issue of Nicholas Ray,  
were confusing as well. Renoir  
rarely used dance, a neo-realis  
common with painting, and Murn  
ments like these were designed

<sup>1</sup>Sylvain Godet, "Little  
in English no. 4 (1966), p. 35.  
<sup>2</sup>Jean-Luc Godard, "Bitt  
trans. and ed. by Tom Milne (1972)

implies the existence of the other, and, reciprocally,  
it is the freedom of the other that bases our essence.'  
It is indeed under the sign of the quest for this cinema  
'in itself' that would no longer necessitate the presence  
of 'the other' in order to exist, that the entire film is  
set.<sup>1</sup>

The film being spoken of here is The Family Jewels, a rather  
typical Lewis film about a little girl and her six uncles, all  
of whom want to adopt her in order to gain control of her in-  
heritance. The sheer audacity of bringing in Sartre to buttress  
a defense of Jerry Lewis and then speculating that Sartre was  
undoubtedly thinking about Lewis when he wrote his statement  
must have been regarded with great derision. While statements  
like the one above infuriated even those who knew little  
about film, the following will give an example of the kind  
of statement that totally mystified film scholars as well:  
"There was theatre (Griffith), poetry (Murnau), painting  
(Rossellini), dance (Eisenstein), music (Renoir). Henceforth  
there is the cinema. And the cinema is Nicholas Ray."<sup>2</sup> Aside  
from the issue of Nicholas Ray, the statements themselves  
were confusing as well. Renoir was a painter's son, Eisenstein  
rarely used dance, a neo-realist like Rossellini had little in  
common with painting, and Murnau made only silent films. State-  
ments like these were designed to shock conventionally held

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<sup>1</sup>Sylvain Godet, "Little Divagation," Cahiers du Cinéma  
in English no. 4 (1966), p. 35.

<sup>2</sup>Jean-Luc Godard, "Bitter Victory," Godard on Godard,  
trans. and ed. by Tom Milne (New York: Viking, 1972), p. 64.

critical positions and to mystify critics into thinking that the Cahiers group was both well-informed and intellectually oriented.

But the debate over auteurism and the politique (or "policy") would have remained on the far side of the Atlantic had it not been for the work of the American critic Andrew Sarris. It was Sarris who became most associated in the English-speaking public's mind with what he called the "auteur theory." For all of this he was castigated by the leading critics of the day: Dwight MacDonalld called him a Godzilla monster, Pauline Kael impugned his masculinity and hinted at the homosexuality of his followers. But in time he would become the most influential critic in the United States and a respected member of the critical community. This thesis is a study of how a new critical methodology became the dominant approach to film in the 1960's. As such, it is also a study of the growth toward respectability of the man who made it happen, Andrew Sarris. Without one, the other would not have been possible.

## CHAPTER II

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF ANDREW SARRIS AND OTHERS

Andrew Sarris had been publishing film criticism since the early 1950's, but it was not until the publication of his article, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962", that he gained critical notoriety. Yet he had been an auteurist for several years before the publication of that article--indeed, the article makes it seem as if he had already fought a good deal of the battle in other articles. He had been depressed by the state of film criticism for a good many years:

. . . auteurism can be understood only in terms of its own historical coordinates, namely Crowther and Kracauer as the Power and the Glory of social significance in film criticism and scholarship.<sup>1</sup>

I had been writing straightforwardly Griersonian criticism for about five years . . . We had no way of coping with apparent failures such as Hitchcock's Vertigo, Ford's The Searchers, . . . The dominant critical tone in America was one of sociological sermons in which Hollywood was urged repeatedly to repent. Our discovery of . . . Cahiers du Cinéma was invigorating because it liberated us from this gloomy atmosphere . . . in which Man towered over mere men and women. Also, we were reassured that no movie was too ignoble to be seen by the merest sensibility.<sup>2</sup>

The Cahiers critics were a breath of fresh air to Sarris, as shown by his interesting theory about why the critical revolution began in France:

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<sup>1</sup>Andrew Sarris, "Auteurism is Alive and Well," Film Quarterly 17:4 (Summer 1974), p. 61.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 62.



The fact that most of the Cahiers critics depended on French sub-titles or dubbing to know what was going on in English language movies had two consequences. First, they were able to find redeeming qualities in films with bad dialogue. Second, they were free to concentrate on the visual style of American movies, something that most American reviewers neglected to do.<sup>1</sup>

So it was rather extraordinary for an American, brought up and weaned on bad dialogue and stilted plots, to look beyond them at the visual style and personality of the director himself.

In his seminal article Sarris posited three basic premises of the auteur theory. The first was that the director must be technically competent, or, "A great director has to be at least a good director."<sup>2</sup> Sarris concedes that there might be some debate about what constitutes directorial talent, and he does not elaborate here on what that might be, choosing instead to say that any artist must be competent in his chosen medium. Tolstoy had to know how to use metaphor wisely, Wagner had to know how to blend the individual instruments of his orchestra and Rembrandt had to know how to balance his colors. In the same way, a director has to know how to compose and combine his shots in order to express what he wishes to express.

The second premise was that the director must have a distinguishable personality to be considered an auteur. "Over a group of films a director must exhibit certain recurring

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>2</sup>Andrew Sarris, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962," The Primal Screen (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), p. 50.

characteristics of style which serve as his signature."<sup>1</sup> As an example, Sarris discusses the well-known story of Little Red Riding Hood as it might have been presented by two different directors.

If the story . . . is told with the Wolf in close-up and Little Red Riding Hood in long-shot, the director is concerned primarily with the emotional problems of a wolf with a compulsion to eat little girls. If Little Red Riding Hood is in close-up and the Wolf is in long-shot, the emphasis is shifted to the emotional problems of vestigial virginity in a wicked world. . . . What is at stake are two contrasting directorial attitudes toward life.<sup>2</sup>

Such attitudes cannot usually be conveyed by the script or the story alone. It is in this sense that every director shows some aspect of his personality on film. His visual style is his signature. However, the operative word here is "distinguishable." A director must be more than an illustrator of screenplays with certain stylistic idiosyncracies: he must have a personality which comes through in the work itself.

The third premise was the most controversial: a film must contain interior meaning--or, as Sarris says, "Interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension between a director's personality and his material."<sup>3</sup> Sarris is quite vague and mysterious about this point. At one point he describes it as the "elan of the soul." At another he quotes Truffaut as saying that it is "the temperature of the director on the set."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>2</sup>Andrew Sarris, Interviews with Film Directors, (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1973), p. iii.

<sup>3</sup>Andrew Sarris, "Notes--1962," p. 51.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

He tries to explain what he means in terms of scenes, but realizes the inadequacy of the attempt. Perhaps the most notorious example he gives--one which would invite considerable invective from Pauline Kael later on--was this analysis of a similar scene from two films by Raoul Walsh:

Sometimes a great deal of corn must be husked to yield a few kernels of interior meaning. I recently saw Every Night At Eight, one of the many maddeningly routine films Raoul Walsh has directed in his long career. . . . The film keeps moving along in the pleasantly unpretentious manner one would expect of Walsh until one incongruously intense scene with George Raft thrashing about in his sleep, revealing his inner fears in mumbling dream talk. The girl he loves comes into the room in the midst of his unconscious avowals of feeling and listens sympathetically. This unusual scene was later amplified in High Sierra with Humphrey Bogart and Ida Lupino. The point is that one of the screen's most virile directors employed an essentially feminine narrative device to dramatize the emotional vulnerability of his heroes. If I had not been aware of Walsh in Every Night at Eight the crucial link to High Sierra would have passed unnoticed. Such are the joys of the auteur theory.<sup>1</sup>

To Sarris, interior meaning is more than the director's world view, more than his attitude toward his characters. It is an utterly cinematic element which cannot be translated into words. It would seem to be related to the shock of recognition of the viewer upon noticing the cinematic expression of an auteur's personality.

Sarris also shocked conventional critics with his views on the value of the American cinema. Indeed, the rediscovery of the American cinema by the Cahiers group was merely for polemical value. The real targets of Truffaut

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

and the others were not the critics, but rather the French screenwriters and studio directors who upheld the hated "tradition of quality." The attack on critical sensibilities was a secondary effort. But for Sarris, members of the American critical establishment, as symbolized by the most powerful and influential critic in America, Bosley Crowther of the New York Times, were the villains. They had too long ignored and reviled unpretentious films by artists and praised socially conscious films with no redeeming aesthetic value. With this in mind, he let loose a shocking defense of American films and filmmakers.

Just a few years ago I would have thought it unthinkable to speak in the same breath of a "commercial" director like Hitchcock and a "pure" director like Bresson. . . . After years of tortured reevaluation, I am now prepared to stake my critical reputation, such as it is, on the proposition that Alfred Hitchcock is artistically superior to Robert 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 recording in depth beneath the frosting of a few great directors at the top.<sup>1</sup>

Sarris confessed later that he had used shock tactics to make a name for himself in the critical world. But there can be no question that his heart was in his propaganda, because in Spring of 1963, Film Culture published his monumental study of American directors, "The American Cinema." The article was sixty-nine pages long and mentioned two

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 48.



hundred and ninety six directors, discussing one hundred and thirteen in some detail. For each one mentioned in detail, he listed every film that director had made--or at least all that he knew of at the time, as scholarship has unearthed several forgotten titles since the advent of the auteur theory. The impact of the article was staggering. Previously, film critics knew and mentioned the names of a handful of American film directors in their reviews. Sometimes they did not even do that. As Sarris said,

You look at old reviews, even reviews by people as astute as Joseph Wood Krutch, who had good taste. Joseph Wood Krutch reviewed Siegfried in the '20s for the Herald Tribune, and he never once mentioned Fritz Lang in the whole review. I would look at reviews in the Times of John Ford movies where the director would not be mentioned in the entire review . . .<sup>1</sup>

"The American Cinema," however, mentioned not only Ford and Lang but a host of quite little-known figures as well. Besides praising Nicholas Ray and Douglas Sirk, as the Cahiers group did, Sarris also had fine words for such obscure directors as Samuel Fuller ("The excitement Fuller arouses in critics sensitive to visual forms is equalled by the horror he arouses in critics of the left for the lack of social perspective in his films."<sup>2</sup>); Otto Preminger ("His deeper meanings elude critics who ignore visual style and directorial

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<sup>1</sup>Sarris, ". . . Everyone is now an Auteurist, more or less," Film Heritage 8:4 (Summer 1973):30.

<sup>2</sup>Sarris, "The American Cinema," Film Culture 28 (Spring 1963):13.

personality to concentrate on the literal content of scripts.");<sup>1</sup> Gerd Oswald ("A fluency of camera movement is controlled by sliding turns and harsh stops befitting a cinema of bitter ambiguity.');2 and Don Siegel ("The moral architecture of his universe is never undermined by the editing, however frenzied.")<sup>3</sup> As controversial as these choices were, even more controversial was his praise of two directors from the depths of "Poverty Row." Sarris wrote about himself in this excerpt from his entry on Joseph H. Lewis:

Back in the Spring 1962 issue of Film Culture, a critic, writing on 'The High Forties Revisited,' remarked: 'If some bright new critic should awaken the world to the merits of Joseph Lewis in the near future, we will have to scramble back to his 1940 record: Two Fisted Rangers, Blazing Six-Shooter, Texas Stagecoach, The Man from Tumbleweeds, Boys of the City, Return of Wild Bill, and That Gang of Mine. Admittedly, in this direction lies madness.' Well, madness is always preferable to smugness, and scramble we must because Lewis has been discovered. . . . the director's somber personality has been revealed consistently through a complex visual style.<sup>4</sup>

Lewis also directed The Invisible Ghost, Secrets of a Co-ed, The Boss of Hangtown Mesa, The Mad Doctor of Market Street, and what is now regarded as his masterpiece, Gun Crazy. As Sarris showed in this excerpt, it is possible for anyone to fall prey to traditional critical biases. It seemed impossible that anyone directing films with names like these could be an artist.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

As if that were not enough, Sarris then went on to praise Edgar G. Ulmer, director of such films as Moon Over Harlem, Girls in Chains, Isle of Forgotten Sins, Jive Junction, The Wife of Monte Cristo, The Man from Planet X, Babes in Bagdad, and The Amazing Transparent Man. Few of these films took more than a week to make, or used more than one standing set, dressed differently in each scene to disguise its origins.

The French call him un cinéaste maudit, and directors certainly don't come any more maudit. . . . he is. . . . one of the minor glories of the cinema. Here is a career, more subterranean than most, which bears the signature of a genuine artist. Strictly speaking, most of Ulmer's films are of interest only to unthinking audiences or specialists in mise-en-scène. Yet, anyone who loves the cinema must be moved by Daughter of Dr. Jekyll, a film with a scenario so atrocious that it takes forty minutes to establish that the daughter of Dr. Jekyll is indeed the daughter of Dr. Jekyll. Ulmer's camera never falters even when his characters disintegrate. . . . That a personal style could emerge from the lowest depths of Poverty Row is a tribute to a director without alibis.<sup>1</sup>

Here, like Lewis, was a director who had probably never received a word of critical praise or even recognition in his life. Yet Sarris regarded him as an auteur, because of his distinguishable style. Ulmer was, quite naturally, considered to be an auteurist joke by most critics of the theory, and his acceptance by Sarris into the ranks of the auteurs certainly did not help the cause a great deal in its search for respectability.

There were more shocks to come. Like Truffaut, Sarris attacked the leading filmmakers of his country. He had divided

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 28-29.

his directors into a number of categories with names which were sometimes too cute. "Pantheon," "Second Line," and "Third Line" were reserved for the true auteurs in descending rank. "Esoterica" was reserved for minor auteurs like Lewis, Oswald, Siegel, and Ulmer. "Likable but Elusive" was the category for unpretentious and entertaining directors who could not as yet be called auteurs. These included men like Busby Berkeley, Michael Curtiz (the director of Casablanca), Victor Fleming (Gone with the Wind), and Mervyn Le Roy (Little Caesar). His two remaining categories caused a great deal of controversy: "Fallen Idols" (a play on the title of The Fallen Idol by one of the directors included) and "Minor Disappointments." "Fallen Idols" contained a list of eleven directors, eight of whom had won at least one Academy Award for Direction (the rest had been nominated for it as well). The list was a veritable "Who's Who" of the American cinema: John Huston (noted for The Maltese Falcon, The Treasure of the Sierra Madre, and The African Queen) received these words from Sarris: "Huston has confused indifference with integrity for such a long time that he is no longer even a competent craftsman."<sup>1</sup> David Lean (Bridge on the River Kwai, Brief Encounter) was written up in this way: ". . . whatever artistic sensibility he once possessed is now safely embalmed in the tomb of the impersonal cinema."<sup>2</sup> William Wellman had been retired for four years when Sarris wrote these lines about him: "With Wellman, as with

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 31.



so many other directors, objectivity is the last refuge of mediocrity."<sup>1</sup> But Sarris saved most of his invective for Fred Zinneman, who had directed some of the most prestigious films of the 1950's (High Noon, From Here to Eternity, The Nun's Story, and later A Man for all Seasons). Yet Sarris wrote:

Zinneman's direction is consistently inferior to his subjects, his genres, his players and his technicians. His movies seem ashamed to be movies. . . . His supreme talent consists in revealing the falseness of his material. By draining every subject and every situation of any possible emotional excitement, Fred Zinneman is now widely considered in academic circles as the screen's most honest director. Too honest perhaps to waste his time and ours making movies.<sup>2</sup>

During the 1950's, Zinneman was perhaps the most respected director in Hollywood. His films were always reviewed respectfully by the traditionally oriented critics. Certainly no critic before had castigated him as mercilessly as Sarris, who regarded him at the time with the same sort of contempt that Truffaut felt for Delannoy, Aurenche, and Bost. Other noted directors that Sarris included in this category were Elia Kazan, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, Lewis Milestone, Carol Reed, Billy Wilder, and one of Bazin's favorite directors, William Wyler. Sarris also included an easy target, Rouben Mamoulian, for balance. Manoulian's stock had been falling in Hollywood for some time. He had not made a critically praised film since Becky Sharp (his version of Thackeray's Vanity Fair) in 1935. His early films were primarily used

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

as film textbook examples of how filmmakers triumphed over the limitations of the early sound equipment. His inclusion with the other more respected directors was a wise polemical choice on Sarris's part, for it reminded film enthusiasts that critical tastes change with the times.

Sarris's other negative category, "Minor Disappointments," included younger directors who had gained critical attention during the late 1950's and early 1960's, such as Richard Brooks (Elmer Gantry, later In Cold Blood), Jules Dassin (Never on Sunday, Rififi, Phaedra), John Frankenheimer (Bird-man of Alcatraz, The Manchurian Candidate), Stanley Kubrick (Paths of Glory, Lolita), Robert Mulligan (To Kill A Mockingbird), Robert Rossen (All the King's Men, The Hustler), and Robert Wise (West Side Story). Of Kubrick, Sarris said, "His métier is projects rather than films, publicité rather than cinéma. He may wind up as the director of the best coming attractions in the industry, but time is running out on his projected evolution into a major artist."<sup>1</sup> This shows Sarris's talent for pithy cinematic insight combined with invective. Whether the statement is accurate or not (and it could easily be argued that after Dr. Strangelove, 2001, and A Clockwork Orange that Kubrick has completed his evolutionary process) is irrelevant to Sarris's argument. What he is doing is showing the discrepancy between the image of the director and his actual accomplishments. One can still admire Kubrick after reading Sarris, but one cannot look at his work in quite the same way.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

Another interesting theory proposed by Sarris was the "happy accident." This was the theory used to explain how some films not made by genuine auteurs could nevertheless be good movies. A "happy accident" occurred when the chemistry of performers, script, director, and other behind the camera talent somehow acted as catalysts upon each other and created a good film. Sarris's choice of the prime "happy accident" was Casablanca, which to Sarris was the exception which proved the rule of the auteur theory. This argument left a loophole for Sarris to protect himself against the critical onslaught which was sure to follow.

Finally, Sarris appended a "Directorial Chronology" to his mammoth article. This chronology ranked an average of 25 films a year in terms of quality from 1915-1962, relegating most of the critically praised and award-winning films to the category of "False Reputations." In all, several thousand films were mentioned somewhere in the course of this lengthy article. The total impact of the article was, as one critic put it:

. . . the object of awed admiration or incredulous gibes, depending upon one's allegiance, but impossible to ignore. To those with any sort of private penchant for listmaking . . . the Sarris List constitutes something like the final achievement in this area; to those who do not share the impulse, it remains a monster of pointlessness. Yet because of the compelling internal evidence the list reveals of its author's having seen every last one of the films included, it stands as a fairly hefty challenge to those battling professionally for the credentials of film erudition.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Marion Magid, "Auteur! Auteur!," Commentary (March 1964): 72.

The article certainly gave that impression, but many of the films were lost, destroyed, or unavailable for public exhibition. Sarris himself later confessed that he had not "seen every last one of the films" he wrote about:

When I originally wrote my first Howard Hawks career article, I went out on a limb to argue that the Hawksian fluidity of camera movement and invisibility of editing in His Girl Friday was actually faster than Lewis Milestone's classical montage in The Front Page. At the time, and it was many, many years ago remember, I was bluffing a bit because I hadn't seen The Front Page. Lo and behold! When I finally did get to see The Front Page . . . my theory held up, but I still recall the incident in a spirit of contrition. There is no substitute for seeing a picture . . .<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately, no one caught Sarris at the time, and indeed the analysis of the directorial styles of Hawks and Milestone was just one of many examples of his knowledge of film. The answer was certain: if one was to argue with the principles of the auteur theory, one would have to be considerably more informed on both films and directors, especially American.

Around the same time, in England, a new film magazine, the first totally auteurist oriented magazine in English (Film Culture being primarily a journal in favor of experimental and avant-garde film), called Movie was published. The work of its editor Ian Cameron and contributing critics, such as Mark Shivas, V. F. Perkins, Robin Wood, Paul Mayersberg, and Charles Barr, served to buttress Sarris's conclusions about film history (and one of the chief aims of the theory was a re-evaluation of the history of American films) as well as to start a few controversies of their own. Ian Cameron, like

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<sup>1</sup>Andrew Sarris, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1970," Film Comment 6:3 (Fall 1970) :9.



Sarris, made a one-page list of 203 directors (71 British and 132 American), ranking them in terms of talent. Not one British director rated the highest category ("Great") shared by Hawks and Hitchcock from America (although Hitchcock is, of course, a British director, he is usually considered an American by auteurists who tend to downplay his early British films in comparison with his major American works). In the "Brilliant" category were 11 American directors and one "British," Joseph Losey, who was born in Wisconsin and did much major work in the United States before he was blacklisted and left to find work in Britain. Under "Very Talented" were 21 American directors and, again, one "British" director, Hugo Fregonese, who was really an Argentinian and had directed only one minor film in Britain, Harry Black and the Tiger. And so it went: three British directors rated "Talented" and the 65 remaining were relegated into either "Competent or Ambitious" or "The Rest."<sup>1</sup> This love of lists is central to all auteurism: the Cahiers staff made lists of their favorite directors and films, all-time "Ten best lists" frequently appear in auteur publications, and auteurists upon meeting often exchange lists. Peter Wollen said, "I think it is only by the publication, comparison and discussion of rankings that individual, subjective taste can be transcended and some degree of general validity established."<sup>2</sup> Many auteur critics agreed with him.

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<sup>1</sup>Movie Reader (New York:Praeger, 1972), frontispiece.

<sup>2</sup>Peter Wollen, Signs and Meaning in the Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), p. 166.

Also in the first issue of Movie was an article by Cameron on the British cinema which was quite similar to the Truffaut article in Cahiers which had started it all. In it Cameron lambasted not only the Ealing comedies so popular both in and out of England but the so-called "kitchen sink" films as well. These films (including Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, A Taste of Honey, This Sporting Life, and The L-Shaped Room) all dealt with working-class conditions in England and were considered part of a British New Wave. As such, they received many awards and a good deal of adulation not only from Britain's leading film periodical Sight and Sound but from American critics as well. Yet to Cameron and his colleagues there was no distinguishable expression of directorial personality in any of these films. Instead, like Sarris, Cameron saw the hope for the future of British cinema in the British equivalent of Edgar G. Ulmer, Seth Holt, whose last film before his recent death was Blood from the Mummy's Tomb. While Sarris and the Movie critics differed in determining precisely who the auteurs were, they did agree on the basic tenet of auteurism: that a film should be judged solely, or at least primarily, on the distinguishable personality of the director as evidenced on the screen. Movie's actions helped take some of the critical hostility off Sarris. He was no longer the only English-speaking auteurist.

One other point should be made about Sarris's position on the auteur theory. For Sarris, some personalities so dominate

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this by no means exhausts the list. Among screenwriters, Sarris brings up the sole example of Paddy Chayefsky of Marty, The Bachelor Party, The Americanization of Emily, and The Hospital.<sup>1</sup> However, because directorial control is lacking, these films can never attain the same level of profundity as can films made by a great director. They cannot be ignored in any aesthetic history of the medium, though, as they are a part of the expression of personality on film.

Yet another aspect of Sarris's conception of the auteur theory was his idea that a director's career should be looked at in its totality. Only in this way can the director's personality be accurately determined and his artistic development correctly gauged. Such evaluations are responsible for the critical reappraisals of the late films of Hitchcock, Ford, Renoir, and Welles, which were not received favorably when first reviewed. Sarris saw them as logical conclusions to great artistic careers rather than the gradual loss of powers of old men.<sup>2</sup>

All of these theories were new and controversial in the early 1960's, and they were especially controversial in the early 1960's, and they were especially controversial

<sup>1</sup>Andrew Sarris, The American Cinema: Directors and Directions--1929-1968 (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), p. 37.  
<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 44-49.

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<sup>1</sup>Andrew Sarris, The American Cinema: Directors and Directions--1929-1968 (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), p. 37.  
<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 44-49.

because they were planted in rather unfamiliar ground. As Sarris himself said,

Most cultivated people know what they like and what is art in acting and writing, but direction is a relatively mysterious, not to say mystical, concept of creation. Indeed, it is not creation at all, but rather a very strenuous form of contemplation. The director is both the least necessary and most important component of film-making. He is the most modern and most decadent of all artists in his relative passivity toward everything that passes before him. He would not be worth bothering with if he were not capable now and then of a sublimity of expression almost miraculously extracted from his money-oriented environment.<sup>1</sup>

If Sarris had been unable to back up his mystical conception of directorial aesthetics with substantial knowledge about film, it is unlikely that his work would be worthy of discussion today. Yet he has prevailed to become one of the most influential figures in American critical circles. Before he was to reach his peak of power and influence, however, he was subjected to attacks from many traditional critics who took his writings line by line and explained why the theory was, in their opinion, faulty.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 37.



## CHAPTER III

### THE ARGUMENTS AGAINST AUTEURISM

Not too long after the publication of "The American Cinema" in Film Culture, a symposium on the art of film criticism was held at the New York Public Library. Marion Magid describes the proceedings:

Less than spellbinding for the most part, the discussion took a decided turn for the better when one of the symposiasts, in an extraordinary departure from the genial liberalism he had been espousing all evening, rose to denounce a colleague, conspicuously absent from the hall. 'A Messiah he may be,' thundered Dwight Macdonald in his windup, 'but a film critic, never!' Whereupon one faction in the audience applauded stormily, a second broke into hoots and catcalls, and the uninitiated remained silent in presumable bewilderment.<sup>1</sup>

He was talking, of course, about Andrew Sarris, and the bone of critical contention was the auteur theory. In the October 1963 issue of Esquire, Macdonald called Sarris a "Godzilla monster . . . who had come clambering up from the primordial swamps. . . ." Sarris responded "by casting aspersions on Macdonald's political past, as well as on his eyesight." Then Macdonald left the San Francisco periodical Film Quarterly because "he found it impossible to appear under common auspices with a critic who judged Hitchcock in The Birds to be ' . . . at the summit of his artistic powers . . .'"<sup>2</sup> This brand of

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<sup>1</sup>Magid, "Auteur! Auteur!," p. 70.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

critical infighting had been virtually unknown before the auteur controversy split the New York critics. But the controversy was not limited to mere name-calling. In the Spring 1963 issue of Film Quarterly, Pauline Kael wrote "Circles and Squares--Joys and Sarris," an article which took Sarris's original manifesto, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962," apart line by line. Referring to the analysis of two scenes from two films by Raoul Walsh quoted in the last chapter, she wrote,

Sarris has noticed that in High Sierra (not a very good movie) Raoul Walsh repeated an uninteresting and obvious device that he had earlier used in a worse movie. And for some inexplicable reason, Sarris concludes that he would not have had this joy of discovery without the auteur theory.<sup>1</sup>

The relative merit of High Sierra, of course, cannot be established: but her criticism of the film served her polemics well. However Ms. Kael went on to show that critics have always noted influences on and development of the artist in each of his or her works, implying that at least this tenet of the auteur theory was nothing new.<sup>2</sup>

Having discounted the "joys" of the auteur theory, she followed the basic premises of the theory to its logical absurdity. She analogized the case of Saturday Evening Post writer Clarence Buddington Kelland, a writer of folksy short stories, (and the literary source of several auteur films by such directors as John Ford and Frank Capra) with the example

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<sup>1</sup>Pauline Kael, "Circles and Squares--Joys and Sarris," I Lost It at the Movies (New York: Little, Brown and Company; Bantam Books, 1965), p. 265.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

of a typical Sarris auteur as she understood it. Kelland, she claimed, was technically competent and had a "distinguishable personality." She then rationalized that

. . . if 'interior meaning' is what can be extrapolated from, say, Hatari! or Advise and Consent or What Ever Happened to Baby Jane? then surely Kelland's stories with their attempts to force a bit of character and humor into the familiar plot outlines are loaded with it.<sup>1</sup>

Dostoyevsky is then defined by Kael as a writer who would not be defined as an auteur by Sarris's premises as he was

. . . too full of what he [had] to say to bother with 'technical competence,' tackling important themes in each work (surely the worst crime in the auteur book) . . . his almost incredible unity of personality and material left you nothing to extrapolate from . . .<sup>2</sup>

The Dostoyevsky argument was not well chosen, for obviously no one can argue Dostoyevsky's competence as a writer, and however vaguely "interior meaning" is defined by Sarris, certainly The Brothers Karamazov contains the mystical tension between writer and material Sarris seeks in films as well as a considerable amount of "distinguishable personality." As for the implications that auteurists were opposed to important themes, Sarris had made a stand against what he called "the fallacy of impressive content, 'the Ingmar Bergman fallacy'; but he explained what he meant by the term by defining the "fallacy":

Because he [Bergman] has two men on a chair talking about God, that necessarily must be better than a John Ford picture where two men go out looking for Indians. This is not necessarily true. I don't say it is true the other way; I don't go pop-camp and say it is much better to go

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

after Indians than after theological implications.<sup>1</sup>

The Kelland argument is a much more complex one for which no adequate defense has yet been raised. There is one equivalent case in film of a director who displays all the attributes of an auteur--technical competence, a distinguishable personality, and even some interior meaning--yet he made no films that were praised by either auteur or anti-auteur critics. Hugo Haas wrote, produced, directed, and starred in most of the films he made (including Pickup, Strange Fascination, One Girl's Confession, Thy Neighbor's Wife, and The Other Woman). All of them had a similar plot: an old man marries a young woman who in turn falls in love with a young man, usually the old man's friend, with tragic results. Haas's films are immediately identifiable as such by most people who have seen more than one before, usually a good criteria of auteur status. His films all contain not only consistent thematic motifs but also a distinctive visual style. Sarris called him a "would-be auteur,"<sup>2</sup> but never defined the difference between a "would-be auteur" and an authentic one. By the Kelland criteria, such writers as Jacqueline Susann and Harold Robbins would be considered auteurs, which is a statement few literary critics would make. So one good argument against the auteur theory is that the criteria dividing the auteur from the

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<sup>1</sup>Andrew Sarris, "Interview with Andrew Sarris: Part 2," Cinema Work Sheet no. 2 (October 21, 1966), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>Andrew Sarris, "The American Cinema," p. 49.



"would-be" auteur is ill-defined and nebulous.

Ms. Kael then took the three premises of auteurism point by point. On the issue of technical competence, she said that ". . . it is doubtful if Antonioni could handle a routine directorial assignment of the type at which John Sturges is so proficient . . ." <sup>1</sup>(for example, The Great Escape, The Magnificent Seven or Bad Day at Black Rock). She went on to explain that writers like Melville and Dreiser overcame certain inadequacies and produced lasting works. Edward Murray, speaking along the same lines in a basically anti-auteurist essay, says

Surely Antonioni knows the basic principles of film-making; if the Italian master had to, he could put together a film so that it would have the same mechanical 'clarity and coherence' as a picture directed by Sturges. Of course, Antonioni's heart--or 'soul'--wouldn't be in the project; but for that matter there is no 'soul' in Sturges's films, either. <sup>2</sup>

The issue is even more complex than that. At issue is the director's personality and Sturges was never considered an auteur by Sarris (" . . . it is hard to remember why Sturges' career was ever taken seriously." <sup>3</sup>). Along the lines of Murray's argument, it could be contended that if Antonioni had to make a Western, for example, both his distinctive style and his thematic concerns would somehow be present. The Dreiser issue is not so easily solved, however. It is

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<sup>1</sup>Kael, "Circles and Squares," p. 267.

<sup>2</sup>Edward Murray, "Andrew Sarris," Nine American Film Critics--A Study of Theory and Practice (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1975), p. 42.

<sup>3</sup>Sarris, "The American Cinema," p. 44.



possible that his alleged stylistic crudity in some way helped mitigate against his being considered America's equivalent to Shakespeare. Yet it is conceivable that a genuine artist could lack the technical competence of a more proficient, less talented director without necessarily invalidating his potential auteur status.

Sarris's second premise was especially problematic to Kael. On the issue of the "distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value," Ms. Kael replied that "The smell of a skunk is more distinguishable than the perfume of a rose; does that make it better?"<sup>1</sup> This sounds like a return to the Kelland-Haas argument against the first premise, but Kael elaborated upon it with an interesting example:

Hitchcock's personality is certainly more distinguishable in Dial M for Murder, Rear Window, 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 while Reed tackles new subject matter. But how does this distinguishable personality function as a criterion for judging the work?<sup>2</sup>

She then conjectured that Sarris rationalized his way around the auteur theory to justify his distaste for filmmakers with distinguishable personalities, citing the case of John Huston, who, she felt, expressed his personality vividly in The Maltese Falcon and The Treasure of the Sierra Madre. Surprisingly, the reply to that charge came almost eleven years later when Sarris placed Huston's little-known film The Mackintosh Man on his "ten best" list for 1973 ("John Huston's The Mackintosh

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<sup>1</sup>Kael, "Circles and Squares," p. 268.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 268-9.

Man articulates its despair with such authority that I find myself reconsidering Huston's career from a new angle."<sup>1</sup>). In other words, once Huston's distinguishable personality became clear and defined, he could be considered a potential auteur. The Hitchcock question still remains, however, and this raises the basic question of all aesthetic criticism: How can one work of art be proven objectively "better" than another? Perhaps the only way to prove aesthetic superiority is through critical consensus and, needless to say, this method is, of necessity, untrustworthy. Nevertheless, in 1972, Sight and Sound magazine held an international poll of 89 film critics, as it had in 1952 and 1962, to determine the ten best films of all time. One of Hitchcock's films, Vertigo, tied for ninth place with five other films. He placed tenth in the total number of votes received by a director and only seven directors had more films chosen by the critics than he did, indicating a relative consistency throughout his career. By contrast, Carol Reed received only one vote from one critic, for his film The Third Man.<sup>2</sup> While this does not necessarily mean that Hitchcock is objectively a better director than Reed, it does show that he has received a critical consensus to that effect. And while it cannot be proven that it was Hitchcock's distinguishable personality that so impressed the critics, the fact that the

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<sup>1</sup>Sarris, "The Great, the Slick, the Lumpy," The Village Voice, 17 January 1974, p. 69.

<sup>2</sup>"Top Ten 72," Sight and Sound, 41:1 (Winter 1971-2), pp. 12-16.

list consists of films which were primarily promoted by auteur critics (Vertigo, Psycho, North by Northwest, The Lady Vanishes, Marnie, Rear Window, and The Birds) would give the impression that the distinguishability of his personality was the criterion of value.

It is in the controversial third premise that the arguments went beyond the search for hypothetical exceptions to the theory. To Sarris's "Interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension between a director's personality and his material,"<sup>1</sup>

Kael replied:

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. . . . Their [the auteurists'] 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.<sup>2</sup>

She then quoted Sarris to point out the absurdity of his position further.

'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.' . . . But what on earth does that mean? How did Sarris perceive Bergman's sensibility except through his technique? Is Sarris saying what he seems to be saying, that if Bergman had developed more 'technique,' his work wouldn't be dependent on his ideas? I'm afraid this is what he means, and that when he refers to Cukor's 'more developed abstract style,' he means by 'abstract' something unrelated to ideas, a technique not dependent on the content of the film.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Sarris, "Notes--1962," p. 51.

<sup>2</sup>Kael, "Circles and Squares," pp. 272-3.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 273-4.

George Cukor often was handed his directorial assignments, yet certain themes ran through all of his works whether they were musicals, melodramas, or his forte, comedy-dramas. His major theme was the illusions we have about ourselves and our tendencies toward theatricality in our behavior with others. His personality is distinguishable in each of his films precisely because we see it in tension with his material.<sup>1</sup> That would essentially be Sarris's argument in favor of Cukor, but it falters when seen in the light of Kael's argument. While Sarris believes Cukor is an auteur and Kael believes he is merely a competent craftsman (given a good script), the real question raised is this: What kind of films would Cukor make if he had the opportunity and ability to write his own scripts and choose his own material as Bergman does? If his style and thematic concerns are consistent throughout his career, it seems likely that his more personal films would certainly show them as well and that thus his personality would be at least as evident as it is now. The point is that the ideal situation would be for every director to have the opportunity to make films he is interested in making. But since that cannot be the case, given the exigencies of motion picture production, directors who are expressing themselves despite their material should not be ignored simply because they do not have total control over the final product. Perhaps their work is more exciting because the meaning in the film does

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<sup>1</sup>Sarris, "The American Cinema," pp. 12-13.



not come out of the mouths of the characters, but rather from the director's visual and aural treatment of the subject and thus requires both a more subtle style and a critical sensibility which is both perceptive and eager to seek out the film's "interior meaning." However, it does not necessarily follow that this subtlety of expression makes a Hollywood studio director a greater artist than a director who works with few imposed encumbrances. In other words, Cukor is not necessarily better than Bergman (Sarris has also mellowed toward Bergman, as his review of Persona will bear witness<sup>1</sup>).

Cukor was chosen to counter Bergman in Sarris's article, possibly because both filmmakers are noted as fine directors of actresses and thus, while the kinds of films they make differ from each other greatly, they have much in common, including an interest in the themes of "reality versus illusion" and "life as theatre." Because their commonality was never clarified by Sarris, the statement seemed both polemical and absurd to many critics. But the case Sarris made was still relevant: no film should be ignored merely because of its title, its theme, or the circumstances surrounding its creation. The following is from an interview with Sarris made in 1973.

Interviewer: . . . Don't you in some ways raise Sam Fuller's Shock Corridor or Pickup on South Street or Howard Hawks's Rio Bravo up to the level, or even above the level, of a film by Bergman or Fellini?

Sarris: Some Bergman films, some Fellini films . . . I think that's quite true because I think they're all on the same level. I don't think one is sublime and the other

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<sup>1</sup>Andrew Sarris, "Persona," Confessions of a Cultist (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), pp. 289-292.



is ridiculous; I think you have to judge each of them on its merits. I don't think that one is more profound than the other . . . I think the European films have been overrated simply because people don't listen to them at all. It's significant that when Antonioni came to America and made a film in English, everybody jumped on him. When Bergman made a film in English, everybody suddenly jumped on him. Suddenly the people were listening to what he was saying. Sometimes I look at . . . Bergman's films . . . dubbed in English. Suddenly you realize what these people are actually saying; you start listening to what they're saying instead of looking at the subtitles in a visual field. And the implications--they're pretty silly . . . I don't think Bergman and Antonioni are great intellectuals; they're great showmen.<sup>1</sup>

After she had discussed the theory point by point, Ms. Kael speculated about the character of the people who would espouse such a critical stance. At first her statements were relatively impersonal: she felt auteur critics were looking for easy schematic answers to difficult problems and she opted for a more pluralistic approach.<sup>2</sup> But towards the end of the article, she returned to a theme she had only hinted at earlier.<sup>3</sup> Referring to Sarris's analysis of the two Raoul Walsh films again, she noted Sarris's emphasis on the masculinity and virility of Walsh and his "feminine narrative device." After discussing similar statements from the Movie critics, she said

The auteur critics are so enthralled with their narcissistic male fantasies . . . that they seem unable to relinquish their schoolboy notions of human experience. (If there are any female practitioners of auteur criticism, I have not yet discovered them.) Can we conclude that, in England and the United States, the auteur theory is an attempt by adult males to justify staying inside the small range of

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<sup>1</sup>Sarris, ". . . Everyone is now an Auteurist . . .," pp. 32-3.

<sup>2</sup>Kael, "Circles and Squares," p. 279.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 265.

experience of their boyhood and adolescence--that period when masculinity looked so great and important but art was something talked about by poseurs and phonies and sensitive-feminine types? And is it perhaps also their way of making a comment on our civilization by the suggestion that trash is the true film art? I ask; I do not know.<sup>1</sup>

This remark was taken by many to mean that auteur critics have a tendency toward homosexuality although, of course, nothing so direct could have been written in scholarly journals in 1963. For years, rumors to that effect were passed around outside of the immediate circle of the New York critical establishment. Evidence that Kael's remarks have not been forgotten by Sarris is shown in his 1974 reply to yet another critic, Graham Petrie.

Petrie's otherwise unexplained quotation marks around the word 'masculine' constitute a snide throwback to Pauline Kael's diatribe against the alleged [closet] homosexuality of the Hawksians more than a decade ago. I don't know (and don't care) what Petrie's sexual politics happen to be, but even Kael can't get away with that kind of innuendo in polite company anymore.<sup>2</sup>

As for Ms. Kael's remarks about the lack of female auteurists, the facts of the matter were, unfortunately, that at the time the article was written there were very few female film critics of any critical stance, and only two of international stature: Ms. Kael and Penelope Houston, the editor of Sight and Sound. Today there are several women auteur film critics. Perhaps the most important is Molly Haskell, author of From Reverence to Rape: an excellent history of American films from both a feminist and an auteurist perspective. She is also Sarris's wife.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 287-8.

<sup>2</sup>Sarris, "Auteurism is Alive and Well," p. 61.

In a 1966 interview, Sarris talked about the Kael-Sarris controversy and its aftermath.

I wrote this little article, 'Notes on the Auteur theory,' just a few things, and I was feeling my way through them. For some reason, Pauline Kael picked up that article in Film Culture, which is for about seven thousand people, and she just blew it up, [In the same issue as Sarris's article was a review by Kael of Shoot the Piano Player by Francois Truffaut, the man who had started it all. The review was highly favorable.] and it was picked up by Sidney Skolsky and people like that. She proceeded to do a hatchet job, in which she implied that everyone who subscribed to this theory was a homosexual and loved muscular men. It was a hodge-podge of sexual innuendoes and everything else. . . . She set up a lot of straw men which she demolished. . . . I find that most people discuss the auteur theory in terms of what was written about it, rather than what I put there in the first place, and the two things are completely different.<sup>1</sup>

At the time, however, his reply to Kael was regarded as inadequate. As Marion Magid said,

Sarris's rebuttal . . . did not, despite a promising title ('Perils of Pauline'), take issue with the points raised. Inhibited perhaps by natural gallantry from responding in kind to the sexual allegation, the author confined himself in large part to attacking the anti-Hollywood stance of the host periodical [Film Quarterly], . . . and to reprinting in toto an earlier piece he had published in Showbill dealing with four Italian directors, whose purpose was presumably to demonstrate that Auteur tastes in cinema were by no means limited to Allan Dwan and Gerd Oswald . . . The round appeared to be Kael's as the combatants withdrew to their corners.<sup>2</sup>

But the seeds of change were beginning to sprout.

In England, Sight and Sound (Movie magazine's old enemy) started to re-evaluate its defense of the British "New Wave" and contemplated a shift to the auteurist camp. And in the United States, Film Quarterly (which had seen three of its

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<sup>1</sup>Sarris, "Interview, Part 2," p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>Magid, "Auteur! Auteur!," pp. 72-3.

critics battle among themselves within its pages) finally came out ". . . in favor of a more 'personal,' 'expressive' cinema regardless of where it might lead."<sup>1</sup>

The tide was slowly beginning to turn toward auteurism in the English-speaking countries. Within five years it would come to be regarded as a major critical force and Andrew Sarris would be regarded as its mentor. But none of this was to come about without further controversy regarding the theory and a battle with John Simon which was even more caustic and bloody than his encounter with Pauline Kael.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE GROWTH OF AUTEURISM: 1968-1974

Pauline Kael's slashing indictment of Sarris in 1963, instead of hurting him as a critic, served to make him notorious and slowly but surely he started to gain critical clout. In 1965 he became editor-in-chief of Cahiers du Cinéma in English, a magazine which included both translations of important articles from the French journal and new articles written especially for it. The magazine lasted only twelve issues, but each of them has since become a collector's item, some of them selling for as much as twenty dollars. In 1966, Sarris was selected as a member of the program committee of the New York Film Festival, easily the most important in the United States. Although frequently criticized for its tastes in selection, the festival has considerable influence on American critical tastes as well as the distribution of foreign films in this country.

In 1966 Sarris published the first of his many books on film: a monograph on Josef von Sternberg for the Museum of Modern Art.<sup>1</sup> The following year he published Interviews with Film Directors, which was the first of scores of books using the interview form. Then in 1968 he published in book form

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<sup>1</sup>Andrew Sarris, The Films of Josef von Sternberg (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1966).



an expanded version of his analysis of film directors and suddenly the full range of his ideas on film were available to wide general attention. Suddenly a critical movement which had previously been spoken of only by its staunchest opponents became a subject on which many could become authorities. The critical movement itself had grown considerably since 1963 and by 1968 there were several major auteur-oriented critics publishing under different auspices. Roger Greenspun, who was soon to become The New York Times's second-string film critic and an avowed auteurist, put it this way: "Back in 1963 some people did not realize that the director of Taza, Son of Cochise was greater by far than the director of Treasure of the Sierra Madre, but Sarris did--and time and The Late Show have born him out."<sup>1</sup> Richard Corliss, a former student and future critic of Sarris, explained the reasons behind the growth of the movement. What Sarris had going for him, Corliss felt, was

. . . an engaging prose style . . . a popular, hip publication (The Village Voice) just right for reaching the young intellectuals for whom film was the most exciting art; a subject matter (the Hollywood sound film) he knew almost viscerally . . . and a burgeoning group of articulate acolytes .<sup>2</sup> . . who could spread the faith without his losing face.

Sarris had another explanation for his rise during the years 1963-69.

. . . In 1963 I rose from obscurity to notoriety by being quoted out of context. . . . I didn't realize at the time that slowly but surely I was gathering professional seniority

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<sup>1</sup>Roger Greenspun, review of The American Cinema by Andrew Sarris, The New York Times Book Review, 16 February 1969.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Corliss, "The Hollywood Screenwriter," Film Comment 6:4 (Winter 1970-1), p. 4.

in a discipline that was about to explode. All I had to do was stand my ground, and suddenly I would find myself in the center of the cultural landscape, returning in triumph to Columbia University, a scholar more prodigal than prodigious.<sup>1</sup>

The year 1969 was in some ways the peak year of his growing prestige as a critic. He was named Associate Professor of Cinema at Columbia University, his alma mater. Also in that year Simon and Schuster published a collection of his film reviews, Confessions of a Cultist. Publication of a critic's reviews in book form is often regarded as a sign that said critic has "arrived" in Establishment circles. In 1969, there were few books of this type in print: only critics such as Pauline Kael, Stanley Kauffmann, John Simon, and James Agee had been so honored.

There were other signs of the growing acceptance of the auteur theory, as Richard Corliss noted.

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, from John Ford . . . to Sam Fuller. Publishers commissioned extended studies of Fritz Lang (who has made forty-three films) and Roman Polanski (who had at the time made five). The Revolution was victorious.<sup>2</sup>

However, there were some unfortunate signs as well:

By 1969 . . . the critical attitude that had begun as a reaction to the party line was in serious danger of hardening into the Gospel According to St. Andrew.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Sarris, Confessions, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup>Corliss, "Hollywood Screenwriters," p. 4.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

Corliss went on to say that many auteurists were becoming close-minded about their concept of the cinema. In their efforts to enthrone the director, "they retarded investigation of other . . . film crafts, especially that of the screenwriter, who creates (or creatively adapts) a film's plot, characters, dialogue and theme."<sup>1</sup> With the spotlight on the screenwriter, the stage was set for the next major attack on the auteur theory. Again, the first major combatant was Pauline Kael.

From their last battle it had probably become evident to Ms. Kael that the best offense against the theory was thorough scholarship, since Sarris was so obviously well-equipped to counter most theoretical arguments with more concrete examples. Even so, it took a considerable amount of courage for Ms. Kael to tackle what had previously been considered the one indisputable example of an American auteur film Citizen Kane, "the most admired, most liked, most discussed work in cinema history-- the Hamlet of film."<sup>2</sup>

In February of 1970, Pauline Kael published a 50,000 word essay on Citizen Kane in the pages of The New Yorker. In it, she contended that the plot, themes, and dialogue of the film were totally the work of the screenwriter who received co-credit for the screenplay, Herman J. Mankiewicz. Despite his credit, Mankiewicz was usually not mentioned in analyses of the film. Instead, these analyses tended to focus on the other credited screenwriter Orson Welles, who also

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Corliss, Talking Pictures (Woodstock, New York: The Overlook Press: 1974), p. 253.

directed and starred in the film. She blamed Mankiewicz's loss of reputation on the incredible publicity and charisma of the "boy wonder of theater and radio," and upon Welles's neglect in mentioning Mankiewicz in the midst of the adulation surrounding Citizen Kane. Kael explored Mankiewicz's career in some depth and unearthed people in his life who were quite similar to characters who appeared in the film. In addition, Mankiewicz was a good friend of William Randolph Hearst, whom many supposed to be the model for the title character of the film. Proceeding to the issue of the authorship of the script, she claimed that Welles was not around when the script was written,<sup>1</sup> that Mankiewicz's secretary said that Welles did not "write (or dictate) one line of the shooting script of Citizen Kane,"<sup>2</sup> and that Welles offered Mankiewicz ten thousand dollars if Mankiewicz would allow his name to be left off the credits.<sup>3</sup> When the essay was published in book form in 1971, it was accompanied by both Mankiewicz's shooting script and a transcript of the finished film itself. The discrepancies between the two were not remarkable when read side by side and this was taken by many to mean that the film owed more to the forgotten Mankiewicz than to the man who had received all of the honor and glory for it, Orson Welles.

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<sup>1</sup>Pauline Kael, "Raising Kane," The Citizen Kane Book (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), p. 29.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 49.



Central to the thesis was that Welles had in some way slighted Mankiewicz's rightful place in the creation of the film. As Ms. Kael said,

he omitted any mention of his writer right from the start. . . In later years, when he has been specifically asked by interviewers whether Mankiewicz wrote the scenario for Citizen Kane, he has had a set reply. 'Everything concerning Rosebud belongs to him,' he has said. Rosebud is what was most frequently criticized in the movie. . . Welles himself has said, 'The Rosebud gimmick is what I like least about the movie. It's a gimmick, really, and rather dollar-book Freud.'<sup>1</sup>

Ms. Kael was referring, unfootnoted, to an interview with Welles published in Cahiers du Cinéma in 1965. Here are the actual words concerning Mankiewicz:

Q.--In an interview, John Houseman said that you got all of the credit for Citizen Kane and that that was unfair because it should have gone to Herman J. Mankiewicz, who wrote the scenario.

Welles--He wrote several important scenes. (Houseman is an old enemy of mine.) I was very lucky to work with Mankiewicz: everything concerning Rosebud belongs to him.<sup>2</sup>

Kael closed with yet another unheralded contribution to the film by Gregg Toland, the cinematographer. She traces Toland's style from a 1935 film, Mad Love, through to Citizen Kane, finding similar shots in each film which she attributed to Toland. Toland had, in fact, been responsible for the development of the deep-focus technique in the films of William Wyler as well as in Citizen Kane. But Welles had never neglected Toland's contribution: In the film, he shared the credit card

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Juan Cobos, Miquel Rubio, and J. A. Pruneda, "A Trip to Don Quixoteland," Cahiers du Cinéma in English 5 (1966) p. 47.



for direction with Toland's credit for cinematography, placing Toland's name before his own (as he placed Mankiewicz's name before his own on the screenplay credit card). The following was from the same Cahiers interview with Welles which was quoted earlier: "I had . . . the good fortune to have Gregg Toland who is the best director of photography who ever existed . . ." <sup>1</sup>

Sarris (who was not mentioned in either "Raising Kane" or in anything else Pauline Kael has written since the original debate, but who was nevertheless a subsidiary target in her attack) responded in a Village Voice column entitled "Citizen Kael vs. Citizen Kane." Sarris raised, in this article, the basic tenet of auteurism:

How much of the final script of Citizen Kane was written by Herman J. Mankiewicz and how much by Orson Welles? I don't know, and I don't think Miss Kael . . . does either. . . . Literary collaboration, like marriage, is a largely unwitnessed interpenetration of psyches. . . . 'Raising Kane' itself bears the byline of Pauline Kael and of Pauline Kael alone. Yet thousands of words are directly quoted from other writers, and thousands more are paraphrased without credit. Miss Kael deserves her byline because she has shaped her material, much of it unoriginal, into an article with a polemical thrust all her own. Her selection and arrangement of material constitutes a very significant portion of her personal style. <sup>2</sup>

What Sarris was implying here was that even if Welles did not write a word of the script, it would still be his film, because he was the one who co-ordinated all the disparate elements of the film and brought them to life. Welles could

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Andrew Sarris, "Citizen Kael vs. Citizen Kane," The Primal Screen, p. 113.

have rejected anything or everything in Mankiewicz's script. His acceptance of most of what Mankiewicz wrote indicates that he felt he would be able to shape or transform the material in accordance with his own personal vision. Similarly, Welles accepted (and, in fact, loved) Gregg Toland's contribution, but if he had not felt that deep-focus and all the other techniques that Toland developed would agree with his personal vision of the film, he would have rejected them. In fact, if Welles had accepted Mankiewicz's and Toland's contributions and those contributions had run counter to Welles's conception, it would not have been Welles's film: he would not be regarded as an auteur. As Sarris said,

. . . Miss Kael suggests that Welles was tricked by both his script and his camera crew during the shooting. She can't have it both ways, treating Welles like Machiavelli in one paragraph and like Mortimer Snerd in another. With all the power Welles possessed on either side of the camera and in the cutting room, it is hard to see how he could be "tricked" without his knowledge, complicity and even industrious cooperation.<sup>1</sup>

He even questions the validity of a comparison of the two scripts, since the shooting script which was published was the final draft, not the first draft of the screenplay. Welles claimed to have written the third draft of the script himself after Mankiewicz had written the first two.<sup>2</sup>

Still, Sarris did not totally reject the article: "Despite her blatant bias against Welles, Miss Kael is to be commended for providing as much information as she has on

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>2</sup>Kael, "Raising Kane," p. 81.

the life and background of Herman J. Mankiewicz. Since his death in 1953 he has indeed been a forgotten man . . ."<sup>1</sup> In fact, at around the same time as the Kael article appeared, Sarris himself uncovered the truth about "Rosebud" in the course of an interview with Mankiewicz's brother, Joseph, who surprised Sarris with these remarks:

It happened when he was growing up in Wilkes-Barre. Herman had always wanted a bicycle, and one Christmas he got one with 'ROSEBUD' printed on the frame, and two days later it was stolen. Toward the end of his life, when he was drinking heavily, he'd often mumble 'Rosebud.' He never got over it.<sup>2</sup>

Reflecting on this, Sarris wrote,

I wondered why the 'Rosebud' story had never been told before, and I decided that no one had bothered to ask. Film history is a vast jigsaw puzzle, and we shall never have access to all the pieces, but we have to keep searching just the same. Now at least one of the pieces had fallen into place, and Herman J. Mankiewicz took his place . . . as one of the poets of the screenplay.<sup>3</sup>

But the matter did not rest there. Peter Bogdanovich (director, Welles afficionado, and early auteur critic) discovered in the course of an interview with Welles that Pauline Kael had never discussed Citizen Kane with him. This was taken by many as an attack on her scholarship: she had talked only to participants in the film who were antagonistic to Welles. Later Bernard Herrmann (the composer of the brilliant

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<sup>1</sup>Sarris, "Citizen Kael vs. Citizen Kane," p. 132.

<sup>2</sup>Andrew Sarris, "Mankiewicz of the Movies," Show Magazine (October 1970), p. 27.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 27-8.

musical score) confirmed in an interview that he had not been contacted by Ms. Kael either. Herrmann added,

What Miss Kael doesn't understand is that the film in the end had nothing to do with the damn screenplay really. It's the springboard. Nobody goes to look at Kane just for the story. It's how it's done. . . . I think the greatest thing that ever happened to Herman J. Mankiewicz, whatever his contribution, was that he met Welles, not the other way round. If Welles hadn't created Kane, he would have made some other equally memorable picture. Mankiewicz's credits don't show any other remarkable scripts. His only moment in the sun was when he came across Orson Welles. And none of us on the film, including Mr. Mankiewicz, ever thought that this was anything anybody was going to worry about.<sup>1</sup>

A year later, Sarris entered the controversy once more with the intention of ending it. He argued, for a moment, on the side of the anti-Wellesians that even if Pauline Kael had interviewed Welles, the result would not necessarily be the last word on the subject. After all, Welles had his own ego to protect. Then he argued that the film, good as it was, was not worth all of the argument that had been centered around it. "I am heartily sick of Citizen Kane and all the seeds of controversy it has sown," he said. "And I record my malaise without denying my own complicity as a frontline combatant in the critical war . . ." <sup>2</sup> Finally, he said,

. . . the anti-Wellesians may have a point in calling attention to the Mankiewicz side of Kane as opposed to the hitherto glorified Toland side. And there is certainly a great deal more to be said about the ever-elusive relationship of screenwriting to direction.

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<sup>1</sup>George Coulouris and Bernard Herrmann with Ted Gilling, "The Citizen Kane Book," Sight and Sound 41:2(Spring 1972) :72-3.

<sup>2</sup>Andrew Sarris, "The Great Kane Controversy," World (16 January 1973): 66.



Auteurism was never intended as the abstract elevation of one film-making function at the expense of another, but rather as merely a means to an end, that end being the improved perception of meaningful style in motion pictures.

Sarris seemed to be on the defensive, for during the Kane controversy his position on the screenwriter had begun to mellow. One of his students had developed an even more conclusive case on their behalf.

The Winter 1970-71 issue of Film Comment caused quite a stir in critical circles. Editor Richard Corliss had devoted the entire issue of this previously auteurist journal to the case of the Hollywood Screenwriter. He included articles which analyzed in some depth the careers and films of certain writers, interviews with others, and a chart showing Corliss's personal Pantheon of screenwriters, which was similar to Movie's chart of American and British directors. In his introductory essay, Corliss contended that the Hollywood screenwriter had been overlooked in the filmmaking process. While crediting Sarris with making people look more closely at American films and directors, Corliss said that most auteur criticism to date had centered on the distinguishability of the director as evidenced by plot, characters, and themes and that these elements are more properly ascribed to the screenwriter. He closed with the following remarks: "The best screenwriters were talented and tenacious enough to assure that their visions and countless revisions would be realized on the screen. Now is the time for them to

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 69.



be remembered in film history."<sup>1</sup> Included also in the issue was an article by Sarris on the screenwriting career of Preston Sturges before he became a writer-director. In it, Sarris noted the thematic similarities of the films Sturges only wrote to those he directed as well. The directors he wrote for were all competent enough, said Sarris, but Sturges felt that his vision was not coming through as much as he would have liked and thus he became a director. The implication was clear: only through directing could a writer express his personal vision clearly.<sup>2</sup>

In 1974, Corliss wrote a book, Talking Pictures, which attempted the same scope that Sarris had achieved in his The American Cinema, with the notable exception that his book was about screenwriters and not directors. Sarris contributed the Preface to the book and proceeded to argue the auteurist case. He explained that he still stood by his original thesis at the highest aesthetic level. In other words, "Pantheon" directors like Ford, Hawks, and Hitchcock had more to do with the nature of their films than their various screenwriters, whatever their talents. He was, however, ". . . prepared to concede many points to Corliss in the pleasant middle regions."<sup>3</sup> When a director is merely an "illustrator of texts," the screenwriter's personality may be the dominant one. Sarris had said essentially the same

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<sup>1</sup>Corliss, "The Hollywood Screenwriter," p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>Andrew Sarris, "Preston Sturges in the Thirties," Film Comment 6:4 (Winter 1970-71) : 81-4.

<sup>3</sup>Andrew Sarris, "Preface," Talking Pictures, p. xv.

thing in his statement about Paddy Chayefsky in 1968. The crucial point was this:

We seem to be fencing around with the roles of the director and screenwriter in that I would grant the screenwriter most of the dividends accruing from dialogue, and Corliss would grant the director the interpretive insights of a musical conductor. Where we grapple most desparately and most blindly is in that no man's land of narrative and dramatic structure. And here I think the balance of power between the director and the screenwriter is too variable for any generalization.<sup>1</sup>

Stuart Byron, an auteur critic, provides an even stronger case for the director's dominance over the screenwriter by paralleling film with opera.

If operagoers stopped listening to opera libretti through the music written for them, most opera houses would close their doors permanently within six months. Not that, say, Da Ponte is bad (great composers, like great film directors, tend to prefer good writers to poor ones), but Da Ponte's Don Giovanni would hardly be worth revival once every fifty years, much less each season as part of a permanent repertory. . . . We see Don Giovanni as Mozart's because if we didn't it wouldn't give us as much pleasure. . . . I believe that the screenplays written for Ford and Hawks and Hitchcock are superior to those written for lesser directors. But it doesn't matter. . . . We don't watch the script, we watch the script through the director's eyes.

This would seem to negate the screenwriters' work, but Sarris would not go that far. He said, ". . . writing and directing are fundamentally the same function. As a screenplay is less than a blueprint and more than a libretto, so is directing less than creating and more than conducting."<sup>3</sup> What Sarris was

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Stuart Byron, "Auteurism, Hawks, Hatari! and Me," Favorite Movies--Critics' Choices, ed. by Philip Nobile (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1973), pp. 256-8.

<sup>3</sup>Sarris, "Preface," p. xv.

saying was that film is a unique art form, and thus perhaps it is not as easy to attribute authorship in a medium which has so many variables. The debate had brought about a slight shift in Sarris's attitude: "I have become increasingly conscientious about mentioning screenwriters as hypothetical auteurs largely under the influence of Corliss's noisy crusade in the pages of Film Comment."<sup>1</sup>

Corliss's arguments were not totally convincing to die-hard auteurists, although some, like Sarris, started looking a little closer at the screenwriter's contribution to film. But in general Corliss's book did not receive the attention it deserved: it was never reviewed in The New York Times, nor was it widely distributed in the bookstores, and consequently the screenwriter-director debate never had much of a hearing.

On February 14th, 1971, yet another clash with a critic involving Sarris came to a head. In the front page of its Entertainment section, The New York Times printed two articles side by side. One was an excerpt from John Simon's then-recent book, Movies into Film, attacking Sarris. The other was Sarris's reply attacking Simon. The debate was one of the most vicious events in the history of film criticism.

Simon's original essay dealt with the state of film criticism at the time. In it, he lambasted several reigning critics, including Pauline Kael, Manny Farber, Penelope Gilliatt, Parker Tyler, Susan Sontag, Judith Crist, and Sarris himself

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

He then went on to praise six critics as concerned with film art, as opposed to movies. These included Dwight Macdonald, Stanley Kauffmann, Vernon Young, Charles T. Samuels, Wilfrid Sheed, and himself. Sarris noted that all six were "dear friends of John Simon, none more so, of course, than Simon himself."<sup>1</sup> From this elaborate essay, The Times chose to excerpt only those remarks devoted to the attack on Sarris, inviting Sarris to reply in kind. Sarris had never before mentioned Simon in his writings and, according to his article, had had no intention of replying to the attack as printed in the book. But, he said, "it is one thing to be attacked in a book that will be very quickly remaindered, but quite another to be reviled in the Sunday Times."<sup>2</sup> An unanswered attack would, he felt, have damaged his reputation. As it turned out, the reputations of both men were damaged by the bitter exchange.

Simon started out by defining the auteur theory as he saw it. Simon's arguments had been raised before: primarily they rested on the concept that since directors were often "at the mercy of the producer or the studio," their personalities could only emerge against the grain of the film. He continued: "From there it was only a short step to admiring films for their quirks . . . The obscurer the auteur, the better . . . the auteur critic has the opportunity to impress us with his esoteric knowledge--often so esoteric that it is hardly worth having." He then posed a major problem with the theory that

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<sup>1</sup>Andrew Sarris, "He's the 'Dracula of Critics,'" The New York Times, 14 February 1971, D1.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.



"it has never been revealed how someone becomes an auteur." He also quoted Robert Benayoun, editor of Cahier's rival magazine Positif, who, though ostensibly an auteurist, criticized other auteurists who praised the minor works of directors like Ulmer, Walsh, and Cottafavi.<sup>1</sup> Sarris likened quoting Benayoun on the auteur theory to "quoting Spiro Agnew at great length on the ideas of Karl Marx."<sup>2</sup> Simon goes on to quote Sarris on Ulmer, which has already been quoted in this thesis on page 19. But Simon quotes from the expanded book version rather than the original magazine version. In the section on Ulmer in the book there appears a typographical error, which Simon uses to great effect:

'Here is a career, more subterranean than most, which be [sic] signature of a genuine artist.' Now if you should wonder about which bee [sic] might have stung Sarris, you will find that it is the Cahiers critics.<sup>3</sup> [The "[sic]"'s were provided by Simon.]

Sarris replied

. . . Simon tries to create the impression that I am hopelessly ill-equipped to write a grammatical sentence. . . . Admittedly, if I had written the sentence Simon quotes, my license to teach remedial composition in kindergarten should be taken away from me. But as it happens, I did not write the sentence in question. . . . Actually I don't have a license to teach remedial composition in kindergarten, but that is about the level to which one must descend to debate with Simon.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>John Simon, "Introduction," Movies into Films (New York: Dial Press, 1971), p. 7, quoted in The New York Times 14 February 1971, D3.

<sup>2</sup>Sarris, "He's the 'Dracula of Critics,'" D3.

<sup>3</sup>Simon, "Introduction," p. 8.

<sup>4</sup>Sarris, "He's the 'Dracula of Critics,'" D3.



Then Simon quoted a Cahiers review by André Labarthe which had an insight into a film similar to a later remark printed by Sarris. Simon implied plagiarism and Sarris denied that he had read Labarthe and that "Simon's accusation is a lie."<sup>1</sup> Sarris then mentioned that Simon had once used an idea of his without attribution, saying instead that "Several reviewers found . . . ." Sarris said:

Note the misappropriation of an insight by the spurious collectivization of its source, a devious variation of the old undergraduate sophistry that stealing from one person is plagiarism whereas stealing from many constitutes research.<sup>2</sup>

Simon closed with more of the homosexual innuendoes, including a quote from the original Kael article, which have plagued Sarris throughout his career. As an additional example, Simon quoted Sarris's review of Hitchcock's Topaz, introducing it with even more innuendoes.

Sarris is reduced to praising a fagged-out Hitchcock for having 'improvised to the extent of exploiting John Vernon's expressively blue eyes in a morally ambivalent situation.' (The Village Voice, Dec. 25, 1969.) Just how a pair of eyes, even if it were something more remarkable than blue, say, yellow, can be exploited in a morally ambivalent situation, to say nothing of how one improvises with this--by not allowing Vernon to blink, lest we lose some of that azure eloquence?--Sarris, of course, neglects to tell us. But he does affirm that Topaz affords us 'unexpected glimpses of the most saving of all human graces: perversity and humor.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Simon, "Introduction," p. 13.

Simon claimed sarcastically that perversity is a vice, rather than a virtue, and concludes with these remarks: "Perversity, however, is certainly the most saving grace of Sarris's criticism, as well as the only deliberate one, the humor being mostly unintentional."<sup>1</sup> Sarris replied in kind, noting the "disgustingly double-edged slang of 'fagged-out'" to slur both Hitchcock and himself. On the issue of perversity, Sarris said, "If Mr. Simon would consult his undoubtedly enormous dictionary, and then read the last sentence of my review, he might see the error of his ways"<sup>2</sup> (the confusion of perversity with perversion).

Sarris throughout the article broke the unwritten canon of critical ethics that one criticizes critics through their works and not their personalities. Both Kael and Simon had attacked Sarris personally, but both preferred to use innuendo rather than direct attack. The Times did not help matters any by taking the title of Sarris's article ("He's the 'Dracula of Critics'") from a quote out of context.

. . . I am always running into kind souls who insist that Simon is a lost lamb misunderstood merely because of the blood dripping from his wolf's fangs. There are merrymakers at every party who can do John Simon imitations, and with a few drinks I can do the Count Dracula of critics myself.<sup>3</sup>

Sarris was undoubtedly referring to Simon's Yugoslavian accent, which made his then frequent appearances on television sound like the famous resident of Transylvania. Obviously there was

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Sarris, "He's the 'Dracula of Critics,'" D 15.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., D 1.

no love lost between the two men at the time, and the out-of-context quote probably did not hurt as much as what Sarris said in context. Sarris peppered his remarks with epithets like these: "nothing can stand in the way of his grubby careerism,"<sup>1</sup> "remarks of such stupid cruelty,"<sup>2</sup> "antic asininity,"<sup>3</sup> and that Simon is "a television monster closer to Zacherly than Zarathustra."<sup>4</sup> He constantly harped on Simon's pretentious use of the language. To prove his point, he quoted Simon's review of Il Posto as an example.

'The film is full of such parentheses, ellipses, anacolutha, interjections, paragraphs in which languorous subordination yields to the staccato of parataxis.' Obviously, a sentence of such willful impenetrability is designed less to describe the movie than to display the education of the critic.<sup>5</sup>

Sarris then quotes other critics who have attacked Simon, sometimes even more vituperatively than Sarris did. For example, Gore Vidal said:

Clanking chains and snapping whips, giggling and hissing, he has ricocheted from one journal to another, and though no place holds him for long, the flow of venom has proved inexhaustible. There is nothing he cannot find to hate. [This last line was used as a caption under Sarris's picture in the Times article, and is yet another example of his being quoted out of context. Indeed, he never said it: Gore Vidal did.] . . . Mr. Simon knows that he is only an Illyrian gangster and is blessedly free of side; he wants simply to torture and kill in order to be as good an American as Mr. Charles Manson, say, or Lyndon Johnson.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., D3.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., D 15.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., D 3.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., D 13.

Sarris even questioned the integrity of Simon's insults by claiming that when Simon appeared on talk shows, he always insulted the guests but never the hosts. In addition, Sarris questioned Simon's vaunted taste:

. . . he stands convicted of ringing endorsements of garbage like Mondo Cane and The Greenwich Village Story amid pans of 8 1/2 and Eclipse. Simon needn't even see movies to lash out at people against whom he is prejudiced: 'I did not see a bill of two TV films, one by Chris Marker, for whom I have little use, and one about Malcolm Muggeridge, for whom I have hardly more . . .'<sup>1</sup>

Sarris's biggest mistake, perhaps, was his refusal to focus on Simon's attack on auteurism. Instead he chose to tell "genuinely interested" readers to read his books if they wished to understand the theory. Consequently, he seemed to be on the defensive, as he had so many times in the past, and perhaps he appeared to be a little paranoid to many readers. It may have been a little unfair, but at least it seemed legitimate for Simon to attack Sarris in a book, or for Vidal and the others to attack Simon while addressing the public at large. Sarris, though, seemed to be attacking Simon directly, although he used the third person to refer to him. Thus his attack, for some reason, seemed to many of his admirers to be unduly petulant.

In the Sunday Entertainment section of the Times three weeks later (March 7, 1971), thirty-one letters were printed about the debate. A few sided with Sarris and a few more with Simon, but the vast majority showed a "plague on both your houses" attitude and compared them with brawling schoolyard

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., D 15.

children. No one had scored points in this particular battle and, though it cannot be proven, it would seem that both men lost a considerable amount of their prestige from this encounter. Certainly John Simon's television appearances were less frequent than they had been and Sarris's appearances in the Times were not as common as they had been before either.

It may have been this that caused the auteur movement to begin its downward swing from popularity. Around the time of the Sarris-Simon battle, new critical theories began to emerge and while they have not taken over the field yet, they show every sign of becoming more important as time goes on. Whether that means that auteurism was only a cultural fad is something that only time will tell.



## CHAPTER V

### THE FUTURE OF AUTEURISM

Despite all the battles about the auteur theory, only one cohesive theory of film had been proposed to replace it: Richard Corliss's defense of the screenwriter. In a way, even this theory was but an extension of the auteur theory with the screenwriter merely replacing the director as the creator of the film. Even under this theory, films were primarily works of art, not sociological phenomena, and as such were to be judged as artistic creations only. But in the late 1960's and early 1970's, three new critical approaches to film emerged and received some credibility: Marxist criticism, genre analysis, and semiological-structuralist criticism. Marxist criticism began at the Cahiers du Cinéma after auteurism went out of fashion in France. It showed a similarity to the old socio-political approach of Grierson and others with the difference being that the focus was on auteurs who showed a decided comprehension of class struggle. These included many of the Hollywood directors who had been praised before primarily on aesthetic terms. Ironically, few of the directors praised were victims of the Blacklist perpetrated by the House Un-American Activities Committee, but rather the same unpretentious filmmakers working in unfamiliar genres who had been praised by the auteur critics. Little of this Marxist criticism has been published in this

country (except for the American journal Cinéaste) so it is difficult to tell if this criticism will lead in a constructive direction. However, the history of Marxist aesthetic criticism would tend to indicate that it will not be of great help to non-Marxists.

Genre criticism has been a part of the critical scene since the beginning. Two of the most anthologized examples of this form are Robert Warshow's much anthologized essays on the Western and gangster film ("The Westerner" and "The Gangster as Tragic Hero" reprinted in his The Immediate Experience).<sup>1</sup> Recently much more work has been done in this field by people like Jim Kitses, Colin MacArthur, and Phillip French and by periodicals like the Journal of Popular Film. Often genre criticism is combined with auteur criticism, as in the case of MacArthur and Kitses, with the result that both methodologies are illuminated. However for those of us who regard film as an art first and as a popular cultural phenomenon second, this method can only be of subordinate interest to legitimate aesthetic criticism.

The semiological-structuralists are a different matter altogether. This methodological approach derives from adaptations of work done in the field of linguistics by Ferdinand de Saussure and Noam Chomsky and in the field of anthropology by Claude Lévi-Strauss. In the field of literature, perhaps the most important semiologico-structuralist is Roland Barthes,

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Warshow, The Immediate Experience (New York: Doubleday, 1962).

author of Elements of Semiology, Writing Degree Zero, and Mythologies--the latter containing several essays on structuralism in film and all of them essential to anyone interested in the field. The major cinematic structuralist critics are Christian Metz of France and the late critic, poet and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini of Italy. One of the difficulties of the semiological approach is the considerable amount of new and difficult terminology attendant with the field. Another, and for me the prime, difficulty is the reluctance of structuralist critics to discuss specific films. Christian Metz's only translated book in the field, Film Language, contains detailed analysis of only one film: Jacques Rozier's Adieu Phillippine--a film which is extremely difficult to see in this country. The only other major structuralist analysis of a film that I know of is the Cahiers analysis of John Ford's Young Mr. Lincoln, which was printed in the British structuralist journal Screen but has not to my knowledge been released in this country. Consequently it is difficult not only to evaluate the methodology but even to understand it. Nevertheless what little I do understand indicates that it could be of extraordinary value to film criticism as it has been to Art and Literary criticism if only it can be put into detailed practice on specific films. Since three of these four major methodologies (including auteurism) began in France, it is unfortunate that public support of Sarris's Cahiers du Cinéma in English was not forthcoming in sufficient numbers to allow the magazine to survive.

It seems absurd for us to wait ten years for a critical revolution to cross the ocean when new ideas on the subject could easily be available to us now.

Sarris was to become involved in one more debate on auteurism along the lines of some of these new theories in 1973. This one was not as noisy as the Kael, Corliss, and Simon battles of the past and virtually passed unnoticed. It was held in the pages of Film Quarterly, the magazine from which the original Kael blast emerged. The participants this time were Graham Petrie and John Hess, two new critics who published often in film journals but were little-known to the public at large. Petrie led off the debate in the Spring 1973 issue with a traditional argument concerning authorship but with a new angle: Petrie said that directors should be classed according to the amount of control they have over a project. Thus, in American films, Charlie Chaplin most deserves the title of auteur (or, as Petrie prefers to call them, creator), because he wrote, produced, directed and starred in his films, in addition to owning his own studio. Therefore he was most likely to produce films in accordance with his personal creative vision. Even in the case of Chaplin, the collaborative efforts of his casts and crews must certainly have changed the final product, argued Petrie. Therefore the "authorship" of all films should be determined on a collaborative basis, tracing the influences of everyone involved in the process to determine the exact amount of "authorship" attributable to each

participant. Petrie claimed that anything less was an injustice to all who worked on the films.<sup>1</sup>

This is an interesting thesis and all auteurists have tried their hand at it from time to time by tracing the influence of a cinematographer or editor or set designer on specific films. They have certainly always noted the inestimable contributions of the performers whose personalities are not subtly hidden but are right up there on the screen. Nevertheless it can be a tedious process indeed with minor films and in the end perhaps a little pointless as well. Ultimately, one person has to say "Yes" or "No" to everything that happens during the course of the film. Sometimes that person can be the actor, sometimes it can be the producer, but usually it is the director and for that reason director-centered criticism is more likely than Petrie's proposition to reveal the source of artistic power of the work.

Another attack on Petrie's attitude toward auteurism came from critic John Hess. First Hess explained that Petrie was confusing the original politique with Sarris's theories and those of what he called the "post-Sarrisites." Auteurism was a valuable and essential transitional step from the old sociological criticism to the modern methods of semiology, structuralism, and Marxism. The original politique, he said, was well aware of the collaborative nature of filmmaking; it was only when the auteur theory came to America under the

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<sup>1</sup>Graham Petrie, "Alternatives to Auteurs," Film Quarterly 26:3 (Spring 1973) pp. 27-42.



tutelage of Andrew Sarris that an understanding of the real conditions besetting filmmakers was forgotten. He claimed that Petrie had betrayed his article's title ("Alternatives to Auteurs") by not proposing a useful alternative to auteurism. Then Hess called for the utilization of one or another of these new methodologies to replace the outmoded politique. He ended his essay with these remarks:

La politique des auteurs and its progeny are now historical artifacts; our only fruitful response to it today is an examination of its origins, development, and influence. . . . The time for flagellating poor, tattered auteurism has passed; it has had its day, done its thing, and passed into history.<sup>1</sup>

Petrie's reply appeared in the next issue of Film Quarterly. In it, he basically re-iterated his earlier position and claimed not to have been understood by Hess. He clarifies his theory further with this example.

I prefer to allow the artist to speak to me first before I decide what it is he is saying. . . . We cannot decode a message unless we understand who is communicating it and under what circumstances: the text, 'Mother is ill. Come immediately,' for example, means one thing when it is sent to you by your sister, and another when it is sent by a stranger who wants you out of the way so that she can murder your husband. Hence my original proposal that film critics pay more attention than they have in the past to finding out who it is that is speaking to us in any particular film. . . .<sup>2</sup>

Another critic in the same issue, Charles W. Eckert, was attempting to defend himself against an attack on the structuralist issue and had these prophetic words to say

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<sup>1</sup>John Hess, "Auteurism and After: A Reply to Graham Petrie," Film Quarterly 27:2 (Winter 1973-74) : 36.

<sup>2</sup>Graham Petrie, "Auteurism: More Aftermath," Film Quarterly 27: 3 (Spring 1974) : 62.

about adhering to any dogmatic critical methodology:

. . . as my experience--and that of Graham Petrie at the hands of John Hess in the last issue of Film Quarterly--demonstrates, there is a stiff, cold wind blowing against partial, outmoded, or theoretically unsound forms of film criticism--and it just might blow many of them away.<sup>1</sup>

Sarris finally came into the fray in the Summer 1974 issue. Again he claimed that both Petrie and Hess had misunderstood the basic tenets of auteurism and had set up "straw men" whom they immediately demolished. He again explicated his position over the years and his awareness of the influences of collaborators and non-director auteurs. He closed with these remarks:

After twelve years auteurism is still in a transitional stage, and the cinema continues to confound our expectations. If I choose to continue analyzing the artist behind the camera by studying the formal and thematic consciousness flitting back and forth on the screen, it is because I do not wish to return to the sterile sermonizing of the past. I should hope that differing critical approaches can coexist. If not, it should be remembered that auteurism was born out of a passion for polemics.<sup>2</sup>

Although his position had not changed much over the years, the constant attacks on him and his theories did cause him to become reflective. In the Foreword to his collection The Primal Screen, Sarris contemplated all battles over the subject of film.

I have often wondered over the years why film critics seem to arouse so much controversy with so little effort. I am not referring now to the unseemly Senecan spectacle of warring critics in the process of dismembering each other. (See the battle records of Sarris-Kael, Sarris-

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<sup>1</sup>Charles W. Eckert, "Shall We Deport Lévi-Strauss?," Film Quarterly 27:3 (Spring 1974) : 65.

<sup>2</sup>Andrew Sarris, "Auteurism is Alive and Well," p. 63.

Macdonald, and Sarris-Simon for some of the gruesome details.) . . . Obviously a part of us recognizes that any given movie may have been seen by millions and millions of people, and yet in some ineffable way it must belong to each of us individually and uniquely, not really even to each of us but to the me, me, me alone in each of us. Often when I discuss a movie even casually with another person I suddenly have the feeling that we are gnawing at the movie like two dogs fighting over a bone for exclusive possession. It is not the usual taste-bud disagreement we might have over a book, a play, a painting or an opera. What is at stake is not so much which of us has judged it more accurately as which of us is more in tune with its dreamlike essence. It is a battle for spiritual custody.<sup>1</sup>

Anyone who has ever felt the need to discuss a film can identify with the feeling Sarris has described. It helps explain why battles in critical circles have been so violent and why it is so crucial to so many people to have the right attitude toward film. It also helps explain why film, always the liveliest art, has become such a popular area for scholarly study. That it has become just that in the past fourteen years, I believe, is due more to the efforts of Andrew Sarris than to any other American. It was he, in this country at least, who first attempted to formulate a coherent theory for the critical judgement of films: The Auteur Theory. He has maintained his convictions throughout brutal attacks on both his work and himself and has been a great example for other critics to follow.

I believe that auteurism is not dead: it can still be a living and vibrant force in the understanding of film. It was auteurism which allowed us to put the history of film in

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<sup>1</sup>Andrew Sarris, "Foreword," The Primal Screen, p. 11, 15.

its perspective as an artistic medium both like and unlike any other, and the ability of auteurism to explain where we have been is essential to an understanding of where we are going. I see it as not only possible but also quite likely that the new methodologies will not only build on the concepts of auteurism but incorporate them as well. As such, I look forward to the new discoveries of all the new critical methodologies and the discoveries which are yet to be made through the application of the auteur theory. I even look forward to the battles which will inevitably emerge between them because conflict is a certain sign of life in the medium. And I look forward to even more contributions by Andrew Sarris and the auteur critics to the literature of film criticism.

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