



---

## ART CINEMA AND THE IDEA OF AUTHORSHIP



Individuals and institutions affect history, but so do ideas. One of the most influential ideas in cinema history is the belief that the director is most centrally responsible for a film's form, style, and meanings. Most historians have made this assumption since at least the 1920s, but it was examined and articulated with particular force in postwar European film culture. The debates of that period, along with the films that were drawn into them, shaped filmmaking all over the world.

### THE RISE AND SPREAD OF THE AUTEUR THEORY

Since the mid-1940s, French directors and screenwriters quarreled over who could properly be considered the *auteur*, or author, of a film. The Occupation period had popularized the notion that the mature sound cinema would be the “age of the scriptwriter,” but Roger Leenhardt and André Bazin (p. 343) claimed that the director was the main source of a film's value. These two critics wrote for the journal *Revue du cinéma* (1946–1949), which championed Orson Welles, William Wyler, and other American directors.

An important statement of this line of thought was Alexandre Astruc's 1948 essay on *la caméra-stylo* (“the camera-pen”). According to Astruc, the cinema had achieved maturity and would attract serious artists who would use film to express their ideas and feelings. “The filmmaker-author writes with his camera as a writer writes with his pen.”<sup>1</sup> The modern cinema would be a personal one, and technology, crew, and cast would be no more than instruments in the artist's creative process.

In 1951, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze founded the monthly magazine *Cahiers du cinéma* (“Cinema Notebooks”). Bazin quickly became its

central critic. The first issue reviewed *Sunset Boulevard* as a Billy Wilder film, *Diary of a Country Priest* as a Robert Bresson film, *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis* as a Roberto Rossellini film, and so on. Soon younger *Cahiers* critics such as Eric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol, Jean-Luc Godard, and François Truffaut began pushing the auteur approach to the point of provocation. The first scandal came in 1954, with Truffaut's essay, "A Certain Tendency in the French Cinema." He attacked the Cinema of Quality (p. 343) as "scenarists' films," works that revealed a lack of originality and a reliance on literary classics. According to Truffaut, in this tradition the screenwriter hands in the script, and the director simply adds the performers and pictures, thereby becoming only a *metteur en scène*, a "stager." Truffaut named a few genuine auteurs: Jean Renoir, Bresson, Jean Cocteau, Jacques Tati, and others who wrote their own stories and dialogue. Fulfilling Astruc's dream of the caméra-stylo, these directors were true "men of the cinema."

In making the issue of screenwriting central, Truffaut was providing a rationale for *Cahiers*'s tastes. The journal had praised those European and American directors who composed or controlled their scripts. Truffaut's initial conception of authorship was also held by *Cahiers*'s rival magazine *Positif* (founded 1952). Marxist and surrealist in its inclinations, *Positif* shared few of the *Cahiers* writers' tastes, but like them it concentrated primarily on directors who had a great deal of control over the scriptwriting process.

Some of the younger *Cahiers* critics went further, claiming that great directors in Hollywood had managed to express their vision of life without having any say in the screenplay. This hard-core version of auteurism proved most controversial throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Bazin could not accept the extreme views of his young colleagues, but critics elsewhere were quick to take up the *politique des auteurs*—the policy of treating any director with a personal style or a distinct worldview as an auteur. In the early 1960s, American critic Andrew Sarris began promulgating what he called the "auteur theory" as a way of understanding U.S. film history. The British journal *Movie* (founded in 1962) was auteurist from the start. While Sarris and the *Movie* critics were sympathetic to the *Cahiers* European canon, they concentrated chiefly on Hollywood directors (see "Notes and Queries" online).

Once we have declared, for example, Ingmar Bergman to be an auteur, how does this help us understand a Bergman film? Auteur critics argued that we can examine the film as if it were a piece of "pure" creation, like a novel. The film can be understood as expressing Bergman's view of life.

Moreover, considering Bergman an auteur allows us to look for common elements across his films. One motto of auteur criticism was Renoir's remark that a director really makes only one film and keeps remaking it. Recurrent subjects, themes, images, techniques, and plot situations give the director's films a rich unity. Knowledge of the auteur's other films may thus help the viewer understand the one at hand. In particular, the auteur critic was sensitive to ways in which a director's work developed over time, taking unexpected turns or returning to ideas broached earlier.

Finally, auteur criticism tended to promote a study of film style. If a filmmaker was an artist like a writer or painter, that artistry was revealed not only in *what* was said but in *how* it was said. Like any creator, the filmmaker ought to be a master of the medium, exploiting it in striking and innovative ways. Auteur critics distinguished directors by uses of camerawork, lighting, and other techniques. Some critics drew a distinction between filmmakers who emphasized staging and camera placement (the so-called *mise-en-scène* directors such as Max Ophüls and Renoir) and filmmakers who relied on editing (montage directors such as Alfred Hitchcock and Sergei Eisenstein).

## AUTHORSHIP AND THE GROWTH OF THE ART CINEMA

Such ideas of authorship meshed smoothly with the growing art cinema of the 1950s and 1960s. Most of the prestigious directors of the period wrote their own scripts; all pursued distinctive themes and stylistic choices in film after film. Film festivals tended to honor the director as the central creator. In a commercial context, Tati, Michelangelo Antonioni, and others became "brand names," differentiating their products from the mass of "ordinary" cinema. Such name recognition could carry a film into foreign markets.

During the 1950s and 1960s, auteurist critics tended to focus on filmmakers who developed the cinematic modernism discussed in the last three chapters. Auteurism sensitized viewers to narrative experiments that expressed a director's vision of life. It also prepared viewers to interpret stylistic patterns as the filmmaker's personal comment on the action. Auteur critics were especially alert for ambiguities that could be interpreted as the director's reflection on a subject or a theme.

This chapter examines the careers of Luis Buñuel, Ingmar Bergman, Akira Kurosawa, Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Robert Bresson, Jacques Tati,