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Circles and Squares

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PAULINE KAEI

Circles and Squares

In 1957, in the Paris monthly "Cahiers du Cinéma," François Truffaut proposed for the magazine a "politique des auteurs"—a policy of focussing criticism primarily upon directors, and specifically upon certain chosen directors whose individuality of style qualified them, in the eyes of the Cahiers "team," as "auteurs"—creators in the personal sense we accept for other arts. This doctrine galvanized the "Cahiers" polemicists, and lent some of the impetus which helped Truffaut, Godard, and many other young men break through as film-makers (and aspiring "auteurs"). In the years since then, the doctrine has gained adherents in England, chiefly around the magazine "Movie," and to some extent in the United States, through the "New York Film Bulletin" and "Film Culture." In its homeland the politique has led to many peculiar judgments, especially of American film-makers: it is Samuel Fuller, Nicholas Ray, and Otto Preminger who figure as the gods of this new pantheon. The results upon export are turning out to be even more peculiar on occasion. The time seems ripe, therefore, for a direct examination of the Anglo-Saxon version of the "politique des auteurs." Is it, in fact, a new and stimulating approach to films, which ought to displace the tradition of criticism developed by the "Sequence" and "Sight & Sound" writers? Pauline Kael offers a resounding negative view; and we anticipate in our next issue a rejoinder by Andrew Sarris, in whose writings the politique has had its most extended and thoughtful American presentation.

JOYS AND SARRIS

"... the first premise of the *auteur* theory is the technical competence of a director as a criterion of value. ... The second premise of the *auteur* theory is the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value. ... The third and ultimate premise of the *auteur* theory is concerned with interior meaning, the ultimate glory of the cinema as an art. Interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension between a director's personality and his material."

—Andrew Sarris, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962," *Film Culture*, Winter 62/3

"Sometimes a great deal of corn must be husked to yield a few kernels of internal meaning. I recently saw *Every Night at Eight*, one of the many maddeningly routine films Raoul Walsh has directed in his long career. This 1935 effort featured George Raft, Alice Faye, Frances Langford and Patsy Kelly in one of those familiar plots about radio shows of the period. 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." Sarris, *ibid.*

Perhaps a little more corn should be husked; perhaps, for example, we can husk away the word "internal" (is "internal meaning" any different from "meaning"?). We might ask why the link is "crucial"? Is it because the device was "incongruously intense" in *Every Night at Eight* and so demonstrated a try for something deeper on Walsh's part? But if his merit is his "pleasantly unpretentious manner" (which is to say, I suppose, that, recognizing the limitations of the script, he wasn't trying to do much) then the incongruous device was probably a misconceived attempt that disturbed the manner—like a bad playwright interrupting a comedy scene because he cannot resist the opportunity to tug at your heart-strings. We might also ask why this narrative device is "essentially feminine": is it more feminine than masculine to be asleep, or to talk in one's sleep, or to reveal feelings? Or, possibly, does Sarris regard the device as feminine because the listening woman becomes a sympathetic figure and emotional understanding is, in this "virile" context, assumed to be essentially feminine? Perhaps only if one accepts the narrow notions of virility so common in our action films can this sequence be seen as "essentially feminine," and it is amusing that a critic can both support these clichés of the male world and be so happy when they are violated.

This is how we might quibble with a different *kind* of critic but we would never get any-

where with Sarris if we tried to examine what he is saying sentence by sentence.

So let us ask, what is the meaning of the passage? 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.

But in every art form, critics traditionally notice and point out the way the artists borrow from themselves (as well as from others) and how the same devices, techniques, and themes reappear in their work. This is obvious in listening to music, seeing plays, reading novels, watching actors, etc.; we take it for granted that this is how we perceive the development or the decline of an artist (and it may be necessary to point out to *auteur* critics that repetition without development is decline). When you see Hitchcock's *Saboteur* there is no doubt that he drew heavily and clumsily from *The 39 Steps*, and when you see North by Northwest you can see that he is once again toying with the ingredients of *The 39 Steps*—and apparently having a good time with them. Would Sarris not notice the repetition in the Walsh films without the *auteur* theory? Or shall we take the more cynical view that without some commitment to Walsh as an *auteur*, he probably wouldn't be spending his time looking at these movies?

If we may be permitted a literary analogy, we can visualize Sarris researching in the archives of *The Saturday Evening Post*, tracing the development of Clarence Budington Kelland, who, by the application of something like the *auteur* theory, would emerge as a much more important writer than Dostoyevsky; for in Kelland's case Sarris' three circles, the three premises of the *auteur* theory, have been consistently congruent. Kelland is technically competent (even "pleasantly unpretentious"), no writer has a more "distinguishable personality," and 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. Poor misguided Dostoyevsky, too full of what he has to say to bother with "technical competence," tackling important themes in each work (surely the worst crime in the *auteur* book) and with his almost incredible unity of personality and material leaving you nothing to extrapolate from, he'll never make it. If the editors of *Movie* ranked authors the way they do directors, Dostoyevsky would probably be in that almost untouchable category of the "ambitious."

It should be pointed out that Sarris' defense of the *auteur* theory is based not only on aesthetics but on a rather odd pragmatic statement: "Thus to argue against the *auteur* theory in America is to assume that we have anyone of Bazin's sensibility and dedication to provide an alternative, and we simply don't." Which I take to mean that the *auteur* theory is necessary in the absence of a critic who wouldn't need it. This is a new approach to aesthetics, and I hope Sarris' humility does not camouflage his double-edged argument. If his aesthetics is based on expediency, then it may be expedient to point out that it takes extraordinary intelligence and discrimination and taste to *use* any theory in the arts, and that without those qualities, a theory becomes a rigid formula (which is indeed what is happening among *auteur* critics). The greatness of critics like Bazin in France and Agee in America may have something to do with their using their full range of intelligence and intuition, rather than relying on formulas. Criticism is an art, not a science, and a critic who follows rules will fail in one of his most important functions: perceiving what is original and important in *new* work and helping others to see.

"THE OUTER CIRCLE"

"... the first premise of the *auteur* theory is the technical competence of a director as a criterion of value."

This seems less the premise of a theory than

a commonplace of judgment, as Sarris himself indicates when he paraphrases it as, "A great director has to be at least a good director." But this commonplace, though it *sounds* reasonable and basic, is a shaky premise: sometimes the greatest artists in a medium by-pass or violate the simple technical competence that is so necessary for hacks. For example, it is doubtful if Antonioni could handle a routine directorial assignment of the type at which John Sturges is so proficient (*Escape from Fort Bravo* or *Bad Day at Black Rock*), but surely Antonioni's *L'Avventura* is the work of a great director. And the greatness of a director like Cocteau has nothing to do with mere technical competence: his greatness is in being able to achieve his own personal expression and style. And just as there were writers like Melville or Dreiser who triumphed over various kinds of technical incompetence, and who were, as artists, incomparably greater than the facile technicians of their day, a new great film director may appear whose very greatness is in his struggling toward grandeur or in massive accumulation of detail. An artist who is not a good technician can indeed create new standards, because standards of technical competence are based on comparisons with work already done.

Just as new work in other arts is often attacked because it violates the accepted standards and thus seems crude and ugly and incoherent, great new directors are very likely to be condemned precisely on the grounds that they're not even good directors, that they don't know their "business." Which, in some cases, is true, but does it matter when that "business" has little to do with what they want to express in films? It may even be a hindrance, leading them to banal slickness, instead of discovery of their own methods. For some, at least, Cocteau may be right: "The only technique worth having is the technique you invent for yourself." The director must be judged on the basis of what he produces — his films — and if he can make great films without knowing the standard methods, without the usual craftsmanship of the "good director," then that is the

way he works. I would amend Sarris' premise to "In works of a lesser rank, technical competence can help to redeem the weaknesses of the material." In fact it seems to be precisely this category that the *auteur* critics are most interested in — the routine material that a good craftsman can make into a fast and enjoyable movie. What, however, makes the *auteur* critics so incomprehensible, is not their *preference* for works of this category (in this they merely follow the lead of children who also prefer simple action films and westerns and horror films to works that make demands on their understanding) but their truly astonishing inability to exercise taste and judgment *within* their area of preference. Movie-going kids are, I think, much more reliable guides to this kind of movie than the *auteur* critics: every kid I've talked to knows that Henry Hathaway's *North to Alaska* was a surprisingly funny, entertaining movie and *Hatari!* (classified as a "masterpiece" by half the *Cahiers* Conseil des Dix, Peter Bogdanovich, and others) was a terrible bore.

"THE MIDDLE CIRCLE"

"... the second premise of the *auteur* theory is the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value."

Up to this point there has really been no theory, and now, when Sarris begins to work on his foundation, the entire edifice of civilized standards of taste collapses while he's tacking down his floorboards. Traditionally, in any art, the personalities of all those involved in a production have been a factor in judgment, but that the *distinguishability* of personality should in itself be a criterion of value completely confuses *normal* judgment. The smell of a skunk is more distinguishable than the perfume of a rose; does that make it better? Hitchcock's personality is certainly more distinguishable in *Dial M for Murder*, *Rear Window*, *Vertigo*, than Carol 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 works? We recognize the hands of Carné and Prévert in *Le Jour se Lève*, but that is not what makes it a beautiful film; we can just as easily recognize their hands in *Quai des Brumes*—which is not such a good film. We can recognize that *Le Plaisir* and *The Earrings of Madame De* are both the work of Ophüls, but *Le Plaisir* is not a great film, and *Madame De* is.

Often the works in which we are most aware of the personality of the director are his worst films—when he falls back on the devices he has already done to death. When a famous director makes a good movie, we look at the movie, we don't think about the director's personality; when he makes a stinker we notice his familiar touches because there's not much else to watch. When Preminger makes an expert, entertaining whodunit like *Laura*, we don't look for his personality (it has become part of the texture of the film); when he makes an atrocity like *Whirlpool*, there's plenty of time to look for his "personality" — if that's your idea of a good time.

It could even be argued, I think, that Hitchcock's uniformity, his mastery of tricks, and his cleverness at getting audiences to respond according to his calculations — the feedback he wants and gets from them — reveal not so much a personal style as a personal theory of audience psychology, that his methods and approach are not those of an artist but a prestidigitator. The *auteur* critics respond just as Hitchcock expects the gullible to respond. This is not so surprising — often the works *auteur* critics call masterpieces are ones that seem to reveal the contempt of the director for the audience.

It's hard to believe that Sarris seriously attempts to apply "the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value" because when this premise becomes troublesome, he just tries to brazen his way out of difficulties. For example, now that John Huston's

work has gone flat* Sarris casually dismisses him with: "Huston is virtually a forgotten man with a few actors' classics behind him..." If *The Maltese Falcon*, perhaps the most high-style thriller ever made in America, a film Huston both wrote and directed, is not a director's film, what is? And if the distinguishable personality of the director is a criterion of value, then how can Sarris dismiss the Huston who comes through so unmistakably in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *The African Queen*, or *Beat the Devil*, or even in a muddled Huston film like *Key Largo*? If these are actors' movies, then what on earth is a director's movie?

Isn't the *auteur* theory a hindrance to clear judgment of Huston's movies and of his career? Disregarding the theory, we see some fine film achievements and we perceive a remarkably distinctive directorial talent; we also see intervals of weak, half-hearted assignments like *Across the Pacific* and *In This Our Life*. Then, after *Moulin Rouge*, except for the blessing of *Beat the Devil*, we see a career that splutters out in ambitious failures like *Moby Dick* and confused projects like *The Roots of Heaven* and *The Misfits*, and strictly commercial projects like *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison*. And this kind of career seems more characteristic of film history, especially in the United States, than the ripening development and final mastery envisaged by the *auteur* theory — a theory that makes it almost de rigeur to regard Hitchcock's American films as superior to his early English films. Is Huston's career so different, say, from Fritz Lang's? How is it that Huston's early good — almost great — work, must be

rejected along with his mediocre recent work, but Fritz Lang, being sanctified as an *auteur*, has his bad recent work praised along with his good? Employing more usual norms, if you respect the Fritz Lang who made *M* and *You Only Live Once*, if you enjoy the excesses of style and the magnificent absurdities of a film like *Metropolis*, then it is only good sense to reject the ugly stupidity of *The Tiger of Eschnapur* botch. It is an insult to an artist to praise his bad work along with his good; it indicates that you are incapable of judging either.

A few years ago, a friend who reviewed Jean Renoir's University of California production of his play *Carola*, hailed it as "a work of genius." When I asked my friend how he could so describe this very unfortunate play, he said, "Why, of course, it's a work of genius. Renoir's a genius, so anything he does is a work of genius." This could almost be a capsule version of the *auteur* theory (just substitute *Hatari!* for *Carola*) and in this reductio ad absurdum, viewing a work is superfluous, as the judgment is a priori. It's like buying clothes by the label: this is Dior, so it's good. (This is not so far from the way the *auteur* critics work, either).

Sarris doesn't even play his own game with any decent attention to the rules: it is as absurd to praise Lang's recent bad work as to dismiss Huston's early good work; surely it would be more consistent if he also tried to make a case for Huston's bad pictures? That would be more consistent than devising a category called "actors' classics" to explain his good pictures away. If *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Treasure of Sierra Madre* are actors' classics, then what makes Hawks' *To Have and Have Not* and *The Big Sleep* (which were obviously tailored to the personalities of Bogart and Bacall) the work of an *auteur*?

Sarris believes that what makes an *auteur* is "an élan of the soul." (This critical language is barbarous. Where else should élan come from? It's like saying "a digestion of the stomach." A film critic need not be a theoretician, but it is necessary that he know how to use words. This might, indeed, be a first pre-

*And, by the way, the turning point came, I think, not with *Moby Dick*, as Sarris indicates, but much earlier, with *Moulin Rouge*. This may not be so apparent to *auteur* critics concerned primarily with style and individual touches, because what was shocking about *Moulin Rouge* was that the content was sentimental mush. But critics who accept even the worst of Minnelli probably wouldn't have been bothered by the fact that *Moulin Rouge* was soft in the center, it had so many fancy touches at the edges.

mise for a theory.) Those who have this *élan* presumably have it forever and their films reveal the “organic unity” of the directors’ careers; and those who don’t have it — well, they can only make “actors’ classics.” It’s ironic that a critic trying to establish simple “objective” rules as a guide for critics who he thinks aren’t gifted enough to use taste and intelligence, ends up — where, actually, he began — with a theory based on mystical insight. This might really make demands on the *auteur* critics if they did not simply take the easy way out by arbitrary decisions of who’s got “it” and who hasn’t. Their decisions are not merely not based on their theory; their decisions are *beyond* criticism. It’s like a woman’s telling us that she feels a certain dress *does* something for her: her feeling has about as much to do with critical judgment as the *auteur* critics feeling that Minnelli *has* “it,” but Huston never had “it.”

Even if a girl had plenty of “it,” she wasn’t expected to keep it forever. But this “*élan*” is not supposed to be affected by the vicissitudes of fortune, the industrial conditions of movie-making, the turmoil of a country, or the health of a director. Indeed, Sarris says, “If directors and other artists cannot be wrenched from their historical environments, aesthetics is reduced to a subordinate branch of ethnography.” May I suggest that if, in order to judge movies, the *auteur* critics must wrench the directors from their historical environments (which is, to put it mildly, impossible) so that they can concentrate on the detection of that “*élan*,” they are reducing aesthetics to a form of idiocy. *Élan* as the permanent attribute Sarris posits can only be explained in terms of a cult of personality. May I suggest that a more meaningful description of *élan* is what a man feels when he is working at the height of his powers — and what we respond to in works of art with the excited cry of “This time, he’s really done it” or “This shows what he could do when he got the chance” or “He’s found his style” or “I never realized he had it in him to do anything so good,” etc., a response to his joy in creativity.

Sarris experiences “joy” when he recognizes a pathetic little link between two Raoul Walsh pictures (he never does explain whether the discovery makes him think the pictures are any better) but he wants to see artists in a pristine state — their essences, perhaps? — separated from all the life that has formed them and to which they try to give expression.

“THE INNER CIRCLE”

“The third and ultimate premise of the *auteur* theory is concerned with interior meaning, the ultimate glory of the cinema as an art. Interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension between a director’s personality and his material.”

This is a remarkable formulation: it is the opposite of what we have always taken for granted in the arts, that the artist expresses himself in the unity of form and content. What Sarris believes to be “the ultimate glory of the cinema as an art” is what has generally been considered the frustrations of a man working against the given material. Fantastic as this formulation is, it does something that the first two premises didn’t do: it clarifies the interests of the *auteur* critics. If we have been puzzled because the *auteur* critics seemed so deeply involved, even dedicated, in becoming connoisseurs of trash, now we can see by this theoretical formulation that trash is indeed their chosen province of film.

Their ideal *auteur* is the man who signs a long-term contract, directs any script that’s handed to him, and expresses himself by showing bits of style up the crevasses of the plots. If his “style” is in conflict with the story line or subject matter, so much the better — more chance for tension. Now we can see why there has been so much use of the term “personality” in this aesthetics (the term which seems so inadequate when discussing the art of Griffith or Renoir or Murnau or Dreyer) — a routine, commercial movie can sure use a little “personality.”

Now that we have reached the inner circle (the bull’s eye turns out to be an empty socket) we can see why the shoddiest films are often

praised the most. Subject matter is irrelevant (so long as it isn't treated sensitively — which is bad) and will quickly be disposed of by *auteur* critics who know that the smart director isn't responsible for that anyway; they'll get on to the important subject — his *mise-en-scène*. The director who fights to do something he cares about is a square. Now we can at least begin to understand why there was such contempt toward Huston for what was, in its way, a rather extraordinary effort — the *Moby Dick* that failed; why *Movie* considers Roger Corman a better director than Fred Zinnemann and ranks Joseph Losey next to God, why Bogdanovich, Mekas, and Sarris give their highest critical ratings to *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (mighty big crevasses there). If Carol Reed had made only movies like *The Man Between* — in which he obviously worked to try to make something out of a rag-bag of worn-out bits of material — he might be considered “brilliant” too. (But this is doubtful: although even the worst Reed is superior to Aldrich's *Baby Jane*, Reed would probably be detected, and rejected, as a man interested in substance rather than sensationalism.)

I am angry, but am I unjust? Here's Sarris: “A Cukor who works with all sorts of projects has a more developed abstract style than a Bergman who is free to develop his own scripts. Not that Bergman lacks personality, but his work has declined with the depletion of his ideas largely because his technique never equaled his sensibility. Joseph L. Mankiewicz and Billy Wilder are other examples of writer-directors without adequate technical mastery. By contrast, Douglas Sirk and Otto Preminger have moved up the scale because their miscellaneous projects reveal a stylistic consistency.” How neat it all is—Bergman's “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 films. This is curiously reminiscent of a view common enough in the business world, that it's better not to get too involved, too personally interested in business problems, or they take over your life; and besides, you don't function as well when you've lost your objectivity. But this is the *opposite* of how an artist works. His technique, his *style*, is determined by his range of involvements, and his preference for certain themes. Cukor's style is no more *abstract* (!) than Bergman's: Cukor has a range of subject matter that he can handle and when he gets a good script within his range (like *The Philadelphia Story* or *Pat and Mike*) he does a good job; but he is at an immense *artistic* disadvantage, compared with Bergman, because he is dependent on the ideas of so many (and often bad) scriptwriters and on material which is often alien to his talents. It's amusing (and/or depressing) to see the way *auteur* critics tend to downgrade writer-directors — who are in the *best* position to use the film medium for personal expression.

Sarris does some pretty fast shuffling with Huston and Bergman; why doesn't he just come out and admit that writer-directors are disqualified by his third premise? They can't arrive at that “interior meaning, the ultimate glory of the cinema” because a writer-director has no tension between his personality and his material, so there's nothing for the *auteur* critic to extrapolate from.

What is all this nonsense about extrapolating “interior” meaning from the tension between a director's personality and his material? A competent commercial director generally does the best he can with what he's got to work with. Where is the “tension”? And if you can locate some, what kind of meaning could you draw out of it except that the director's having a bad time with lousy material or material he doesn't like? Or maybe he's trying to speed up the damned production so he can do something else that he has some *hopes* for? Are

these critics honestly (and futilely) looking for “interior meanings” or is this just some form of intellectual diddling that helps to sustain their pride while they’re viewing silly movies? Where is the tension in Howard Hawks’ films? When he has good material, he’s capable of better than good direction, as he demonstrates in films like *Twentieth Century*, *Bringing Up Baby*, *His Girl Friday*; and in *To Have and Have Not* and *The Big Sleep* he demonstrates that with help from the actors, he can jazz up ridiculous scripts. But what “interior meaning” can be extrapolated from an enjoyable, harmless, piece of kitsch like *Only Angels Have Wings*; what can the *auteur* critics see in it beyond the sex and glamor and fantasies of the high-school boys’ universe – exactly what the mass audience liked it for? And when Hawks’ material and/or cast is dull and when his heart isn’t in the production – when by the *auteur* theory he should show his “personality,” the result is something soggy like *The Big Sky*.

George Cukor’s modest statement, “Give me a good script and I’ll be a hundred times better as a director”^{*} provides some notion of how a director may experience the problem of the given material. What can Cukor do with a script like *The Chapman Report* but try to kid it, to dress it up a bit, to show off the talents of Jane Fonda and Claire Bloom and Glynis Johns, and to give the total production a little flair and craftsmanship. At best, he can make an entertaining bad movie. A director with something like magical gifts *can* make a silk purse

^{*}In another sense, it is perhaps immodest. I would say, give Cukor a clever script with light, witty dialogue, and he will know what to do with it. But I wouldn’t expect more than glossy entertainment. (It seems almost too obvious to mention it, but can Sarris really discern the “distinguishable personality” of George Cukor and his “abstract” style in films like *Bhowani Junction*, *Les Girls*, *The Actress*, *A Life of Her Own*, *The Model and the Marriage Broker*, *Edward, My Son*, *A Woman’s Face*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Double Life*? I wish I could put him to the test. I can only suspect that many *auteur* critics would have a hard time seeing those tell-tale traces of the beloved in their works.)

out of a sow’s ear. But if he has it in him to do more in life than make silk purses, the triumph is minor – even if the purse is lined with gold. Only by the use of the *auteur* theory does this little victory become “ultimate glory.” For some unexplained reason those travelling in *auteur* circles believe that making that purse out of a sow’s ear is an infinitely greater accomplishment than making a solid carrying case out of a good piece of leather (as, for example, a Zinnemann does with *From Here to Eternity* or *The Nun’s Story*).

I suppose we should be happy for Sirk and Preminger, elevated up the glory “scale,” but I suspect that the “stylistic consistency” of, say, Preminger, could be a matter of his *limitations*, and that the only way you could tell he made some of his movies was that he used the same players so often (Linda Darnell, Jeanne Crain, Gene Tierney, Dana Andrews, et al., gave his movies the Preminger look). But the argument is ludicrous anyway, because if Preminger shows stylistic consistency with subject matter as varied as *Carmen Jones*, *Anatomy of a Murder*, and *Advise and Consent*, then by any rational standards he should be attacked rather than elevated. I don’t think these films are stylistically consistent, nor do I think Preminger is a great director – for the very simple reason that his films are consistently superficial and facile. (*Advise and Consent*—an *auteur* “masterpiece” – Ian Cameron, Paul Mayersberg, and Mark Shivas of *Movie* and Jean Douchet of *Cahiers du Cinéma* rate it first on their ten best lists of 1962 and Sarris gives it his top rating—seems not so much Preminger-directed as other-directed. That is to say, it seems calculated to provide what as many different groups as possible want to see: there’s something for the liberals, something for the conservatives, something for the homosexuals, something for the family, etc.) An editorial in *Movie* states: “In order to enjoy Preminger’s films the spectator must apply an unprejudiced intelligence; he is constantly required to examine the quality not only of the characters’ decisions but also of his own reactions,” and “He presupposes an intelligence active enough to allow the specta-

tor to make connections, comparisons and judgments." May I suggest that this spectator would have better things to do than the editors of *Movie* who put out Preminger issues? They may have, of course, the joys of discovering links between *Centennial Summer*, *Forever Amber*, *That Lady in Ermine*, and *The Thirteenth Letter*, but I refuse to believe in these ever-so-intellectual protestations. The *auteur* critics aren't a very *convincing* group.

I assume that Sarris' theory is not based on his premises (the necessary causal relationships are absent), but rather that the premises were devised in a clumsy attempt to prop up the "theory." (It's a good thing he stopped at three: a few more circles and we'd really be in hell, which might turn out to be the last refinement of film tastes — Abbott and Costello comedies, perhaps?) These critics work em-

barrassingly hard trying to give some semblance of intellectual respectability to a preoccupation with mindless, repetitious commercial products — the kind of action movies that the restless, rootless men who wander on 42nd Street and in the Tenderloin of all our big cities have always preferred just because they could respond to them without thought. These movies soak up your time. I would suggest that they don't serve a very different function for Sarris or Bogdanovich or the young men of *Movie* — even though they devise elaborate theories to justify soaking up their time. An educated man must have to work pretty hard to set his intellectual horizons at the level of *I Was a Male War Bride* (which, incidentally, wasn't even a good *commercial* movie).

"Interior meaning" seems to be what those in the know know. It's a mystique — and a mistake. The *auteur* critics never tell us by what divining rods they have discovered the élan of a Minnelli or a Nicholas Ray or a Leo McCarey. They're not critics; they're inside dopesters. There must be another circle that Sarris forgot to get to — the one where the secrets are kept.

Long Live the—er—King

"*Two Weeks in Another Town* is without a doubt Minnelli's best film to date and perhaps the best thing he'll ever do, for never again will the coincidence arise of having a piece of 'respectable trash' like Shaw's novel, and a director who respects trash. The thing that makes *Two Weeks* great is not the acting (Douglas as per usual is horrendous; Robinson stupid, and Claire Trevor, faintly interesting). Certainly not the story, for the changes from the novel only make it more banal. It is the fact that Minnelli has taken something not fit for even the slightest bit of serious critical attention, and turned it into a film which demands exhaustive visual analysis on one level and offers a cinematic joy-ride on a more visceral level. . . . Most of all it is a movie which does not take itself seriously . . . full of beautiful shots and startlingly poetic moments, all of which would mean nothing unless placed in the context of Minnelli's background—a background that indicates, especially with *Two Weeks*, that Minnelli is fast challenging Douglas Sirk's title as Hollywood's 'King of Camp.'" —*New York Film Bulletin*, #45

OUTSIDE THE CIRCLES, or WHAT IS A FILM CRITIC?

I suspect that there's some primitive form of Platonism in the underbrush of Sarris' aesthetics.* He says, for example, that "Bazin's greatness as a critic . . . rested in his disinterested conception of the cinema as a universal entity." I don't know what a "universal entity" is, but I rather imagine Bazin's stature as a critic has less to do with "universals" than with intelligence, knowledge, experience, sensitivity, perceptions, fervor, imagination, dedication, lucidity, etc. — the traditional qualities asso-

*This might help to explain such rather quaint statements as: Bazin "was, if anything, generous to a fault, seeking in every film some vestige of the cinematic art"—as if cinema were not simply the movies that have been made and are being made, but some preëxistent entity. If Bazin thought in these terms, does Sarris go along with him?

ciated with great critics. The role of the critic is to help people see what is in the work, what is in it that shouldn't be, what is not in it that could be. He is a good critic if he helps people understand more about the work than they could see for themselves; he is a great critic, if by his understanding and feeling for the work, by his passion, he can excite people so that they want to experience more of the art that is there, waiting to be seized. He is not necessarily a bad critic if he makes errors in judgment. (Infallible taste is inconceivable; what could it be measured against?) He is a bad critic if he does not awaken the curiosity, enlarge the interests and understanding of his audience. The art of the critic is to transmit his knowledge of and enthusiasm for art to others.

I do not understand what goes on in the mind of a critic who thinks a *theory* is what his confrères need because they are not "great" critics. Any honest man can perform the critical function to the limits of his tastes and powers. I daresay that Bogdanovich and V. F. Perkins and Rudi Franchi and Mark Shivas and all the rest of the new breed of specialists know more about movies than some people and could serve at least a modest critical function if they could remember that art is an expression of human experience. If they are men of feeling and intelligence, isn't it time for them to be a little ashamed of their "detailed criticism" of movies like *River of No Return*?

I believe that we respond most and best to work in any art form (and to other experience as well) if we are pluralistic, flexible, relative in our judgments, if we are eclectic. But this does not mean a scrambling and confusion of systems. Eclecticism is not the same as lack of scruple; eclecticism is the selection of the best standards and principles from various systems of ideas. It requires more care, more orderliness to be a pluralist than to apply a single theory. Sarris, who thinks he is applying a single theory, is too undisciplined to recognize the conflicting implications of his arguments. If he means to take a Platonic position, then is it not necessary for him to tell us what

his ideals of movies are and how various examples of film live up to or fail to meet his ideals? And if there is an ideal to be achieved, an objective standard, then what does élan have to do with it? (The ideal could be achieved by plodding hard work or by inspiration or any other way; the method of achieving the ideal would be as irrelevant as the "personality" of the creator.) As Sarris uses them, vitalism and Platonism and pragmatism do not support his *auteur* theory; they undermine it.

Those, like Sarris, who ask for objective standards seem to want a theory of criticism which makes the critic unnecessary. And he is expendable if categories replace experience; a critic with a single theory is like a gardener who uses a lawn mower on everything that grows. Their desire for a theory that will solve all the riddles of creativity is in itself perhaps an indication of their narrowness and confusion; they're like those puzzled, lost people who inevitably approach one after a lecture and ask, "But what is your basis for judging a movie?" When one answers that new films are judged in terms of how they extend our experience and give us pleasure, and that our ways of judging how they do this are drawn not only from older films but from other works of art, and theories of art, that new films are generally related to what is going on in the other arts, that as wide a background as possible in literature, painting, music, philosophy, political thought, etc., helps, that it is the wealth and variety of what he has to bring to new works that makes the critic's reaction to them valuable, the questioners are always unsatisfied. They wanted a simple answer, a formula; if they approached a chef they would probably ask for the one magic recipe that could be followed in all cooking.

And it is very difficult to explain to such people that criticism is exciting just because there is no formula to apply, just because you must use everything you are and everything you know that is relevant, and that film criticism is particularly exciting just because of the multiplicity of elements in film art.

This range of experience, and dependence

on experience, is pitifully absent from the work of the *auteur* critics; they seem to view movies, not merely in isolation from the other arts, but in isolation even from their own experience. Those who become film specialists early in life are often fixated on the period of film during which they first began going to movies, so it's not too surprising that the *Movie* group — just out of college and some still in — are so devoted to the films of the 'forties and 'fifties. But if they don't widen their interests to include earlier work, how can they evaluate films in anything like their historical continuity, how can they perceive what is distinctive in films of the 'forties? And if they don't have interests outside films, how can they evaluate what goes on in films? Film aesthetics as a distinct, specialized field is a bad joke: the *Movie* group is like an intellectual club for the intellectually handicapped. And when is Sarris going to discover that aesthetics is indeed a branch of ethnography; what does he think it is — a sphere of its own, separate from the study of man in his environment?

SOME SPECULATIONS ON THE APPEAL OF THE AUTEUR THEORY

If relatively sound, reasonably reliable judgments were all that we wanted from film criticism, then *Sight and Sound* might be considered a great magazine. It isn't, it's something far less — a good, dull, informative, well-written, safe magazine, the best film magazine in English, but it doesn't satisfy desires for an excitement of the senses. Its critics don't often outrage us, neither do they open much up for us; its intellectual range is too narrow, its approach too professional. (If we recall an article or review, it's almost impossible to remember which Peter or which Derek wrote it.) Standards of quality are not enough, and *Sight and Sound* tends to dampen enthusiasm. *Movie*, by contrast, seems spirited: one feels that these writers do, at least, love movies, that they're not condescending. But they too, perhaps even more so, are indistinguishable read-alikes, united by fanaticism in a ludicrous cause; and for a group that discounts content

and story, that believes the director is the *auteur* of what gives the film value, they show an inexplicable fondness — almost an obsession — for detailing plot and quoting dialogue. With all the zeal of youth serving an ideal, they carefully reduce movies to trivia.

It is not merely that the *auteur* theory distorts experience (all theory does that, and helps us to see more sharply for having done so) but that it is an aesthetics which is fundamentally anti-art. And this, I think, is the most serious charge that can possibly be brought against an aesthetics. The *auteur* theory, which probably helped to liberate the energies of the French critics, plays a very different role in England and with the *Film Culture* and *New York Film Bulletin* *auteur* critics in the United States — an anti-intellectual, anti-art role.

The French *auteur* critics, rejecting the socially conscious, problem pictures so dear to the older generation of American critics, became connoisseurs of values in American pictures that Americans took for granted, and if they were educated Americans, often held in contempt. The French adored the American gangsters, and the vitality, the strength, of our action pictures — all those films in which a couple of tough men slug it out for a girl, after going through hell together in oil fields, or building a railroad, or blazing a trail. In one sense, the French were perfectly right — these were often much more skilfully made and far more interesting visually than the movies with a message which Americans were so proud of, considered so *adult*. Vulgar melodrama with a fast pace can be much more exciting — and more honest, too — than feeble, pretentious attempts at drama — which usually meant just putting "ideas" into melodrama, anyway. Where the French went off was in finding elaborate intellectual and psychological meanings in these simple action films. (No doubt we make some comparable mistakes in interpreting French films.)

Like most swings of the critical pendulum, the theory was a *corrective*, and it helped to remind us of the energies and crude strength and good humor that Europeans enjoyed in

our movies. The French saw something in our movies that their own movies lacked; they admired it, and to some degree, they have taken it over and used it in their own way (triumphantly in *Breathless* and *Shoot the Piano Player*, not very successfully in their semi-American thrillers). Our movies were a product of American industry, and in a sense, it was America itself that they loved in our movies — our last frontiers, our robber-barons, our naiveté, our violence, our efficiency and speed and technology, our bizarre combination of sentimentality and inhuman mechanization.

But for us, the situation is different. It is good for us to be reminded that our mass culture is not altogether poisonous in its effect on other countries, but what is appealingly exotic — “American” — for them is often intolerable for us. The freeways of cities like Los Angeles may seem mad and marvelous to a foreign visitor; to us they are the nightmares we spend our days in. The industrial products of Hollywood that we grew up on are not enough to satisfy our interests as adults. We want a great deal more from our movies than we get from the gangster carnage and the John Ford westerns that Europeans adore. I enjoy some movies by George Cukor and Howard Hawks but I wouldn't be much interested in the medium if that were all that movies could be. We see many elements in foreign films that *our* movies lack. We also see that our films have lost the beauty and innocence and individuality of the silent period, and the sparkle and wit of the 'thirties. There was no special reason for the French critics, preoccupied with *their* needs, to become sensitive to *ours*. And it was not surprising that, in France, where film directors work in circumstances more comparable to those of a dramatist or a composer, critics would become fixated on American directors — not understanding how confused and inextricable are the roles of the front office, the producers, writers, editors, and all the rest of them — even the marketing research consultants who may pretest the drawing powers of the story and stars — in Holly-

wood. For the French, the name of a director *was* a guide on what American films to see: if a director was associated with a certain type of film that they liked; or if a director's work showed the speed and efficiency that they enjoyed. I assume that anyone interested in movies uses the director's name as some sort of guide, both positive and negative, even though we recognize that at times he is little more than a stage manager. For example, in the 'forties, my friends and I would keep an eye out for the Robert Siodmak films and avoid Irving Rapper films (except when they starred Bette Davis whom we wanted to see even in bad movies); I avoid Mervyn LeRoy films (though I went to see *Home Before Dark* for Jean Simmons' performance); I wish I could avoid Peter Glenville's pictures but he uses actors I want to see. It's obvious that a director like Don Siegel or Phil Karlson does a better job with what he's got to work with than Peter Glenville, but that doesn't mean there's any pressing need to go see every tawdry little gangster picture Siegel or Karlson directs; and perhaps if they tackled more difficult subjects they wouldn't do a better job than Glenville. There is no rule or theory involved in any of this, just simple discrimination; we judge the man from his films and learn to predict a little about his next films, we don't judge the films from the man.

But what has happened to the judgment of the English and New York critics who have taken over the *auteur* theory and used it to erect a film aesthetics based on those commercial movies that answered a need for the French, but which are not merely ludicrously inadequate to our needs, but are the results of a system of production that places a hammerlock on American directors? And how can they, with straight faces, probe for deep meanings in these products? Even the kids they're made for know enough not to take them seriously. How can these critics, sensible enough to deflate our overblown message movies, reject the total content of a work as unimportant and concentrate on signs of a director's “personality” and “interior meaning”? It's understandable that

they're trying to find movie art in the loopholes of commercial production — it's a harmless hobby and we all play it now and then; what's incomprehensible is that they *prefer* their loopholes to unified film expression. If they weren't so determined to exalt products over works that attempt to express human experience, wouldn't they have figured out that the *mise-en-scène* which they seek out in these products, the director's personal style which comes through despite the material, is only a mere suggestion, a hint of what an artist can do when he's in control of the material, when the whole film becomes expressive? Isn't it obvious that *mise-en-scène* and subject material — form and content — can be judged separately only in bad movies or trivial ones? It must be black comedy for directors to read this new criticism and discover that films in which they felt trapped and disgusted are now said to be their masterpieces. It's an aesthetics for 1984: failure is success.

I am too far from the English scene to guess at motives, and far away also from New York, but perhaps close enough to guess that the Americans (consciously or unconsciously) are making a kind of social comment: like the pop artists, the New Realists with their comic strips and Campbell's Soup can paintings, they are saying, "See what America is, this junk is the fact of our lives. Art and avant-gardism are phony; what isn't any good, is good. Only squares believe in art. The artifacts of industrial civilization are the supreme truth, the supreme joke." This is a period when men who consider themselves creative scoff at art and tradition. It is perhaps no accident that in the same issue of *Film Culture* with Sarris' *auteur* theory there is a lavishly illustrated spread on "The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez" — a fairly close movie equivalent for that outsized can of Campbell's Soup. The editor, Jonas Mekas, has his kind of social comment. This is his approach to editing a film magazine: "As long as the 'lucidly minded' critics will stay out, with all their 'form,' 'content,' 'art,' 'structure,' 'clarity,' 'importance' — everything will be all right, just keep them out. For the new soul is still a bud, still going through its

most dangerous, most sensitive stage." Doesn't exactly make one feel welcome, does it? I'm sure I don't know what the problem is: are there so many "lucidly minded" critics in this country (like Andrew Sarris?) that they must be fought off? And aren't these little "buds" that have to be protected from critical judgments the same little film-makers who are so convinced of their importance that they can scarcely conceive of a five-minute film which doesn't end with what they, no doubt, regard as the ultimate social comment: the mushroom cloud rising. Those "buds" often behave more like tough nuts.

Sarris with his love of commercial trash and Mekas who writes of the "cul-de-sac of Western culture" which is "stifling the spiritual life of man" seem to have irreconcilable points of view. Sarris with his joys in Raoul Walsh seems a long way from Mekas, the spokesman for the "independent filmmakers" (who couldn't worm their way into Sarris' outer circle). Mekas makes statements like "The new artist, by directing his ear inward, is beginning to catch bits of man's true vision." (Dear Lon Chaney Mekas, please get your ear out of your eye. Mekas has at least one thing in common with good directors: he likes to dramatize.) But to love trash and to feel that you are stifled by it are perhaps very close positions. Does the man who paints the can of Campbell's Soup love it or hate it? I think the answer is both: that he is obsessed by it as a fact of our lives and a symbol of America. When Mekas announces, "I don't want any part of the Big Art Game" he comes even closer to Sarris. And doesn't the *auteur* theory fit nicely into the pages of an "independent filmmakers" journal when you consider that the work of those film-makers might compare very unfavorably with good films, but can look fairly interesting when compared with commercial products. It can even look original to those who don't know much film history. The "independent filmmakers," Lord knows, are already convinced about their importance as the creative figures—the *auteurs*; a theory which suggested the importance of writing to film art might seriously damage their

egos. They go even farther than the *auteur* critics' notion that the script is merely something to transcend: they often act as if anyone who's concerned with scripts is a square who doesn't dig film. (It's obvious, of course, that this aesthetic based on images and a contempt for words is a function of economics and technology, and that as soon as a cheap, lightweight 16mm camera with good synchronous sound gets on the market, the independent film-makers will develop a different aesthetic.)

The *auteur* theory, silly as it is, can nevertheless be a dangerous theory — not only because it constricts the experience of the critics who employ it, but because it offers nothing but commercial goals to the young artists who may be trying to do something in film. *Movie* with its celebration of Samuel Fuller's "brutality" and the Mackie Mekas who "knows that everything he has learned from his society about life and death is false" give readers more of a charge than they get from the limp pages of *Sight and Sound* and this journal. This is not intended to be a snide remark about *Sight and Sound* and *Film Quarterly*: if they are not more sensational, it is because they are attempting to be responsible, to hoard the treasures of our usable past. But they will be wiped off the cinema landscape, if they can't meet the blasts of anti-art with some fire of their own.

The union of Mekas and Sarris may be merely a marriage of convenience; but if it is strong enough to withstand Sarris' "Hello and Goodbye to the New American Cinema" (in *The Village Voice*, September 20, 1962), perhaps the explanation lies in the many shared attitudes of the Mekas group and the *auteur* critics. Neither group, for example, is interested in a balanced view of a film; Mekas says he doesn't believe in "negative criticism" and the *auteur* critics (just like our grammar school teachers) conceive of a review as "an appreciation." The directors they reject are so far beyond the pale that their films are not even considered worth discussion. (Sarris who distributes zero ratings impartially to films as varied as *Yojimbo*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, and *Billy Budd* could hardly be expected to

take time off from his devotional exercises with Raoul Walsh to explain why these films are worthless.) Sarris, too, can resort to the language of the hipster — "What is it the old jazz man says of his art? If you gotta ask what it is, it ain't? Well, the cinema is like that." This is right at home in *Film Culture*, although Sarris (to his everlasting credit) doesn't employ the accusatory, paranoid style of Mekas: "You criticize our work from a purist, formalistic and classicist point of view. But we say to you: What's the use of cinema if man's soul goes rotten?" The "you" is, I suppose, the same you who figures in so much (bad) contemporary prophetic, righteous poetry and prose, the "you" who is responsible for the Bomb and who, by some fantastically self-indulgent thought processes, is turned into the enemy, the *critic*. Mekas, the childlike, innocent, pure Mekas, is not about to be caught by "the tightening web of lies"; he refuses "to continue the Big Lie of Culture." I'm sure that, in this scheme, any attempt at clear thinking immediately places us in the enemy camp, turns us

Beware of the Bull-Dozers . . .

"Granted that one must be 'committed' to Welles to even like *Arkadin*, but once one has made the commitment, there is no choice but to call it a masterpiece."

—*New York Film Bulletin*, #45

into the bomb-guilty "you," and I am forced to conclude that Mekas is not altogether wrong — that if we believe in the necessity (not to mention the beauty) of clear thinking, we are indeed his enemy. I don't know how it's possible for anyone to criticize his work from a "purist, formalistic and classicist point of view" — the method would be too far from the object; but can't we ask Mekas: is man's soul going to be in better shape because your work is protected from criticism? How much nonsense dare these men permit themselves? When Sarris tells us, "If the *auteur* critics of the Fifties had not scored so many coups of clairvoyance,

the *auteur* theory would not be worth discussing in the Sixties," does he mean any more than that he has taken over the fiat of the *auteur* critics in the 'fifties and goes on applying them in the 'sixties? Does he seriously regard his own Minnelli-worship as some sort of objective verification of the critics who praised Minnelli in the 'fifties? If that's his concept of critical method, he might just as well join forces with other writers in *Film Culture*. In addition to Mekas ("Poets are surrounding America, flanking it from all sides,") there is, for example, Ron Rice: "And the beautiful part about it all is that you can, my dear critics, scream protest to the skies, you're too late. The Musicians, Painters, Writers, Poets and Film-Makers all fly in the same sky, and know Exactly where It's 'AT'." Rice knows where he's at about as much as Stan Brakhage who says, "So the money vendors have begun it again. To the catacombs then..." In the pages of *Film Culture* they escape from the money changers in Jerusalem by going to the catacombs in Rome. "Forget ideology," Brakhage tells us, "for film unborn as it is has no language and speaks like an aborigine." We're all familiar with Brakhage's passion for obstetrics, but does being a primitive man mean being a foetus? I don't understand that unborn aborigine talk, but I'm prepared to believe that grunt by grunt, or squeal by squeal, it will be as meaningful as most of *Film Culture*. I am also prepared to believe that for Jonas Mekas, culture is a "Big Lie." And Sarris, looking for another culture under those seats coated with chewing gum, coming up now and then to announce a "discovery" like Joanne Dru, has he found his spiritual home down there?

Isn't the anti-art attitude of the *auteur* critics both in England and here, implicit also in their peculiar emphasis on virility? (Walsh is, for Sarris, "one of the screen's most virile directors." In *Movie* we discover: "When one talks about the heroes of *Red River*, or *Rio Bravo*, or *Hatari!* one is talking about Hawks himself. . . . Finally everything that can be said in presenting Hawks boils down to one simple state-

ment: here is a man.") I don't think critics would use terms like "virile" or "masculine" to describe artists like Dreyer or Renoir; there is something too *limited* about describing them this way (just as when we describe a woman as sensitive and feminine, we are indicating her *special* nature). We might describe Kipling as a virile writer but who would think of calling Shakespeare a virile writer? But for the *auteur* critics calling a director virile is the highest praise because, I suggest, it is some kind of assurance that he is not trying to express himself in an art form, but treats movie-making as a professional job. (*Movie*: Hawks "makes the very best adventure films because he is at one with his heroes. . . . Only Raoul Walsh is as deeply an adventurer as Hawks. . . . Hawks' heroes are all professionals doing jobs — scientists, sheriffs, cattlemen, big game hunters: real professionals who know their capabilities. . . . They know exactly what they can do with the available resources, expecting of others only what they know can be given.") The *auteur* critics are so enthralled with their narcissistic male fantasies (*Movie*: "Because Hawks' films and their heroes are so genuinely mature, they don't need to announce the fact for all to hear") 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 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.

