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Teaching Film Auteurs

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Abstract
In the 1960s, the movies arguably made their most significant headway into the classrooms of the US colleges and universities first and foremost as the products of directors refigured as authors. Directors of the European new-wave cinema, like Jean-Luc Godard, Ingmar Bergman, and Michelangelo Antonioni, offered films whose aesthetic and textual challenges aligned them with modernist literature and art. They and their films became comparable to the canonical writers and texts taught in English and foreign language departments, from Bertolt Brecht's plays to the novels of William Faulkner and Marguerite Duras. The focus on auteurs at once facilitated and reduced how film has been taught, while also identifying critical and theoretical flashpoints that open film studies to other rich issues.

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In the 1960s, the movies arguably made their most significant headway into the classrooms of US colleges and universities first and foremost as the products of directors refigured as authors. Directors of the European new-wave cinema, like Jean-Luc Godard, Ingmar Bergman, and Michelangelo Antonioni, offered films whose aesthetic and textual challenges aligned them with modernist literature and art. They and their films became comparable to the canonical writers and texts taught in English and foreign language departments, from Bertolt Brecht's plays to the novels of William Faulkner and Marguerite Duras. The focus on auteurs at once facilitated and reduced how film has been taught, while also identifying critical and theoretical flashpoints that open film studies to other rich issues.

Auteur cinema, *auteurism*, and *author cinema* were first coined by and associated with writers for the French journal *Cahiers du cinéma* in the 1950s and the French new-wave films of Godard, François Truffaut, and Agnès Varda of that same period. In the pervasive cultural shifts that followed World War II, including the prominence of existential philosophies and wide criticism of institutional systems of many kinds, these writers and filmmakers attacked the so-called boulevard cinema that seemed merely to

repeat industrial formulas of the past and instead hailed films that represented the creative or individual vision of auteurs.[1] In this sense, auteurism appeared originally as a fundamentally differential and evaluative term that distinguished the art of film from film as mass entertainment.

The early champions of auteurism attribute to the director the primary role in determining the look and meaning of film. Especially in the postwar period, film critics and filmmakers begin to imagine the director able to use the camera, as Alexandre Astruc famously put it in his 1948 essay, as a "*caméra-stylo*," or camera pen, analogous to the expressive tool of the writer:

> [T]he cinema is quite simply becoming a means of expression, just as all the other arts have been before it. . . . After having been successively a fairground attraction, an amusement analogous to boulevard theatre, or the means of preserving the images of an era, it is gradually becoming a language. By language, I mean a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel. This is why I would like to call this new age of cinema the age of the *caméra-stylo* (camera pen). This metaphor has a very precise sense. By it I mean that the cinema will gradually break free from the tyranny of what is visual, from the image for its own sake, from the immediate and concrete demands of the narrative, to become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language. (159)

These claims would be technologically underpinned by the arrival of portable, lightweight camera technology, introduced as the Arriflex system in Germany in 1936 and as the Éclair 35mm Cameflex in France in 1947. More than coincidentally, these different *caméra-stylos* would feature reflex-viewing systems linking the pragmatics of filmmaking with the potential for the conceptual reflexivity of a personal auteur cinema and its "idea of the cinema expressing ideas" (159).

From this historical beginning and foundation, an auteurist model for film introduces two important and fundamental questions to the classroom: To what extent can film be considered the product of a single expressive and creative individual or agency? To what extent can film be considered a language or like a language? The two questions overlap since an expressive agency is commonly associated with the articulation of a personal style or ideas whose vehicle is a discourse or a film language.[2] Thus, from the start, the common practice with an auteurist critical perspective would be to investigate, for instance, the films of Fritz Lang as a consistent

personal vision that expresses itself according to identifiable cinematic figures or forms, seen across his films—in this case, perhaps shared themes about the dark impulses of society and a consistent stylistics of blocking groups of characters within the mise-en-scène of these films.

The *Cahiers* writers and French new-wave filmmakers implicitly recognized that the historical precedents for auteurism originated in the very first decades of the twentieth century, when Hollywood developed a Fordist division-of-labor model in which the director, more so than the film's cinematographer or editor, handled the main responsibilities for the actual filmmaking.[3] Directors like D. W. Griffith or Charlie Chaplin, for example, made their creative role a key ingredient in the financing, production, and promotion of their early films. Accordingly, as film critics, Godard and others would return to the power of older filmmakers (and others like John Ford and Nicholas Ray) and partly reinvent Hollywood and film history by describing them as distinctively individual auteurs whose creativity and style distinguished them from directors who simply followed industrial formulas. Later, Alfred Hitchcock would, in a tongue-in-cheek fashion, signal his presiding presence through cameo appearances in his films, suggesting that the director as auteur represents the central vision of his films. More recently, filmmakers as diverse as Woody Allen and Clint Eastwood have been identified as American auteurs because they write, direct, and appear in their own films. Significant variation on the notion of a film auteur is evident in these directors and the historical periods they worked in, but approaching their films through the auteurist perspective established in the 1950s allows viewers to analyze the films' consistent style and thematics.

Critical perspectives defining auteurism have varied considerably over the last fifty years. Building on the French foundation of a director's identifiable stylistic and thematic concerns in different films, four approaches have become the primary critical categories over the last fifty years, each with pragmatic advantages and disadvantages. First, in the United States, Andrew Sarris became the most prominent proponent of auteurism as an evaluative measure of a film, basing his model in a humanist perspective that worked to elevate the cultural status of the movies. In his collection *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929–1968*, Sarris isolates as criteria of value the director's technical abilities, a distinguishable personality visible in the films, and the presence of an interior meaning that makes auteur films art. Second, in the wake of structuralist and poststructuralist theories in the 1970s and 1980s, when, ironically, theories

of the death of the author appeared in the work of writers like Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, auteurism remained an important critical practice but became associated less with the person or style of the filmmaker than with different semiotic and structural clusters in films whereby the director-auteur appears as the vehicle for the arrangement of certain interpretive cues. In his influential book *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, Peter Wollen advocates a structural approach to authorship as an act of decipherment that places the film author's name in quotation marks to designate a critical construct rather than a biographical individual. For example, John Ford's films return again and again to the antinomy, or opposition, between garden and wilderness, and a viewer can see this common "Ford" structure developed differently in films from *My Darling Clementine* (1946) to *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962).

Third, more recent approaches to auteurism have paid increasing attention to how the figure of the auteur in a film or group of films requires historical and cultural differentiations. Not only have the changing industrial and technological mechanisms that support filmmaking altered the power and the way filmmakers can express an identity, but the social and cultural contexts (including gender, race, and sexuality) for enacting a singular cinematic vision have changed and continue to change significantly. These differences can and, for many, should be taken into account in discussing how a film mobilizes an auteurist force: the recent films of the Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami require a historical and cultural contextualization that would distinguish his brand of auteurism from, say, the auteurist vision in the 1960s films of the Brazilian director Glauber Rocha; women directors such as Penny Marshall or Chantal Akerman may require a different critical measure of how female identity becomes articulated in film. Finally, an important determinant from the beginning, the commercial and industrial significance of auteurism has become especially visible since 1990 as the auteurist label has become a particularly important and successful tool for marketing and promoting a film. Today, the promotion of a film often clearly claims the presiding vision of a director, sometimes as part of its official title, as in *Quentin Tarantino's Kill Bill: Volume One* (2003), and sometimes as an explicit confrontation with other authorial visions, as in the marketing of Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996) as an engagement with both Shakespeare and Laurence Olivier. A film directed by Quentin Tarantino often considers Tarantino's name its most salient feature and, perhaps more so than ever before in film history, distribution strategies have expanded that power by using and highlighting a director's name as part of the discovery, production, and distribution of new films.

This commercial use and manipulation of auteurism does not simply debunk or undermine the traditional association of auteurism with singular creativity. Rather, it adds another critical dimension for teaching and understanding film as both an artistic and economic activity in which the name of the auteur can be positioned to generate certain expectations for a film's reception.

Each of these auteurist methods and their frequent overlapping provide rich entryways into film analysis and, used with subtlety, can provide the framework for sophisticated courses such as The Cinema of Jane Campion, in which one teaches not only her films but also how different kinds of critical thinking produce different readings. In this case, one approach may allow a viewer to evaluate and distinguish the development of Campion's body of work from her short films and breakthrough features *Sweetie* (1989) and *An Angel at My Table* (1990) through international successes like *The Piano* (1993) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996) in terms of their evolving thematic and stylistic common ground and difference, such as the distinctive use of sound and a continuing investigation of female interiority. As a productive interpretation of these films, another approach may look for structural arrangements that link her films together, possibly exploring contrasting figures of confinement and nature. A third use could develop an auteurist perspective to analyze how Campion's films articulate specific cultural and historical forces, including her place as a female director and her status as a New Zealand filmmaker working first in the context of the new Australian cinema and later international coproductions.

Finally, a fourth auteurist angle on these films would attend not only to the works themselves but also to the ways marketing campaigns have used Campion's reputation—as a woman filmmaker and as a director of art films—to establish certain expectations for the reception of the films. There are alternative ways to use an auteurist model as a critical perspective on Campion's films (or those of any auteur), and tailoring an approach or using a variety of approaches to discuss a filmmaker's work is perhaps the most sophisticated and subtle way to take pedagogical advantage of this critical method.

An equally valuable pedagogical use of an auteurist lens in a film course is to surface its pitfalls and contradictions, since demonstrating which critical dimensions of film practice are not adequately served by an auteur model makes students sensitive to the complexities of film studies. Auteur theory provokes two primary challenges for film studies: To what extent is film a collaborative industrial practice that belies auteurist assumptions?

And how does a critical viewer reconcile the tension between auteurism and genre, two often opposed critical methods?

The fundamental problem in reading films as the product of an auteur is the tendency to valorize biography and essentialism in discussing the relationship between a filmmaker and a film. While this critical temptation appears almost justified in discussions of Spike Lee's *Malcom X* as a felicitous meeting of racial views, it becomes transparently problematic in the films of the Coen brothers, who collaborate on their films. More generally, the commonplace recognition that film is almost always a collaborative practice—with producers, screenwriters, editors, and stars often playing equal or larger roles in the look and meaning of a completed film—means any subtle reading of an auteurist film benefits enormously from taking these other contributions into account. Indeed, considering the other major figures in a film's production has sometimes allowed instructors and students alike to move away from the dominant assumption that only directors warrant the label auteurs and provided legitimate evidence for reading a movie or group of movies as the product of others as the presiding auteur, such as the star (Marlene Dietrich, for instance), the producer (like Irving Thalberg), or even the choreographers (in Busby Berkeley films and other musicals). In her well-known essay on *Citizen Kane*, Pauline Kael analyzes perhaps history's most celebrated auteur and auteurist film, Orson Welles and *Citizen Kane* (1941), by arguing that the writer Herman Mankiewicz rather than Orson Welles should be credited for the elaborate narrative construction of the film and that the cinematographer Gregg Toland is most responsible for the film's dramatic visual style.

A second common critique of auteurism is frequently formulated in the opposition of auteur criticism and genre criticism. While auteur criticism privileges the individual creative power in a film, genre studies emphasizes the repetition of industrial and artistic formulas put in place by a long film history and an industry always attuned to audience expectations. With a critical model based in film genres, the achievement of a work such as *His Girl Friday* (1940) or *The Big Sleep* (1946) may be less about the creative vision of the director Howard Hawks than about the timely combination of generic conventions and icons associated with the screwball comedy or film noir and a production unit aiming at a certain target audience. Even the films of more current auteurs, such as Martin Scorsese or Mira Nair, need to be considered not simply from the point of view of a romantic aesthetic of expressive vision but also in terms of how they mobilize and refashion standard generic formulas. Teaching a film

that seems to place its generic and auteurist status in contention, such as Scorsese's *The Departed* (2006) or Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), can be one of the most productive ways to teach both methods, as well as the general importance of methodic choices in reading and understanding a film from any perspective.

In today's convergent cultures of new media, the Internet, and the movies, the long and diverse history of auteur criticism has perhaps become more, not less, important in the classroom. As in the past, changing social, industrial, and technological conditions are now transforming how a tradition of auteur criticism can and will be used. Most prominent, the rapid globalization of media (including film) and the shift of movie distribution and reception to new media venues (from the Internet to iPods) have potentially altered in fundamental ways what it means to be a single artist expressing a particular perspective. In today's climate, anyone and everyone may choose to be an auteur, but what that ultimately means requires precise historical, technological, and cultural analysis.

Notes

1. The best known statement of this position is Truffaut's "A Certain Tendency in French Cinema."

2. While debates about the description of film as language are as old as the cinema itself, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a rigorous and widespread debate about this question, most famously in the work of Christian Metz, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Umberto Eco.

3. This early industrial shift is described in detail in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (113–28).

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