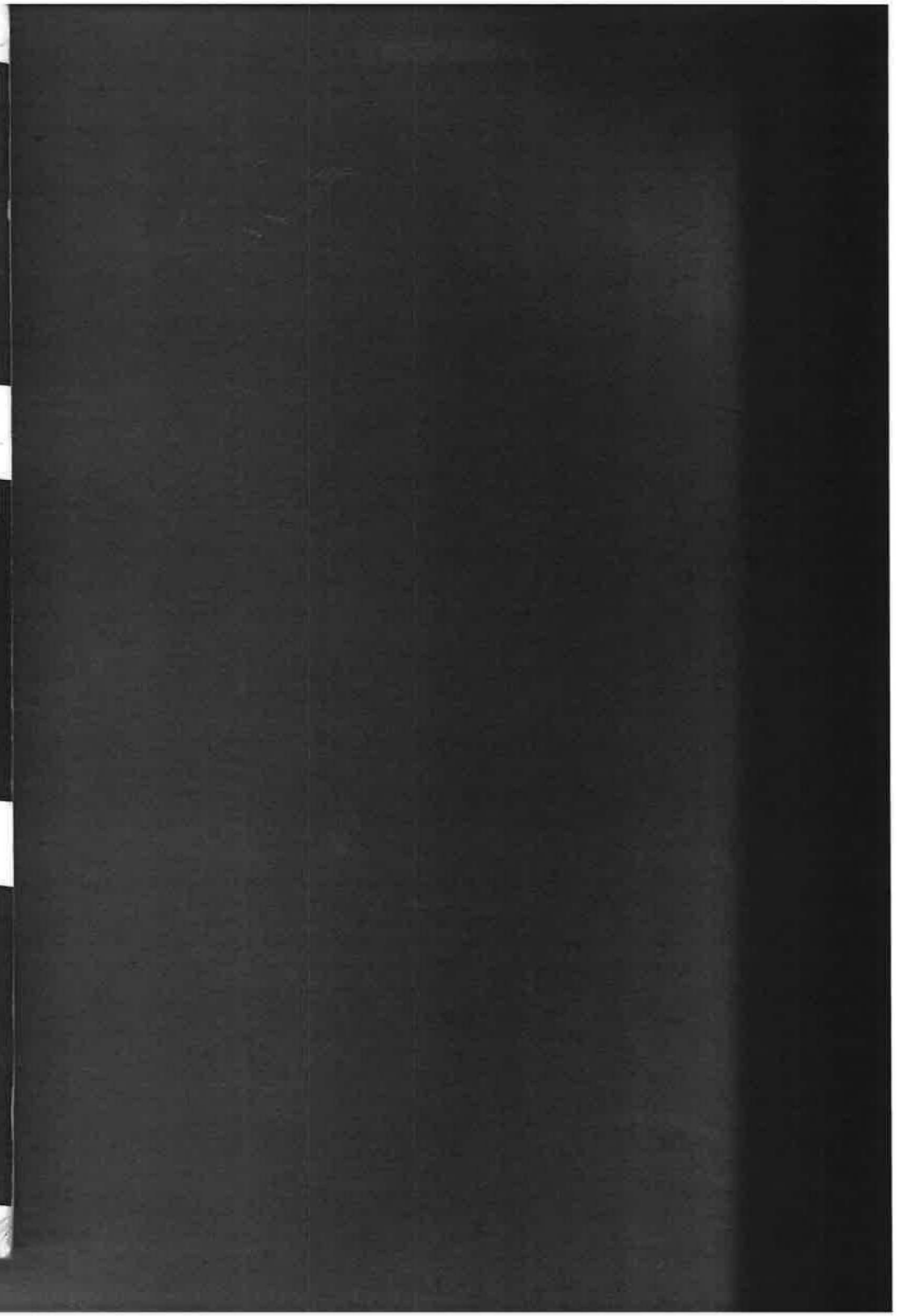
The American Cinema

Directors and Directions 1929–1968

ANDREW SARRIS



TOWARD A THEORY OF FILM HISTORY

I. The Forest and the Trees

The cinema by any definition is still very young, but it is already old enough to claim not only its own history but its own archaeology as well. The earliest artifacts have been traced back to the 1880's and 1890's in the United States, France, or England, depending on the nationality of the archaeologist. Conflicting proofs and patents of invention have been submitted for Thomas A. Edison, William Kennedy Laurie Dickson, William Friese-Greene, Louis Aimé Augustin Le Prince, Louis and Auguste Lumière, and many other shadowy figures out of the nineteenth-century camera obscura of art, science, and capitalism.

To the extent that the cinema is a creature of the scientific spirit, it has inherited expectations of infinite development and improvement. It is as if this machine art were designed to transcend the vagaries of human inspiration. A Shakespeare may appear once in a millennium, but the express train of twentieth-century history cannot wait a century or even a decade for the world to be remade from the moonbeams of a movie projector. Too much was expected of the medium, and too little was demanded of its scholars. The extravagant rhetoric of disillusionment obscured the incredibly perfunctory attention given to thousands upon thousands of movies. Therefore the first task of a theory of film history is to establish the existence of these thousands of movies as a meaningful condition of the medium.

Even though most movies are only marginally concerned with the art of the cinema, the notion of quality is difficult to grasp apart from the context of quantity. Comprehension becomes a function of comprehensiveness. As more movies are seen, more cross-references are assembled. Fractional responsibilities are more precisely defined; personal signatures are more clearly discerned.

It follows that comprehensive film scholarship from primary sources depends for its motivation upon a pleasurable response

to the very act of moviegoing. Conversely, the compleat film historian must be recruited from the ranks of the authentic moviegoers rather than the slummers from the other arts. Not that an uncritical enthusiasm for movies is desirable in our chronicler. Film history devoid of value judgments would degenerate into a hobby like bridge or stamp collecting, respectable in its esoteric way, but not too revelatory. Or, as has been more the fashion, the collectivity of movies could be clustered around an idea, usually a sociological idea befitting the mindlessness of a mass medium.

The trouble up to now has been not seeing the trees for the forest. But why should anyone look at thousands of trees if the forest itself be deemed aesthetically objectionable? Of course, the forest to which I refer is called Hollywood, a pejorative catchword for vulgar illusionism. Hollywood is a foresty word rather than a treesy word. It connotes conformity rather than diversity, repetition rather than variation. The condescending forest critic confirms his preconceptions by identifying those elements that Hollywood movies have in common. Thus he also justifies his random sampling of Hollywood's output. If you've seen one, you've seen 'em all. And if you've seen a few, you certainly don't need to see them all. Hence the incessant carping on Hollywood "clichés:" Boy Meets Girl. The Happy Ending. The Noble Sacrifice. The Sanctity of Marriage. The Gangster Gets His Just Deserts. The Cowboy Outdraws the Villain. Girl and Boy Feel a Song Coming On. Presumably if you've laughed at one such convention, you've laughed at them all.

There is no denying that Hollywood movies emerge through a maze of conventions. Pressures from the studio, the censor, and the public have left their mark on film history. There is no artistic justification for the handcuffing of Burgess Meredith's George after he has mercifully shot the Lennie of Lon Chaney, Jr., in *Of Mice and Men*. Nor for the arrest of Gale Sondergaard at the end of *The Letter*. Nor for the mysterious going-away tears shed by Carole Lombard's Amy in *They Knew What They Wanted*. The citations of censor-dictated punishments of crime and sin could take up volumes and volumes. Hollywood movies have been hobbled also by front-office interference and a Scribean script policy that decreed the simplest, singlest, and most vulgar motivations for characters.

But the forest critic is not concerned with particulars. It is the system that he despises. It is the system that he blames for betraying the cinema. This curious feeling of betrayal dominates most forest histories to the point of paranoia. Somewhere on the western shores of the United States, a group of men have gathered to rob the cinema of its birthright. If the forest critic be politically oriented, he will describe these coastal conspirators as capitalists. If aesthetically oriented, he will describe them as philistines. Either way, an entity called the cinema has been betrayed by another entity called Hollywood. It is hard to find a parallel to this stern attitude in any of the other arts. A bad novel is not reviewed as if the author and publisher had betrayed literature. A bad painting is not castigated for disgracing the medium that produced Poussin and Delacroix. Perhaps the closest parallel can be found in certain critical attitudes toward the type of play performed on Broadway, London's West End, and the Parisian boulevards. The factor shared by theatre and cinema in this regard is the possession of buildings in which the public gathers to watch plays or films as the particular edifice complex dictates. The forest critic cannot help wondering what would happen if these buildings were consecrated to what he considers to be genuine art. What he seeks is the union of crowd spectacle with coterie taste. His generally liberal leanings convince him that the masses can indeed be saved from their own vulgarities.

The forest critic is not entirely lacking in historical proofs of betrayal. An unimpeachable witness such as George Stevens has testified: "When the movie industry was young, the film-maker was its core and the man who handled the business details his partner. . . . When he finally looked around, he found his partner's name on the door. Thus the film-maker became the employee, and the man who had the time to attend to the business details became the head of the studio." The so-called system can be blamed for the blighted careers of D. W. Griffith, Josef von Sternberg, Orson Welles, Erich von Stroheim, and Buster Keaton, and for the creative frustrations of innumerable other directors. The problem with these examples is that in most instances the forest critics repudiated the afflicted directors long before the industry curtailed their careers. Forest critics have never championed individuality for its own sake. A Griffith has

been denounced for not keeping up with the times. A Sternberg has been condemned for his preoccupation with eroticism. A Welles has been flayed for his flamboyant egotism. The principle of the forest has been upheld at the expense of the topmost trees, and this is indeed the supreme irony of forest criticism. Far from welcoming diversity, the forest critic seeks a new uniformity. He would have Hollywood march off en masse like Birnam Wood to whatever Dunsinane the forest critic desires. Instead of one version of *The Grapes of Wrath,* there would be three hundred. Instead of one biography of Émile Zola, there would be a thousand critiques of anti-Semitism throughout the ages. Every movie would deal Realistically with a Problem in Adult Terms, or employ the Materials of the Medium in a Creative Manner. Thus the goals of forest criticism are ultimately impersonal. If John Ford decides to make a thirties adventure movie like *Seven Women* in the sixties, he is hopelessly out of step with cinemah. Similarly Charles Chaplin's *Countess from Hong Kong,* Orson Welles's *Falstaff,* and Howard Hawks's *El Dorado* are not synchronized with the express train of history. The medium marches on at its own pace. It is impervious to the melancholy twilight periods of its greatest artists.

The forest critic has had recourse to other snobberies over the years, and brief rebuttals to the battle cries of foreign "art" films, documentary, and the avant-garde might be in order at this point. In fact, the same careless arguments are heard today. The same rebuttals obviously apply.

THE FOREIGN FILM IS BETTER: The first serious cults of the foreign film sprang up in the twenties around the German and Russian cinemas, notable respectively for expressive camera mobility and revolutionary theories of montage. The giants of this era were Murnau, Lang, and Pabst in Germany, and Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Dovjenko in Russia. The French cinema of Renoir, Vigo, Becker, Cocteau, Pagnol, Duvivier, Carné, Feyder, and Autant-Lara attracted some cultists in the thirties and early forties. The Italian neorealism of Rossellini, Visconti, and De Sica dominated the late forties and early fifties. The current line of the xenophiles among American critics is less localized. Hollywood's alleged betters may be found in Sweden (Ingmar Bergman), Denmark (Carl Dreyer), Japan (Mizoguchi, Kurosawa, Ozu), India (Satyajit Ray), Poland (Has, Polanski, Skolimowski, Wajda), not to mention the familiar hunting grounds of France, Italy, and England. Film for film, Hollywood can hold its own with the rest of the world. If there have been more individualized works from abroad, there have also been fewer competent ones. If Hollywood yields a bit at the very summit, it completely dominates the middle ranges, particularly in the realm of "good-bad" movies and genres. Invidious comparisons are inevitable to some extent because of the arithmetic of distribution. Since a lower percentage of foreign films are available in America, indiscriminate viewing of Hollywood movies leads to an unscientific sampling of merit. Language barriers and the sheer exoticism of the unknown contribute to critical distortions. By the same token, American movies are often overrated abroad.

DOCUMENTARY FILMS ARE MORE REALISTIC THAN FICTIONAL MOVIES, HENCE MORALLY AND AESTHETICALLY SUPERIOR: One might just as well say that books of nonfiction are more truthful than novels. A great deal of semantic confusion is caused here by the duality of the cinema as a recording medium like the printing press, phonography, radio, lithography, and television, and as an art form.

AVANT-GARDE FILMS POINT THE WAY FOR COMMERCIAL MOVIES: It is difficult to think of any technical or stylistic innovations contributed by the avant-garde. Avant-garde critics and film-makers have had to be dragged screaming into the eras of sound, color, and wide-screen. Avant-garde impulses seem to be channeled toward the shattering of content taboos, political, religious, and sexual. Luis Buñuel and René Clair have come out of the avant-garde, and some think that Cocteau never left it, but few avant-garde mannerisms stand for long the withering gaze of the camera.

Though the forest critic may still point to foreign "art" films, the documentary, and the avant-garde, he knows full well that the masses he wants to save are enthralled more by ordinary movies than by lofty cinema. He himself is fascinated by the vulgar spectacles he deplores in his scholarly treatises, and in his fascination is the secret of his yearning. If the stupidities on the screen can stir even his own refined sensibilities, what ecstasies

would he not experience if the dream mechanism were controlled by tastes comparable to his own? Greta Garbo edited by the *Partisan Review,* and all that. The forest critic cannot admit even to himself that he is beguiled by the same vulgarity his mother enjoys in the Bronx. He conceals his shame with such cultural defense mechanisms as pop, camp, and trivia, but he continues to sneak into movie houses like a man of substance visiting a painted woman. If he understood all the consequences involved, he would not want movies liberated from their vulgar mission. He appreciates the fact that always and everywhere there were temples of temptation dedicated to the kind of furtive pleasure that was mercifully free from the stink of culture. Nonetheless his intellectual guilt compels him to deny serious purpose and individual artistry to the mass spectacles he has been educated to despise.

The forest critic makes the mistake of crediting the power of the medium for making a "bad" movie seem entertaining. He overlooks the collectivity of creation in which "good" and "bad" can co-exist. Greta Garbo is genuinely "good" in *Camille* and Robert Taylor is genuinely "bad." George Cukor's direction of Garbo is extraordinary, but his direction of Laura Hope Crews is much too broad. In that same year (1937) Ernst Lubitsch obtained a restrained performance from Miss Crews in *Angel.* Thus our notions of "good" and "bad" are cast adrift in a sea of relativity. The collectivity that makes the cinema the least personal of all the arts also redeems most movies from complete worthlessness. But collectivity is not necessarily impersonality. Collectivity may just as easily be a collection of distinctive individualities. Ideally the strongest personality should be the director, and it is when the director dominates the film that the cinema comes closest to reflecting the personality of a single artist. A film history could reasonably limit itself to a history of film directors. It would certainly be a good start toward a comprehensive film history, but it would hardly explain everything to be found in thousands of movies. Nor is there any theory that would explain everything for all time. The performances of Humphrey Bogart, for example, seem more meaningful today than they did in their own time. By contrast, the image of Greer Garson has faded badly.

Film history is both films *in* history and the history of films.

The forest critic tends to emphasize the first approach at the expense of the second. He treats the movies of the thirties as responses to the Great Depression. By this criterion, few movies met their responsibilities to the oppressed and the underprivileged. For every *I Was a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* and *Our Daily Bread,* there were a score of "Thou Swell" romances in which money was no object. Yet the escapism of the thirties was as much a reflection of the Great Depression as any topical film on unemployment. The most interesting films of the forties were completely unrelated to the War and the Peace that followed. Throughout the sound era, the forest critic has been singling out the timely films and letting the timeless ones fall by the wayside. Unfortunately, nothing dates faster than timeliness. Hence the need for perpetual revaluation.

The theory of film history toward which this book is directed aims at nothing more than taking the moviegoer out of the forest and into the trees. The thousands of sound films in the English language exist for their own sake and under their own conditions. They constitute their own history, be it sublime or ridiculous or, as is more likely, a mixture of both. This particular study will start at the top with the bundles of movies credited to the most important directors, and work downward, director by director, movie by movie, year by year, toward a survey of what was best in American sound movies between 1929 and 1966. This survey is obviously a labor of love beyond the boundaries of art. The movies have been their own justification. Piece by piece, scene by scene, moment by moment, they have paralleled my own life. I was born in the midst of the convulsions over sound. I grew up with the talkies. Film history constitutes a very significant portion of my emotional autobiography. Fortunately, the resources of archives, television, museums, and revival houses make it possible to reappraise nostalgic memories in the clear, cold light of retrospection. Old movies come out of their historical contexts, but they must be judged ultimately in the realm of now.

II. The Auteur Theory

I first employed the term "auteur theory" in an article entitled "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962" (*Film Culture* No. 27, Winter 1962–63). The article was written in what I

thought was a modest, tentative, experimental manner. It was certainly not intended as the last word on the subject. Indeed, it invited debate in a dialectical spirit of pooled scholarship, though without much hope of attracting attention in a publication with a readership of less than ten thousand. I had been writing articles in *Film Culture* for seven years without fueling any fires of controversy, but on this occasion a spark was ignited in far-off San Francisco by a lady critic with a lively sense of outrage. As often happens, the attack on the theory received more publicity than the theory itself. Unfortunately, the American attacks on the auteur theory only confirmed the backward provincialism of American film criticism. Not that the auteur theory is beyond criticism. Far from it. What is beyond criticism is the historical curiosity required to discuss any critical theory on film. A character in Bernardo Bertolucci's *Before the Revolution* observes that you can argue only with those with whom you are in fundamental agreement. "Let us polemicize," a Polish critic once wrote me. The affectionate aggressiveness of this attitude demands a modicum of mutual respect and a tradition of scholarly community sadly lacking in American film criticism.

First of all, the auteur theory, at least as I understand it and now intend to reaffirm it, claims neither the gift of prophecy nor the option of extracinematic perception. Directors, writers, actors (even critics) do not always run true to form, and the critic can never assume that a bad director will always make a bad film. No, not always, but almost always, and that is the point. What is a bad director but a director who has made many bad films? Hence, the auteur theory is a theory of film history rather than film prophecy. Of the directors listed in this book's Pantheon, Flaherty, Griffith, Keaton, Lubitsch, Murnau, and Ophuls are dead. Lang, Renoir, and Sternberg are involuntarily inactive, Chaplin, Ford, and Welles involuntarily intermittent. Only Hawks and Hitchcock of this group still enjoy reasonable commercial viability as they pass into their seventies, but it is difficult to imagine that their ultimate critical standing will be at stake in the next few seasons. Auteur criticism has been accused of sentimentality toward old directors. In Hollywood, particularly, you're only as good as your last picture, and no one in that

power-oriented micropolis wants to waste time on has-beens. Since auteur criticism is based on an awareness of the past, it finds the work of old directors rich in associations. Not the work of all old directors, however. William Wellman, Henry King, and Frank Lloyd are not without their defenders, but the sum totals of their careers reveal more debits than credits. The ranking of directors is based on total rather than occasional achievement.

But why rank directors at all? Why all the categories and lists and assorted drudgeries? One reason is to establish a system of priorities for the film student. Another is the absence of the most elementary academic tradition in cinema. The drudgeries in the other, older, arts are performed by professional drudges. Film scholarship remains largely an amateur undertaking. In America especially, a film historian must double as a drudge. The rankings, categories, and lists establish first of all the existence of my subject and then my attitude toward it. "Taste," Paul Valéry remarked, "is made of a thousand distastes." François Truffaut's *Politique des auteurs,* first promulgated in the *Cahiers du Cinéma* No. 31 of January 1954, can be credited (or blamed) for the polemical stance of the term "auteur."

Politique des auteurs referred originally to the policy at *Cahiers* to be for some directors and against others. For Truffaut, the best film of Delannoy was less interesting than the worst film of Renoir. This was an extreme example of the *politique* in action. It served as a shock statement for the criticism of cruelty. The term "auteur" is more perplexing, as I should be the first to recognize after all the controversies the term has caused me. Strictly speaking, "auteur" means "author," and should be so translated when the reference is to literary personalities. When Truffaut writes of Gide or Giraudoux, and refers to them incidentally as "auteurs," there is no special point being made, and "author" is both an adequate and accurate translation. It is another matter entirely when Truffaut describes Hitchcock and Hawks as "auteurs." "Author" is neither adequate nor accurate as a translation into English mainly because of the inherent literary bias of the Anglo-American cultural Establishment. In terms of this bias, Ingmar Bergman did not become an author until his screenplays were published in cold print. The notion that a non-

literary director can be the author of his films is difficult to grasp in America. Since most American film critics are either literary or journalistic types with no aspirations or even fantasies of becoming film directors, the so-called auteur theory has had rough sledding indeed. Truffaut's greatest heresy, however, was not in his ennobling direction as a form of creation, but in his ascribing authorship to Hollywood directors hitherto tagged with the deadly epithets of commercialism. This was Truffaut's major contribution to the anti-Establishment ferment in England and America.

However, Truffaut cannot be considered a systematic historian of the American cinema. Nor a comrade in arms for Anglo-American auteurists and New Critics. Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol, Rohmer, Rivette, and other *Cahiers* critics may have stimulated the Anglo-American New Criticism into being, but they did not long sustain its heresies. Of course, even *Cahiers* criticism was never so monolithic as its more vulgar American antagonists supposed. Nor were (or are) all French critics and periodicals camped under the *Cahiers* standard. Nor does the *nouvelle vague* constitute a continuing advertisement for auteur criticism. The critics of each country must fight their own battles within their own cultures, and no self-respecting American film historian should ever accept Paris as the final authority on the American cinema.

If Truffaut's "Politique des auteurs" signaled a break with anything, it was with a certain segment of the French cinema that was dominated (in Truffaut's view) by a handful of scriptwriters. The target was the well-upholstered, well-acted, carefully motivated "Tradition of Quality" represented by Claude Autant-Lara, Marcel Carné, René Clair, René Clément, Henri Clouzot, André Cayatte, Jean Delannoy, Marcel Pagliero, and a host of even lesser figures. This "Old Guard" was responsible for films like *Devil in the Flesh, The Red and the Black, Forbidden Games, Gervaise, Wages of Fear, Diabolique, Justice Is Done,* and *Symphonie Pastorale,* in short, what American reviewers considered the class of French film-making into the late fifties. Against these alleged creatures of fashion, Truffaut counterposed Jean Renoir, Max Ophuls, Robert Bresson, Jacques Becker, Jean Cocteau, and Jacques Tati as authentic auteurs.

Truffaut was involved in nothing less than changing the course of the French cinema. His bitterest quarrels were with filmmakers, whereas the bitterest quarrels of the New Critics in England and America were with other critics. Truffaut's critical antagonists in Paris were generally not guilty of condescending to the American cinema. The editors of *Positif* may have preferred Huston to Hitchcock, and the MacMahonists may have preferred Losey to Hawks, but no faction had to apologize for its serious analyses of American movies. Even the French Marxists denounced the more capitalistic output from Hollywood in intellectually respectful terms. Long before the giddy rationalizations of pop, camp, and trivia, French critics were capable of discussing such lowbrow genres as Westerns and *policiers* with a straight face. The fact that many French critics had small English and less American actually aided them in discerning the visual components of a director's style.

Nevertheless a certain perversity in Truffaut's position still haunts the auteur theory and the New Criticism. Truffaut used American movies as a club against certain snobbish tendencies in the French cinema. This suggests the classic highbrow gambit of elevating lowbrow art at the expense of middle-brow art. Auteur critics are particularly vulnerable to the charge of preferring trash to art because they seek out movies in the limbo of cultural disrepute. An anti-auteur critic can score points simply by citing the titles of alleged auteur masterpieces. Without having seen the films, is anyone likely to believe that *Kiss Me Deadly* is more profound than *Marty,* that *Seven Men from Now* is more artistically expressive than *Moby Dick,* that *Baby Face Nelson* is more emotionally effective than *The Bridge on the River Kwai,* that *Bitter Victory* is more psychologically incisive than *The Defiant Ones,* that *Rio Bravo* is more morally committed than *The Nun's Story,* that *Gun Crazy* will outlive *The Heiress* or that *Psycho* will be admired long after *A Man for All Seasons* has been forgotten? Again, these propositions cannot be seriously debated. One kind of critic refuses to cope with a world in which a movie called *Baby Face Nelson* could possibly be superior to *The Bridge on the River Kwai.* The other kind of critic refuses to believe that a movie called *Baby Face Nelson* could possibly be less interesting than *The Bridge on the River Kwai.* One of the

fundamental correlations in auteur criticism is that between neglected directors and neglected genres. To resurrect Ford and Hawks, it is necessary also to resurrect the Western. To take Minnelli seriously, it is necessary to take musicals seriously. However, auteur criticism is quite distinct from genre criticism. Genre criticism of the Western, for example, presupposes an ideal form for the genre. Directors may deviate from this form, but only at their own peril. The late Robert Warshow's celebrated essay on the Western described how a variety of directors failed to achieve Warshow's idealized archetype of the genre. By contrast, auteur criticism of the Western treats the genre as one more condition of creation.

Ultimately, the auteur theory is not so much a theory as an attitude, a table of values that converts film history into directorial autobiography. The auteur critic is obsessed with the wholeness of art and the artist. He looks at a film as a whole, a director as a whole. The parts, however entertaining individually, must cohere meaningfully. This meaningful coherence is more likely when the director dominates the proceedings with skill and purpose. How often has this directorial domination been permitted in Hollywood? By the most exalted European standards, not nearly enough. Studio domination in the thirties and forties was the rule rather than the exception, and few directors had the right of final cut. Educated Americans were brought up on the jaundiced Hollywood chronicles of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Nathanael West, John Dos Passos, Ring Lardner, and John O'Hara. The vulgar but vital producer-entrepreneur was the sun king in these sagas, and sensitive literary types were left out in the shade. In retrospect, however, the studio system victimized the screenwriter more than the director. It was not merely a question of too many scribes spoiling the script, although most studios deliberately assigned more than one writer to a film to eliminate personal idiosyncrasies, whereas the director almost invariably received sole credit for direction regardless of the studio influences behind the scenes. This symbol of authority was not entirely lacking in substance even in Hollywood, or perhaps especially in Hollywood where the intangibles of prestige loom large. There were (and are) weak and strong directors as there were weak and strong kings, but film history, like royal history, concerns those who merely reign as well as those who actually rule. Indeed, the strength of a John Ford is a function of the weakness of a Robert Z. Leonard just as the strength of a Louis XIV is a function of the weakness of a Louis XVI. The strong director imposes his own personality on a film; the weak director allows the personalities of others to run rampant. But a movie is a movie, and if by chance Robert Z. Leonard should reign over a respectable production like *Pride and Prejudice,* its merits are found elsewhere than in the director's personality, let us say in Jane Austen, Aldous Huxley, Laurence Olivier, Greer Garson, and a certain tradition of gentility at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Obviously, the auteur theory cannot possibly cover every vagrant charm of the cinema. Nonetheless, the listing of films by directors remains the most reliable index of quality available to us short of the microscopic evaluation of every film ever made.

Even the vaunted vulgarity of the movie moguls worked in favor of the director at the expense of the writer. A producer was more likely to tamper with a story line than with a visual style. Producers, like most people, understood plots in literary rather than cinematic terms. The so-called "big" pictures were particularly vulnerable to front-office interference, and that is why the relatively conventional genres offer such a high percentage of sleepers. The culturally ambitious producer usually disdained genre films, and the fancy dude writers from the East were seldom wasted on such enterprises. The auteur theory values the personality of a director precisely because of the barriers to its expression. It is as if a few brave spirits had managed to overcome the gravitational pull of the mass of movies. The fascination of Hollywood movies lies in their performance under pressure. Actually, no artist is ever completely free, and art does not necessarily thrive as it becomes less constrained. Freedom is desirable for its own sake, but it is hardly an aesthetic prescription.

However, the auteur critic does not look to the cinema for completely original artistic experiences. The cinema is both a window and a mirror. The window looks out on the real world both directly (documentation) and vicariously (adaptation). The mirror reflects what the director (or other dominant artist) feels about the spectacle. Modern cinema tends to fog up the window in order to brighten the reflection. It would seem that a theory

that honored the personality of a director would endorse a cinema in which a director's personality was unquestionably supreme. Paradoxically, however, the personalities of modern directors are often more obscure than those of classical directors who were encumbered with all sorts of narrative and dramatic machinery. The classical cinema was more functional than the modern cinema. It knew its audience and their expectations, but it often provided something extra. This something extra is the concern of the auteur theory.

The auteur theory derives its rationale from the fact that the cinema could not be a completely personal art under even the best of conditions. The purity of personal expression is a myth of the textbooks. The camera is so efficient a manufacturer of "poetic" images that even a well-trained chimpanzee can pass as a "film poet." For all its viciousness and vulgarity, the Hollywood system imposed a useful discipline on its directors. The limited talents of a Gregory La Cava could be focused on an exquisite department-store-window whimsy involving Claudette Colbert and a family of mannequins. The genre expectations of *She Married Her Boss* took care of the rest of the movie, but in those few moments in the department-store window, the La Cava touch was immortalized as a figure of style.

Nonetheless the auteur theory should not be defended too strenuously in terms of the predilections of this or that auteur critic. Unfortunately, some critics have embraced the auteur theory as a shortcut to film scholarship. With a "you-see-it-or-you-don't" attitude toward the reader, the particularly lazy auteur critic can save himself the drudgery of communication and explanation. Indeed, at their worst, auteur critiques are less meaningful than the straightforward plot reviews that pass for criticism in America. Without the necessary research and analysis, the auteur theory can degenerate into the kind of snobbish racket that is associated with the merchandizing of paintings. The burden of proof remains with the critic, auteur-oriented or otherwise, and no instant recipes of aesthetic wisdom will suffice. Welles is not superior to Zinnemann "of course," but only after an intensive analysis of all their respective films. Where the auteur critic parts company with the anti-auteur critic is in treating every Welles film as well as every Zinnemann film as part of a

career whole. The auteur critic thus risks the resentment of the reader by constantly judging the present in terms of the past. The auteur critic must overcome this resentment by relating the past to the present in the most meaningful way possible. Fortunately, readers are becoming more rather than less knowledgeable about the past with each passing year.

Ian Cameron's article "Films, Directors and Critics" in *Movie* of September 1962 raises an interesting objection to the auteur theory: "The assumption which underlies all the writing in *Movie* is that the director is the author of a film, the person who gives it any distinctive quality. There are quite large exceptions, with which I shall deal later. On the whole we accept the cinema of directors, although without going to the farthest-out extremes of the *la politique des auteurs* which makes it difficult to think of a bad director making a good film and almost impossible to think of a good director making a bad one."

Cameron was writing particularly of the policy at *Cahiers du Cinéma* in which the films of favored directors were invariably assigned to the specialists in those directors. The result was that no favored director was ever panned. Ironically, Cameron and his colleagues found themselves in the same bind in *Movie* when David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* came up for consideration. Since none of the *Movie* critics liked Lean or the film enough to search for meanings in the mise-en-scène, *Lawrence* was left in the lurch without any review at all. Cameron defended the exclusion on the grounds that the best review of any film will be written by the critic who best understands the film, usually because he is the most sympathetic to it. Cameron, like the editors of *Cahiers,* thus upheld the criticism of enthusiasm as a criterion for his publication. Why does this sound so heretical in the United States? Simply because most movie reviewers fancy themselves as magistrates of merit and paid taste consultants for the public. The "best" movie reviewer is the "toughest" movie reviewer, and a reputation is made and measured by the percentage of movies the reviewer pans. The more movies panned, the more honest the reviewer. Everyone knows how assiduously the movie companies seek to corrupt the press. Hence, what better proof of critical integrity than a bad notice? Besides, the journalistic beat of the movie reviewer takes in all movies, not

just the ones he likes. The highbrow critic can pick and choose; the lowbrow reviewer must sit and suffer. Walter Kerr has defined the difference between reviewing and criticism as the difference between assuming that your reader has not seen the work in question and assuming that he has. Reviewing is thus a consumer report for the uninitiated; criticism a conversation with one's equals. It is the economic structure of the cinema that gives the reviewer more power than the critic, but whereas in the other arts the critic makes up in academic prestige what he lacks in the market power of the reviewer, the film scholar has until very recently lacked both power and prestige. That is why film scholars can be slandered as "cultists" by philistinish movie reviewers.

However, the more fastidious film publications neglect their obligations to the medium by restricting their critiques to the films and directors they like. The film scholar should see as much as possible and write about as much as possible. To avoid passing judgment on a film because of lack of sympathy is an act of intellectual arrogance. Nothing should be beneath criticism or contempt. I take a transcendental view of the role of a critic. He must aspire to totality even though he knows that he will never attain it. This transcendental view disposes of the either/or tone of many opponents of the auteur theory. This tone suggests that the critic must make an irrevocable choice between a cinema of directors and a cinema of actors, or between a cinema of directors and a cinema of genres, or between a cinema of directors and a cinema of social themes, and so on. The transcendental view of the auteur theory considers itself the first step rather than the last stop in a total history of the cinema. Eventually we must talk of everything if there is enough time and space and printer's ink. The auteur theory is merely a system of tentative priorities, a pattern theory in constant flux. The auteur critic must take the long view of cinema as if every film would survive in some vault forever. Auteur criticism implies a faith in film history as a continuing cultural activity. The last thing an auteur critic desires is to keep a reader from seeing a movie. Debate is encouraged, but the auteur critic is committed to the aesthetic values he has derived from the artists who have inspired him. The auteur critic seeks to communicate the excitement he has felt to his readers, but he does not substitute his own sensibility for that of the artist

under analysis. The ideal auteur critic should sacrifice his own personality to some extent for the sake of illuminating the personality of the director. In practice, however, no critic can entirely escape the responsibility of his own values. Elucidation must yield at some point to evaluation. All that is meaningful is not necessarily successful. John Ford's sentimentality in *The Informer* is consistent with the personality he expresses throughout his career, but the film suffers from the sentimentality just the same. Alfred Hitchcock's *Marnie* makes a meaningful statement about sexual relationships, but the script and acting leave much to be desired. *Red Line—7000* is no less personal a project for Howard Hawks than *El Dorado,* but there is all the difference in the world between the self-parody of *Red Line* and the self-expression of *El Dorado.* Orson Welles manifests his vision of the world with more lucidity and grace in *The Magnificent Ambersons* than in *Macbeth,* and Sternberg is more poetic, if less personal, in *Morocco* than in *Anatahan.* Even the greatest directors have their ups and downs. No one has ever suggested the contrary. At a certain level of achievement, however, even the failures of a director can be fascinating. Actually, a careful analysis of a director's career often turns up neglected masterpieces that replace the "official" masterpieces. Ford, for example, is seldom cited for *Steamboat 'Round the Bend* and *The Searchers,* but these films look more interesting today than *The Informer* and *The Grapes of Wrath.*

The best directors generally make the best films, but the directors must be discovered through their films. "That was a good movie," the critic observes. "Who directed it?" When the same answer is given over and over again, a pattern of performance emerges. The critic can talk about meaning and style in the work of a director. But how does a critic determine whether a movie is good or bad? This is a more difficult question. At first, there was only the vaguest idea of what a movie should be like to qualify as a work of art. Then as more and more movies were made, it was possible to impose relative standards. D. W. Griffith was the first great film-maker simply because his films were so much more accomplished than anyone else's.

After Griffith, film criticism became richer in associations. If Aristotle had been alive to write a *Poetics* on film, he would have

begun with D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* as the first definition of a feature film as a work of bits and pieces unified by a central idea. Griffith is thus one of the definitions of cinema. Subsequent definitions include Murnau, Lang, Lubitsch, Flaherty, Eisenstein, Dreyer, Hitchcock, Renoir, Ford, *et al.* In every instance, the film preceded the film-maker in the critic's consciousness. The films have continued to accumulate more than fifty years after *Birth of a Nation.* The bits and pieces have multiplied beyond measure. The auteur theory is one of several methods employed to unify these bits and pieces into central ideas.

To look at a film as the expression of a director's vision is not to credit the director with total creativity. All directors, and not just in Hollywood, are imprisoned by the conditions of their craft and their culture. The reason foreign directors are almost invariably given more credit for creativity is that the local critic is never aware of all the influences operating in a foreign environment. The late Robert Warshow treated Carl Dreyer as a solitary artist and Leo McCarey as a social agent, but we know now that there were cultural influences in Denmark operating on Dreyer. *Day of Wrath* is superior by any standard to *My Son John,* but Dreyer is not that much freer an artist than McCarey. Dreyer's chains are merely less visible from our vantage point across the Atlantic.

The art of the cinema is the art of an attitude, the style of a gesture. It is not so much *what* as *how*. The *what* is some aspect of reality rendered mechanically by the camera. The *how* is what the French critics designate somewhat mystically as mise-en-scène. Auteur criticism is a reaction against sociological criticism that enthroned the *what* against the *how*. However, it would be equally fallacious to enthrone the *how* against the *what*. The whole point of a meaningful style is that it unifies the *what* and the *how* into a personal statement. Even the pacing of a movie can be emotionally expressive when it is understood as a figure of style. Of course, the best directors are usually fortunate enough to exercise control over their films so that there need be no glaring disparity between *what* and *how*. It is only on the intermediate and lower levels of film-making that we find talent wasted on inappropriate projects.

Not all directors are auteurs. Indeed, most directors are virtually anonymous. Nor are all auteurs necessarily directors. There is much more of Paddy Chayefsky than of Arthur Hiller in *The Americanization of Emily,* which is another way of saying that *Emily* is written but not really directed. Players, particularly comic players, are their own auteurs to varying degrees. It can be argued that Leo McCarey directed the funniest picture of the Marx Brothers in *Duck Soup,* but he can hardly be credited with molding their anarchic personalities. The trouble with the Marx Brothers, in comparison with Chaplin, Keaton, and Lloyd in the silent era, was that they never controlled their own films either as directors or producers. W. C. Fields did his most memorable turns as unrelated bits of vaudeville in the muck of third-rate scenarios. We remember fragments more than we remember films. Even Garbo was of only fragmentary interest in Robert Z. Leonard's *Susan Lennox—Her Fall and Rise.* Would Garbo's image be as lustrous today without her performances in *Camille* (George Cukor), *Ninotchka* (Ernst Lubitsch), and *Queen Christina* (Rouben Mamoulian)? Good sequences in bad movies can be cited *ad infinitum, ad gloriam.* How about good performances by bad actors? Or good novels by bad novelists? Good and bad seem to become less frivolous matters with acting and writing than with direction. 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.