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Authors and auteurs: the uses of theory

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> You know there's a lot of detail in this movie; it's absolutely essential because
> these little nuances enrich the over-all impact and strengthen the picture…. At the
> beginning of the film we show Rod Taylor in the bird shop. He catches the canary
> that has escaped from its cage, and after putting it back, he says to Tippi Hedren,
> 'I'm putting you back in your gilded cage, Melanie Daniels'. I added that sentence
> during the shooting because I felt it added to her characterization as a wealthy,
> shallow playgirl. And later on, when the gulls attack the village, Melanie Daniels
> takes refuge in a glass telephone booth and I show her as a bird in a cage. This
> time it isn't a gilded cage, but a cage of misery, and it's also the beginning of her
> ordeal by fire, so to speak. It's a reversal of the age-old conflict between men and
> birds. Here the humans are in cages, and the birds are on the outside. When I
> shoot something like that, I hardly think the public is likely to notice it.
>
> – Alfred Hitchcock on *The Birds* (Truffaut, 1985: 285)

Returning to auteurism and authorship after a decent interval, I am struck by two
contradictory perceptions: first, that the auteur seems to have disappeared from the
centre of theoretical debate in Film Studies; second, that this disappearance may in fact
be an illusion and that the grave to which we consigned him – and, by implication, her –
is, in fact, empty.

Reading the academic literature diagnostically, it seems that the delirium of auteurism has been sanitized by common sense. First, there is a select body of 'postscripts', 'retrospects' and 'revisitations' which permit writers associated with 'first-generation' auteurism (Peter Wollen [2003], Geoffrey Nowell-Smith [2003], Robin Wood [2002], for example) to temper their affiliations, qualify their claims, and complicate their positions. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, in a number of areas – gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity -- there is a very pointed recognition that it may have been irresponsible or arrogant to declare the author dead just at the point at which previously 'un-authorized' constituencies began to speak with authority. And, thirdly, there is now a more scholarly and empirical understanding of the actual conditions of production which permitted and constrained the creativity and self-expression of the auteur; an understanding which, in fact, no longer needs the concept of an 'auteur' and is content to write about directors within 'director-centred criticism'. 'The death of the auteur', says Victor Perkins, 'is without the drastic consequences that some have imagined for the theory and practice of director-centred criticism' (1990: 63).

There is, then, a retreat both from the wilder shores of critical ecstasy (Fereydoun Hoveyda: 'If anyone persists in thinking *Party Girl* an imbecility, I will cry out: Long live the imbecility which dazzles my eyes, fascinates my heart, and give me a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven!' (1986 [1960]: 127) and from the opposite but equally wild shores of the closing sentence of Roland Barthes' inescapable essay, in which he dramatically – or melodramatically – sentences the Author to death:

We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer by the arrogant, antiphrastical recriminations of good society in favour of the very thing it sets aside, ignores, smothers or destroys; we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author. (1977: 148)

Avoiding the opposite extremes of beatification and damnation, academic discourse about authorship has become properly 'academic': measured, sceptical and open. Generations of students have learned not to be auteurist ('I'm not being auteurist, but…'), and that authorship is a critical problem whose history they must learn in order to avoid temptations which they may never have felt. While the virtues of a measured, sceptical and open discourse are undoubtedly the ones we should be teaching and practicing, they do not wholly encompass the place which auteurism and authorship has occupied in film studies. Approached 'commonsensically', authorship as an area of engagement and debate seems to have lost its energizing force, its function as an irritant soothed by knowing hindsight.

Meanwhile, slowly vanishing from academic debate, the auteur is everywhere else – in publicity, in journalistic reviews, in television programmes, in film retrospectives, in the marketing of cinema. Sometime around the point at which Film Studies began to be embarrassed by its affiliation to the author, the film industry and its subsidiaries began to discover with renewed enthusiasm the value of authorial branding for both marketing and reputation. It was already apparent by the late 1960s that auteurism was capacious and could accommodate even those who had first poured scorn on the *politique des*

auteurs as Gallic intellectual hooliganism. Now, it has become the air we breathe: *auteurism* has become ideology; 'it *really* represents something without representing something real' (Marx and Engels, 1974: 52).

I should acknowledge at the outset my own contribution to this process. In the first paragraph of an article on homosexuality and authorship in *Screen* in 1991, Andy Medhurst paid waspish tribute to the Reader, *Theories of Authorship* (Caughie, 1981), which I edited for the British Film Institute in 1981:

> Authorship is hardly a hot issue these days. The very word itself conjures up ancient dusty battles over the cultural legitimacy of cinema, battles that were fought, won and forgotten long ago. The idea that a film's director is the primary, shaping force of its meaning is simultaneously inscribed as middlebrow commonsense…and dismissed as hopelessly outmoded by every branch of recent critical theory. It is a dead debate, and its tombstone was the BFI Reader, *Theories of Authorship*, which offered an inbuilt teleology, a narrative trajectory which led me, as a postgraduate student, away from the embarrassments of romantic individualism to the chastening rigours of poststructuralist thought. (1991: 197–8)

It would be hard to miss the double-edge. On the one hand, the collection of articles was indeed intended to do more than simply summarize positions: it was conceived as a theoretical intervention and it did have the narrative strategy which Medhurst experienced. On the other hand, I know irony when I see it, and I have some sympathy for its object. I have always had the suspicion that the success of the Reader – and

twenty-five years later it is still in print – was that it made authorship teachable by making it orderly. More than I would have thought at the time or would now welcome, a book which was intended to undermine the certainties of creative authority became authoritative. Such is the fate of authorial intention.

In his *Theories of Cinema*, Francesco Casetti argues for an approach to theory which leaves open a space for debate, and he insists on the productivity of theoretical knowledge: 'It is the *productivity* of a knowledge', he says, 'that ensures, perhaps more than anything else, its theoretical status' (1999: 3). In his conclusion, he argues that it is not scientific rationality that defines a theory but its '*cognitive* capacity, in the broadest sense of the word' (1999: 315). Rather than an achieved knowledge, theory is a means of achieving knowledge. Like experimental science itself, its methods can no longer be reduced to formalized 'scientific' constructs but are drawn to such nuanced forms as metaphor, analogy or parallelism. Furthermore, he says,

> a theory is knowledge that circulates among those working in a given field and through them reaches broader audiences, producing discussion, loyalties, and dissent. In this respect, it is a social device, something that is diffused and shared within a community. Finally, a theory is also a historical event: it is a discourse that comes on the scene at a given time, in a given place, and by its very presence is capable of defining the ambience in which it appears. In this sense, it is a historical reality, something that reflects the path (or even the error) of thought. (Casetti, 1999: 315)

Theory, then, 'institutionalizes' knowledge, but as a dynamic field constantly under review and revision, always open to debate and dissent.

In Casetti's sense, then, authorship is a theory: *'a set of assumptions, more or less organized, explicit, and binding, which serves as a reference for scholars so that they can understand and explain the nature of the phenomenon under investigation'* (1999: 2). While recognizing its origins in the editorial *policy* (the so-called '*politique des auteurs*') of *Cahiers du cinéma* in the 1950s, the significance of authorship *theory* for Film Studies lies in its productivity: its production and institutionalization not simply of a 'knowledge field', but also of a community within which that field could be shared and contested: a field on which sides could be taken, theoretical battles fought, and solidarities formed and reformed. It was a field of debate in which the members of an emerging community began to identify themselves and define their studies and their terms of engagement. The practical and experiential importance of debate – not just in articles and books, but, in the UK, in BFI summer schools, Edinburgh Film Festival seminars, SEFT weekend schools, the foyers of cinemas – to an emerging field of study in Britain cannot be overemphasized. In the United States, the vituperative denunciation of Andrew Sarris's 'Notes on the auteur theory in 1962' (1962/3) by Pauline Kael (1963) gave a polemical edge to auteurism which reverberated across the Atlantic ('the *Movie* group', she says, ' is like an intellectual club for the intellectually handicapped' [22]), and inflected the partisan ways in which auteurism was taken up by criticism and, in turn, by academic film studies: 'a spark was ignited', says Sarris famously, 'in far-off San Francisco by a lady critic with a lively sense of outrage' (1968: 26). Just as the lines of battle had been drawn in Paris between *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Positif*, so in

Britain they were drawn between *Sight and Sound*, *Movie* and *Screen* and in the United

States between the west coast *Film Quarterly* and the east coast *Film Culture*. The fact

that the emerging field of study felt itself to be academically marginalized only

intensified the debates, reinforced the solidarities, and drew the wagons into a tighter

circle. The 'historical reality' of the various engagements with authorship was formative

for many of us, and has left its mark on film studies – both the path of thought *and* the

errors that went with it.

It is customary for 'historical realities' to be so by forgetting the histories and realities

that went before them, and the period from the 1950s to the 1970s was fertile ground for

both 'new waves' and for amnesia. It is easy to form the impression that film theory –

like teenagers and sex – were invented in that period, and that before the polemics of

Cahiers in the 1950s and its skirmishes with *Positif* there was no debate about the art of

film, or that before the meeting of auteurism and structuralism in the 1970s there was no

theory of the artist. To get the measure of authorship theory and its particular impact, it

seems important to have some sense of the theoretical field which preceded it and into

which it burst.

In 1948, Alexandre Astruc had already proclaimed the 'new age of cinema' to be 'the

age of the *caméra stylo*' in which, using the camera as his pen, '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' (1981: 9). Astruc was referring specifically to an

avant-garde cinema, and in the anglophone world he can be placed most clearly in the

tradition of *Close Up* and the group around Kenneth MacPherson where the role of the

director/artist as poet of the cinema was implicit in the criticism and explicit in the filmmaking practice (Donald et al., 1998). The assumption of the artist applied to the avant garde, however, was only more explicit than the insistence on film as an art form which can be found in a number of the theoretical discussions of cinema from the silent period onwards. In Rudolf Arnheim's *Film as Art* (1957), the 'film artist' appears almost interchangeably with the director in the application of creative technique to expression. Arnheim argues that in the earliest film the intention was simply to capture objective reality without mediation or 'distortion'.

> Only gradually, and at first probably without conscious intention, the possibility of using the differences between film and real life for the purpose of making formally significant images was realized. What before had been ignored or simply accepted was now intelligently developed, displayed, and made into a tool to serve the desire for artistic creation. The object as such was no longer the first consideration. Its place in importance was taken by the pictorial representation of its properties, the making apparent of an inherent idea, and so forth. (Arnheim, 1957: 41–2)

Here, the film artist 'distorts' the unmediated photographic reality through representation in order to bring forth an inherent idea, a concept of expressiveness which would be comfortable with both Russian montage theory and German expressionism.

For Béla Balázs, whose *Theory of Film* was first published in Moscow in 1945 as *Iskusstvo Kino* (*The Art of Cinema*), the story was one of

> the transformation of cinematography from a technique into an art, the
> transformation of a moving picture industry, which merely reproduced stage
> performances, into an autonomous, independent, utterly novel art-producer….
> (Balázs, 1970: 155)

Sharing with Georg Lukács, his compatriot and fellow member of The Budapest Sunday Circle, a distrust of the avant garde – 'a hangover from the psychotic conditions following the first world war; it was one of the ways in which bourgeois consciousness sought to escape reality' (Balázs, 1970: 158) – Balázs found no difficulty in conceptualizing an art form which was both popular and industrial. He shared with Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin, however, an insistence on an artist/director whose subjectivity was to be subjugated in the service of reality:

> the artist may see any however unusual and strange physiognomy in his object,
> but as long as he sees it *in* the object and cuts it *out* of it, as Michelangelo cuts the
> figures he saw in his mind out of the block of marble, so long as he derives the
> physiognomy of the work of art *from* his object and does not project it *into* the
> object, so long is his art realistic. The artist is a realist as long as he does not
> change the structure and meaning of his object by subjectively drawn outlines.
> (Balázs, 1970: 101)

What emerges most clearly from these early theorists is an explication of the evolutionary development of techniques which allow cinema to move from the photographic reproduction of reality to its creative representation, from a technology to an art. This is not to suggest that there was a consensus about film authorship before the debates of the 1950s and 1960s. With Kracauer's insistence (1960) that an art of representation is defined by the technology of reproduction, one can see the debate opening up between those who held that the artist/director is defined by the creative use of the techniques available to him, and those for who the business of the artist was to reshape the world or construct a new one. While Eisenstein and the Soviet theorists, however, would take the latter view, they would probably agree about the subjugation of the individual personality in the face of a revolutionary reality. It was the reality which was different rather than the role of the artist. In this respect, these theorists of cinema can be located in a critical tradition of impersonality, a tradition which stretches from the socialist pragmatism of Engels ('The more the opinions of the author remain hidden, the better for the work of art' [1976: 91]) to the literary modernism of Eliot ('Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality' [1960: 58]).

This suggests at least one part of the theoretical context for the offensive of *Cahiers* and the significance of the debates and arguments about authorship which followed. When Andrew Sarris proclaims 'the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value' (1981: 64), he is out of harmony not only with Pauline Kael and the assumptions of established film criticism and theory, but also with a dominant current of modernist thought about intention, impersonality and the artist. It is a commonplace that auteurism

is a romanticism and can be traced to the aesthetic theories of the nineteenth-century

Romantics. In fact, however, its antecedents may be found more clearly in the agonism

of the early twentieth-century avant garde, and it is appropriate that the journal in which

Sarris published his 'Notes and the auteur theory in 1962' was *Film Culture*, a journal

founded by Jonas Mekas in 1954 as the critical and theoretical voice of New York

'underground' film. In this respect, the criticism of *Cahiers* may have constituted an

even more radical break than Bazin suspected from the prewar hostility to the aesthetic

or revolutionary avant garde of the 1920s and 1930s which he shared with Balåzs and

Kracauer. The line between auteurism and the avant garde is in no sense

straightforward, and it is complicated by *Cahiers'* skirmishes over auteurism with

Positif, the journal more usually linked with the politics of surrealism in France.

Nevertheless, it is worth establishing some lines of connection between auteurism and

the agonistic aesthetic of the avant garde – if only to rescue it from automatic

association with a simple and infantile romanticism.

Even more contentious for film criticism than the assertion of personality as a criterion

of value was the assertion that the value of the auteur was guaranteed not by the

seriousness or moral purpose of the film's content but by the audacity of its style:

'Morality', said Luc Moullet infamously, 'is a question of tracking shots' (1985: 148).

This opened the way for a criticism which had little to say about 'important' films like

Lawrence of Arabia (David Lean, 1962) or *The Red Badge of Courage* (John Huston,

1951) but could find the kingdom of heaven in *Party Girl* (Nicholas Ray, 1958) or *The

Girl Can't Help It* (Frank Tashlin, 1956). The claim which brought down the greatest

contempt from their contemporaries on both sides of the English Channel, and even

won an indulgent finger-wagging from their *paterfamilias*, Bazin, was the claim that the best film of a metteur en scène, a director without a consistent signature, was less interesting than the worst film of an auteur: emblematically, *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) was less interesting than *Wee Willie Winkie* (John Ford, 1937). Furthermore, since, as Eric Rohmer argued (scandalously invoking Titian, Rembrandt and Beethoven), 'The history of art … contains no example of an authentic genius who has experienced, at the end of his career, a period of decline' (1981: 38), then it follows that *Casablanca* must be considerably less interesting than *Red Line 7000* (Howard Hawks, 1965). Reviewing *Red Line 7000* in *Cahiers* in 1966, Jean Narboni finds in the film the mark of 'someone ageless' for whom 'everything…was being presented once and for all in a unique present'. 'What we have here', he says,

> is a cinema that has to be taken in its entirety, a vast nervous system, a magnetic field, a multi-layered network. It conjures up the belief voiced by Edward G. Robinson in *Tiger Shark* [Howard Hawks, 1932] that a man can only enter heaven whole (repeated in *The Big Sky* [Howard Hawks, 1952]). So it is with Hawks's films, which posterity and our own rather remotely connected generation will have to accept as a totality, a whole *oeuvre*, and not as a series of films. (1986: 217)

The 'effrontery' of *Cahiers* is well documented, its enthusiasms on occasion masking a political insouciance which toppled over into reaction. Following Casetti, however – 'a theory is also a historical event' – it was precisely this effrontery which effected a paradigm shift in thinking and writing about cinema. The theoretical and critical writing

about cinema from the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, exactly anticipating writing about

television from the 1980s and 1990s, was concerned to 'take film seriously': for Balázs,

'the question of educating the public to a better, more critical appreciation of the films

is a question of the mental health of nations' (1970: 17). The concept of a *popular* art

was by no means widely accepted and there was still work to be done to establish 'in the

consciousness of our generation this most important artistic development of our

century' (Balázs, 1970: 17). Film theory, like film education, was bound up in film

appreciation: it was important that the public understood the techniques which the film

artist had at his or her disposal in order that it could appreciate the good and shun the

bad.

Cahiers, on the other hand, in its sensibility and its rhetoric, begins from the premise

that cinema is – self-evidently – an art which can be discussed in the same way as the

great monuments of European culture, applying to Nicholas Ray the same criteria which

might be applied to Goethe ('It would mean little enough to say that *Bitter Victory* is the

most Goethian of films' [Godard, 1985: 119]) or comparing Luchino Visconti with

Vermeer (Ayfre, 1985: 185).

> If Domarchi, for example, quotes Hegel and Kant in discussing Minnelli, he does
>
> so neither out of pedantry nor a love of paradox, but simply because cinema is at
>
> least as important as theatre, literature or painting! (Hoveyda, 1986b: 139)

Differing both from its predecessors and from its contemporaries in England, where the

engagement with popular culture was always pulled between cultural advocacy and

political inoculation, *Cahiers*, in a critical language unfamiliar to the empirical

traditions of Anglo-Saxon protestanism, celebrated the mysteries of its chosen auteurs

whose personalities broke through the routines of industry, commerce, and small-

mindedness. The first achievement of the *Cahiers* writers was to develop, almost by

accident, a critical 'style' which, rather than 'educating the public to a better, more

critical appreciation of the films', created a field of debate within a community of

interest, the kind of field out of which theory develops. Their writing was the first step

towards the institutionalization of a knowledge, the formation of a critical community

which really cared whether Minnelli was an auteur or a metteur en scène.

Their second achievement, of course, was to establish some of the terms in which that

debate might be conducted. While it may have been self-evident that film was an art and

that directors were its primary artists, it was not self-evident which directors were

artists, the true auteurs; which were metteurs en scène, the craftsmen capable of

producing meritorious films but without a consistent personality; and which were mere

tradesmen, more or less competent but seldom rising about the meretricious. To place

directors in this hierarchy, later formalized in a finer grain by Andrew Sarris (1968),

and particularly to settle boundary disputes both within their own ranks and with their

favourite adversaries in *Positif*, required both a knowledge and a method. It required a

knowledge of a very large corpus of films: not simply a sampling along an already

approved crest line, but a kind of profligate intemperance of viewing in which nothing

could be left out in case that is where the key lay, and in which, as Narboni says, the

auteur's work can be grasped as a whole, an oeuvre, rather as a series of films. And it

required a method of *reading* films: a reading which, somewhat curiously, resonates

with F.R. Leavis's definition of the critic's task 'to determine what is actually *there* in the work of art', sensitive to 'the difference between that which has been willed and put there, or represents no profound integration, and that which grows from a deep centre of life' (1963: 224–5).

However far current film scholars might wish to distance themselves from the impressionistic agonism of *Cahiers'* judgements in the 1950s, its footprint can still be seen in the sand: a legacy of debate, of reading and of the omnivorous appetite of the cinephile. Two pathways opened up from the *politique d'auteurs* which determine the direction of authorship theory and mark out routes for film theory more generally: first, and most indelibly, there was an attention to mise en scène, not simply as a set of techniques for the representation of reality but as a language of creativity with which an auteur transformed material.

> When I say that everything is expressed on the screen through mise en scène, I in no way contest the existence or the importance of the subject matter. I simply want to point out that the distinguishing feature of a great author is precisely his ability to metamorphose the stupidest plot through his technique. It is obvious that if we tried to summarize the plot of *Time Without Pity* [Joseph Losey, 1957], we would end up with a very weak melodrama. But do we go to the cinema to translate images into words? (Hoveyda, 1986b: 139)

Mise en scène was the language – the 'specific signifying practice' – of cinema, and the analysis of mise en scène was a method of detection, finding there rather than in subject

matter the signature of the director. Though the object of detection may have shifted in later theory away from the creative subject – the auteur – towards the 'positioned subject' – the spectator, the methods of decipherment or decoding through an investigation of the language and signification of mise en scène was the foundation of the textual analysis which secured for Film Studies a place of grudging respect in the humanities and the academy.

If the first pathway led towards language and the significations of the image, the second pathway led towards narrative and the themes which structured narrative. In his 'Autocritique' in *Cahiers* in 1961, Fereydoun Hoveyda anticipates the figure who will later move to the centre of the theoretical stage: the psychoanalyst:

> This leads me to clarify my ideas on the critic's function. In many respects, it resembles that of the psychoanalyst. Does he not, in effect, have to reconstruct through the film the discourse of the auteur (subject) in its continuity, bring to light the unconscious that underpins it and explain the particular way it is articulated? (Hoveyda, 1986c: 261)

What came to be known as auteur structuralism or cine-structuralism, identified with the work of Wollen and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith in Britain in the late 1960s and early 1970s, followed from the insistence of the *politique* on thematic consistency and wholeness as a mark of the auteur's signature. While for *Cahiers* much of the attention focused on mise en scène as the scene of personality, it was a relatively short step, following the success of structuralism in the social sciences, to seek out thematic

structures across the work of an auteur, and crucially, as Hoveyda implies, to seek

structures of which the auteur himself may be unconscious. Increasingly in the 1960s,

the writers of *Cahiers*, in step with a growing body of theory in both Britain and the US,

moved away from the auteur as creator of varying degrees of genius towards an author-

subject who is written by the text, and can be read out of its signs and structures.

Wollen's famous distinction between 'Fuller or Hawks or Hitchcock, the directors' and

'"Fuller" or "Hawks" or "Hitchcock", the structures named after them' (1972: 168)

appears again in Jean-Pierre Oudart's identification of John Ford as an 'inscription'

(1981: 185) in the influential reading of *Young Mr Lincoln* (John Ford, 1939) which the

editors of *Cahiers* undertook collectively in 1970 (*Cahiers du cinéma* editors. 1970: 29-

47). The beneficiary of this devaluation of the authorial currency and the depreciation in

the dignity of the auteur from artist to structure, from inscriber to inscription was

'ideology'. It was not the author who spoke, but ideology, an ideology which could be

detected in the gaps, ruptures and contradictions of the text. The method inherited from

auteurism remained the same, a detailed reading to uncover the text's hidden places, but

it was no longer the personality of the author which was hidden there, but ideology – of

which the author was the bearer rather than the creator. It is at this point that the author

becomes – almost literally – a shadow of his former self, leaving traces in the text rather

than dominating it with his unique signature; shading into structure, inscription or

function; an object of desire for the cinephile, a subject whose subjectivity is an effect

of the text.

In this account, I am giving particular weight to the contribution of the early writing of

Cahiers du cinéma because, revisiting earlier teleologies, including my own (1981), I

am struck by the impression which they give that the *theory* of authorship does not really start until the arrival of structuralism, bringing with it 'science' to rescue us from 'ideology'. I would argue now that it was in that earlier period that the field of knowledge and a method to define it began to be defined, and that theory as a field of debate and contestation became both formative and animating, generating an engagement which was quite distinct from the educative impulse of the pioneers and an intellectual excitement which was symptom and cause of a paradigm shift in the study of film and cinema.

It was a short step from the author as an 'unconscious' effect of the text to the theoretical death of the author. Barthes' short essay, 'The Death of the Author' (1977), first published in France in 1968, is one of those texts which has reverberated through the whole field of criticism and critical theory, echoing the 'death of God', causing similar forms of perturbation and consternation, and leaving behind similar gaps and possibilities in the hermeneutics of meaning and the determination of value. In many spheres, the death of the author has become so much a commonplace that it has become a barrier to further thought, a knowing wink which can be shared as a mark of distinction between people who know better than to think anything else. And yet, as Wollen notes in his essay on Michael Curtiz, returning to his yellowing copy of the original in *Manteia*, 'although written in Barthes's most provocative style (shades of Truffaut), it is not quite as earthshaking as I had remembered' (2003: 69). Stripped of the rhetorical flourish of his final resounding (and infinitely repeatable) phrase – 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author' (Barthes, 1977: 148) – the essay appears as itself the condensed trace of positions already elaborated in

Barthes' writing and in a tradition of modernist writing stretching back to the nineteenth century (Barthes himself appeals to Mallarmé and Proust). The 'scandal' of 'The Death of the Author' is the tip of a more complex historical argument turned into a rhetorical *coup de grâce*.

Again it is worth establishing the context into which Barthes' essay intervened. He is reacting against an interpretative criticism which seeks in the personality of the author the truth of the fiction and the guarantee of the interpretation:

> The *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* 'confiding' in us. (1977: 143)

The tyranny of the author is attributed to an 'ordinary culture', hungry for the biographical and psychological background which fleshes out the 'image of literature', and to a tradition of criticism which finds in Baudelaire's work 'the failure of Baudelaire the man', in Van Gogh's 'his madness' and in Tchaikovsky's 'his vice' (1977: 143). These are powerful traditions in both the academy and the public sphere, and the strength of their appeal cannot be ignored, particularly in the present moment when a culture of celebrity obsessed with the biography and psychology of the artist seeps into any discussion of contemporary authorship. Indeed, the tradition which finds in the life of the author the meaning of the work is so embedded that it could not, even in 1968, simply be extirpated by a theoretical intervention, however persuasive. Rather, in film studies as in other branches of the humanities, it was driven underground for a

fairly brief period to the place where unfashionable ideas regroup. In more recent writing, there is a palpable sense of relief that the proscription against auteurism has been lifted: witness Dudley Andrew's sharp irony in 1993: 'Breathe easily. *Épuration* has ended. After a dozen years of clandestine whispering we are permitted to mention, even to discuss, the auteur again' (1993: 77). [1]

These are the terms of engagement governing the skirmishes by which we mark out territory and keep debate alive. But before we exhume the author and bury Barthes, it is worth recalling what was at stake. For Barthes, the author – or 'modern scriptor' – does not precede the text, but is 'born simultaneously' (1977: 145) with it. He or she does not stand behind the text as its truth, authorizing a correct reading, but is written in the text, identical with the writing. 'Writing', says Barthes,

> is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing. (1977: 142)

While we might legitimately wish to draw back from the absolutism of Barthes' decree, particularly in respect of film where the moment of 'writing' becomes a process of corporate and industrial production, there is a challenge to the authority of origins and intentions which is liberating for criticism and enabling for the critical reader. In the context of current debate, it may not be necessary to insist on the death of the author but it is still worth contesting her or his authority as the determinant of meaning.

One of the effects of the challenge to the centrality of the author was a challenge to the centrality of interpretation as the primary purpose of criticism. The business of a textual criticism focused on writing rather than meaning is to engage with the work and play of language and signification rather than to fix meaning. Interestingly, it becomes easier to see the importance of Susan Sontag (a writer who often plays leapfrog with Barthes) and her key, similarly manifesto-like essay, 'Against interpretation' (1969), written in 1964, four years before 'The Death of the Author':

> The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art – and by analogy, our own experience – more, rather than less, real to us. The function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*.
>
> In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art. (1969: 23)

Interestingly also, an erotics of art seems to rescue auteur criticism from the reductive structuralism which reduced films and oeuvres to a pattern of meanings identified, *post facto*, with an 'unconscious' auteur and returns it to the exuberance of *Cahiers*, its attention to film as a 'writing' – a '*caméra-stylo*' – and the kingdom of heaven found in a tracking shot. It is just such an erotics of art that Laura Mulvey wrestles with in her much-cited 1975 article, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema'. It also forms the basis for a body of criticism across the arts which tries to understand the complex interplay of textuality and subjectivity, an interplay which frequently invokes, if not the personality or biography of the author, at least the figure of the author as, in Michel Foucault's terms, a 'function' of the text (1977). Such a criticism still seems to me to form a

central, if not an exclusive, focus of the film theory with which a critical film studies still needs to engage.

However unfashionable Barthes in his turn may become -- or may already have become, -- the debt to him is considerable. In many ways, his argument in its more nuanced forms gives a centrality to the development of a rigorous and robust film analysis, the kind of reading of films which has been one of the jewels in film studies' crown. In the absence of an authorizing voice, the critic or the student seeks support for her reading in the authority of her analysis, opening up how the text works rather than closing it down to what it means. Without the author as the ultimate guarantee, the analysis is never final and complete, but remains partial. In the retreat from extremes, this is one of the things we hold on to. It is part of the terms of engagement that the pendulum does not swing all the way back.

While Barthes' impact on *auteurism* and authorship theory was direct, apparent and tangible, an indirect, but probably more pervasive, impact can be identified in the development of a body of film scholarship which questioned, in the name of empirical evidence and historical enquiry, what it believed to be the inflated claims of 'Grand Theory'. This body of work is most clearly associated with David Bordwell who has provided – most particularly in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (1985), written with Kristin Thomson and Janet Staiger – a scholarly account of a particular period of Hollywood cinema which, among other things, replaces the 'genius' of the author with 'the genius of the system', a familiar phrase appropriated from André Bazin's

comradely critique in 1957 of the auteurism of his younger colleagues at *Cahiers du cinéma*:

> The American cinema is a classical art, but why not then admire in it what is most
> admirable, i.e. not only the talent of this or that filmmaker, but the genius of the
> system, the richness of its ever-vigorous tradition, and its fertility when it comes
> into contact with new elements…. ([1957] 1985: 258)

Though Bordwell (1996) has confronted 'Grand Theory' more directly and more tendentiously elsewhere, it is in the historical scholarship of his and his colleagues' development of Bazin's 'classical art' that the work has been most persuasive, leaving its mark in the teaching and writing even of those of us who would not align ourselves with his philosophical position. Bordwell uses the term 'classical' precisely, not to assign value or consign to a particular place in the memory of cinema, but to define a system. In the opening section of the book he justifies the use of the term thus:

> the principles which Hollywood claims as its own rely on notions of decorum,
> proportion, formal harmony, respect for tradition, mimesis, self-effacing
> craftsmanship, and cool control of the perceiver's response – canons which critics
> in any medium usually call 'classical'. (Bordwell, 1985: 3–4)

He goes on to describe the components of this classical narrative system in terms of 'devices' (pan, dissolve, field reverse-field), 'systems' (time, space, narrative

causation), and crucially, 'relations between systems': 'In the Hollywood style, the systems do not play equal roles: space and time are almost always made vehicles for narrative causality' (Bordwell, 1985: 6).

A classical cinema, then, like any classical art, is rule-bound and systematic, and the strengths and limitations of Bordwell's approach lie in its system building: a scholarly rationality which is both explanatory and oppressively totalizing. The artist is one insofar as he or she articulates the rules with a proper balance of originality and deference, imagination and propriety. It is not an art of unbridled expression, but of articulation, articulating the conventions and expectations in a way which gives the audience enough repetition to ensure recognition and familiarity and enough difference to make it new and singular. Among the factors which might motivate the components of the filmic system (genre, verisimilitude, narrative causality), Bordwell includes 'artistic motivation' which permitted individual artistic flourish as a signature of variation, but discouraged – or punished – it when it threatened the integrity of the classical narration: 'overt narration, the presence of a self-conscious "author" not motivated by realism or genre or story causality, can only be intermittent and fluctuating in the classical film' (1985: 79). A classical art at its most classical acknowledges the presence of an artist, but as a component of the system, articulating its conventions, enlivening its rules: refreshing it but never dominating it with his personality or his self-expression. It is worth quoting Bordwell at length to trace his delimitation of the auteur:

In Western music, the classical style creates dynamism by departing from and returning to a stable tonal center. Something like this dynamism appears in the Hollywood auteur film. The auteur film draws its sustenance from the classical base, which is visible in the film. The film mixes narrational modes – some systems operating according to classical probabilities, others intermittently foregrounded as less probable and more distinctive. Far from being a fault or flaw, this mixture can be a source of aesthetic value to those prepared to perceive it. Most often, an idiosyncratic exploration of causality, time, or space works to reaffirm the norm by revealing the suppleness and range of the paradigm. At rarer moments, a deviant narrational process can be glimpsed. We see the norm afresh, understand its functions better, recognize previously untapped possibilities in it, and – on a few occasions – reflect upon how our trust in the norm can mislead us. The Hollywood auteur film offers a particular pleasure and knowledge: the spectator comes to recognize norm and deviation oscillating, perhaps wrestling, within the same art work, that work being actively contained by the pressures of tradition. (1985: 82)

Such common sense makes sense of the auteur in the classical system in a way which is hard to contest, and in their closing chapter, Bordwell and Staiger make explicit their recognition of alternative – and post-1960 – modes of film practice which do not conform to the classical system and in which the auteur functions differently – though nonetheless systematically. As well as being apparently flexible, the approach is eminently teachable: susceptible to historical evidence and to demonstration through the close analysis of what is actually there on the screen. It avoids the mysteries of intention

and expressive personality on the one hand and of an abstract 'writing without origin' on the other.

To pause for a moment, however, on the concept of the classical and push a little Bordwell's analogy with Western music, both confirming it and qualifying it, I want to quote – again at length – from an essay in the *Times Literary Supplement* by Stephen Brown, 'Mozart, Classical form, and the rescue from equanimity' (2006), one of a number of articles associated with Mozart's two hundred and fiftieth anniversary. Like Bordwell, Brown begins by sketching the outlines of the classical system:

> A formula for producing a convincing Classical piece of music might look like this: start with an axiomatic idea, one so simple and basic that it is hard to imagine reducing it further. You're in the key of C? Then create an outline of a C major chord. (A little more than half of Mozart's piano sonatas start with an outline of the home-key chord.) That's a little angular; balance it with a softer turn of phrase. Now balance those two bars with two other bars. Where the first used chords I and V, the balancing phrase could start with IV and work its way back to I. Now we have four bars without much flow; balance them with another four bars of running scales. Keep in mind that everything must be clear and distinct: no thick textures, just melody and accompaniment. Continue along this path, follow the rules of sonata form, and you too can create a bad – but realistic – example of Classical-sounding music. (2006: 18)

He then proceeds to cases:

I recently attended a concert where I heard a lovely performance of the Concerto for Two Clarinets by Franz Krommer, born in 1759, just three years after Mozart. It followed the kind of Classical formula described above and bored me nearly senseless with its predictability. But I have heard Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 11 on A Major (K331), the one that ends with the famous 'Rondo alla Turca', countless times; at one time in my youth I could play the piece from memory, and even today I do not find it boring. How can Krommer be boring on a first hearing and Mozart not boring on the 500th? (2006: 18)

The analogy seems to me to illuminate and illustrate the functioning of the classical analogy, but, more importantly, Brown's simple question – how can Krommer be boring and Mozart not boring? -- seems to me to lie at the heart of the question of authorship in a classical system, limiting the explanatory reach of a purely systematic approach. The displacement of the auteur onto the system and the systematization of motivation within the rules of the game, however appealingly common sense they may be, leave some nagging questions about creativity, imagination and the artist which apply even within – or particularly within – a classical art. What is it that makes the difference, and what difference does difference make? Or Samuel Beckett, appropriated by Foucault: 'What matters who's speaking, someone said, what matter's who's speaking?' (Beckett, 1974: 16). [2]

The work of Bordwell – and his colleagues and associates – has been hugely influential. (With irresistible irony, Bordwell himself has suffered the fate of the structuralist's auteur: an apostrophization in which Bordwell, the scholar, must often be rescued from

'Bordwell', the structure named after him.) Most particularly in his essay, 'Contemporary film studies and the vicissitudes of Grand Theory', in the collection which he edited with Noël Carroll in 1996, Bordwell challenges what he identifies as 'Grand Theories', such as 'subject-position theory' and 'culturalism'. These are defined as 'Grand Theories' because 'their discussions of cinema are framed within schemes which seek to describe or explain very broad features of society, history, language and psyche' (1996: 3). Bordwell diagnoses what he depicts as a pathological attachment to Parisian theory, offering an account of its 'viscissitudes' supported by evidence based on quotation – quotation which is, of course, selected to support the diagnosis. 'Why this reliance on Parisian sources?' (1996: 19), he asks. He turns back to the process of self-definition as a discipline which Film Studies was going through in the 1970s and 1980s, and he takes auteurism as an exemplary instance:

> in the effort to win academic respectability, film scholars could best show their work to have significance if there were a powerful theory backing it up. Auteurism was a connoisseurship that required a staggering knowledge of particular films. In an academic context, such knowledge could seem mere buffery, so auteur studies could not justify studying movies 'seriously'. An analysis of Hitchcock that purported to demonstrate a theory of signification or the unconscious was more worth of academic attention than an analysis of recurring authorial motifs. (19)

In place of 'Grand Theory', Bordwell supports the emergence in the 1980s of what he calls 'middle-level research', pre-empting accusations of being 'anti-theory' with the

argument that such research addresses questions that have both 'empirical and theoretical import' (1996: 27), and insisting, in his own italics, *'you do not need to have a Theory of Everything to do enlightening work in a field of study'*, or with fewer italics but more persuasively:

> Contrary to what many believe, a study of United Artists' business practices or the standardization of continuity editing or the activities of women in early film audiences need carry <u>no</u> determining philosophical assumptions about subjectivity and culture, <u>no</u> univocal metaphysical or epistemological or political presumption – in short, no commitment to a Grand Theory. (1996: 29)

Like the influence of Barthes in his time, the influence of Bordwell and his associates has been emancipatory in certain ways, freeing up the citation list from the usual suspects (Foucault, Barthes, Lacan), and realigning theory with empirical research in a way which has been productive for film studies in the academy. The growth of historical research and the respect for empirical evidence since the 1980s has been formative for film studies as an academic discipline, and there is a greater willingness now, for example, to recognize a study of the activities of women in early film audiences, even if not itself theoretical, as the building-blocks of a theory which appeals to evidence rather than to avatars. For work on authorship, this has led to a diversity of approach which is embodied in a collection such as that of David Gerstner and Janet Staiger, *Authorship and Film* (2003), and perhaps most emblematically in that collection in Wollen's (2003) revisitation of his early auteurism in a study of Curtiz which brings together empirical evidence, textual analysis and theory.

It has also permitted those questions to be re-opened which were shamefully closed by the 'death of the author' thesis: questions of agency in areas in which authority was socially and critically neglected. There were always degrees of death, and Hitchcock was always likely to be more dead than Jean-Luc Godard. Raised from the dead, can a single theory of authorship deal with Hitchcock, Godard, Abbas Kiarostami, Sally Potter and Bill Viola? And how does a 'high theory' of authorship deal with the intention expressed in the quotation which forms the epigraph to this essay.

As the essay was being written, *Good Night, and Good Luck* (George Clooney, 2005) was released in the UK, and it seemed to me to crystallize some of the variables which now open up in front of authorship. There is George Clooney, directing and co-writing an openly 'political' film – in black and white and at a very precise political moment in both Britain and the US when issues of freedom of speech are at the top of the agenda. The moment gives particular sharpness to questions of agency and intention, an intention which is made explicit as it is repeated in interview after interview. The power of agency which is required to direct a political film in black and white is conferred by celebrity, a celebrity which is conferred, in its turn, through acting – and not only through acting, but through acting on television (and not only on television but on hospital melodrama). The power of this agency is confirmed rather than denied by Clooney's own self-effacing performance – as supporting actor – in 'his' film: a self-effacement which only real power can aspire to. And, as Barthes correctly claims, 'ordinary culture' is hungry for the biography which precedes and explains the motive behind the film. In interviews, reviews, articles, television programmes, Clooney's

authorship is attributed to his respect for his father and for his father's history of

engagement. It is his family biography, his inheritance of political integrity from his

father, which is called into play to define and explain his authorship. And behind the

biographies of father and son, there is the historical agency of Ed Murrow, 'a principled

journalist who took a stand against a malignant demagogue and helped bring him

down'. (Kemp, 2006: 58)

There is also a production company, Participant Productions, replete with agency and

intention, a company, operating in Hollywood, whose website bears the strap line and

mission statement:

> *Changing the world*
>
> > *one story at a time*
>
> Participant believes in the power of media to create great social change. Our goal
>
> is to deliver compelling entertainment that will inspire audiences to get involved
>
> in the issues that affect us all. [3]

We did not expect that in the days of Hollywood-Mosfilm.. While analysis would of

course complicate all of this, the play of agency is fertile ground for thinking through

the pragmatics of contemporary authorship.

And yet none of this quite answers Beckett's question – 'What matters who's

speaking…?' – or even decides whether it is a question of indifference or of making a

difference. Is there something more to the difference between Krommer and Mozart

than a dexterity in articulating the classical norms? Within the genius of the system, is there still room for the genius of the artist?

While our engagement with authorship – and the attendant issues of agency, authority, intention, creativity – is greatly enriched and complicated by an empirical understanding of its historical and contemporary conditions of existence, an accumulation of interesting facts without a theory seems to me to lead by a different route to the 'buffery' which Bordwell tries so hard to avoid: a knowledge-based appropriation of film which is impressive without being fully satisfying as an account of our experience of cinema. It is theory which defines the questions which research asks and confounds the easy answers which assume the sufficiency of empirical knowledge: the beneficiary is a more complex and appropriate theory. There may not be a Theory of Everything, and the 'Grand Theory' which Bordwell characterizes and caricatures, if it ever existed, has probably now gone the way of the Grand Narrative of Progress. There still remain fields, however, which require a more sophisticated theoretical, as well as historical, understanding. One of these is the constantly shifting field of imagination and creativity, raising issues of art and authorship which the anti-humanism of earlier film theory has constantly avoided and for which Bordwell's systematic rationality has not delivered satisfactory answers. A theory of creativity and the creative imagination in film and cinema is complicated, of course, by technology, industry, commerce and collective production, but without it film and cinema are impoverished and it is difficult to account for those cinephiliac moments which give us glimpses of the 'kingdom of heaven' and which make studying film an 'affair of the heart' as well as a quest for knowledge.

In his book, *The Singularity of Literature*, Derek Attridge concludes

> the attempt to do justice to literary works as *events*, welcoming alterity,
> countersigning the singular signature of the artist, inventively responding to
> invention, combined with a suspicion of all those terms that constitute the work as
> an object, is the best way to enhance the chances of achieving a vital critical
> practice. (2004: 137)

Similarly in film studies, a criticism informed by empirical research but motivated by theory – including a theory which engages in new ways with authorship, creativity and invention – seems to me to be the only way of establishing a vital critical practice which avoids constituting the work as an object.

Finally, then, the continuing work of theory is to keep alive debate and engagement, not simply applying institutionalized theories and knowledges, but rediscovering fields in which contesting theories of authorship and their conflicting desires and demands have historically played a key role. It is for this reason that I believe the writing in *Cahiers du cinéma* in the 1950s and 1960s still resonates, if not as a model of scholarship, at least as a confirmation that critical excitement and a love of films and cinema still has a role to play. In his book, *Literature, Theory, and Common Sense* – whose chapter on authorship and intention in literature repays attention – Antoine Compagnon describes a familiar scenario:

The theorists often give us the impression of raising very sensible criticisms against the positions of their adversaries; but as those adversaries, comforted by their ever clear conscience, refuse to give up and continue to hold forth, the theorists too begin to hold forth and push their own theses, or antitheses, to absurd lengths, and as a result annihilate themselves before their rivals, who are delighted to see themselves justified by the extravagance of their opponents' position. (2004: 5)

Despite the apparent absurdity of the ritual, Compagnon shares Casetti's belief (and mine) in the importance of the productivity of theory, producing knowledge not only through research and the accumulation of information and understanding but also by constituting a field of discussion and debate – the field, in fact, of dialectics. Theory is important in the 'rejuvenating struggle it led against received ideas in literary studies, and in the equally determined resistance with which those received ideas opposed it.' (Compagnon, 2004: 5) In the end, for Compagnon,

The aim of theory is in effect the defeat of common sense. It contests it, criticizes it, denounces it as a series of fallacies – the author, the world, the reader, style, history, value; theory makes it seem indispensable to begin by freeing oneself from these fallacies in order to talk about literature. But the resistance of common sense to theory is unimaginable… (193)

The history of film studies charts a narrative in which the common sense of authorship has been contested time after time. Each common sense has been vanquished and each

theory institutionalized so effectively that the victor has become the new received idea; contested again, vanquished again; and a new common sense installed, waiting for the challenge of new theories. Beckett again: 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better' (1974: 1). At each stage, something is lost and something gained. The work of theory is still contestatory, moving forward dialectically, rather like Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, continually looking backwards to pick up any fragments which may have been lost in the rubble of earlier encounters. The questions of art and authorship, creativity and imagination, may still prove an irritant in our attempts to come to terms with our complex engagements with cinema.

Notes

 [1] 'Epuration', Andrew (1993: 77) tells us, was the period in post-war France when certain individuals, suspected of collaboration, were prohibited from working in the film industry.

[2] This line is quoted by Foucault in 'What is an author?' (1977) and abbreviated as the final line of the essay.

[3] http://www.participantproductions.com (Accessed 3 January 2007).

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