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***La Politique des Auteurs* in British Film Studies:  
Traditional versus Structural Approaches**

Warren Buckland

Abstract: This essay charts the emergence of auteur structuralism in Britain from 1967-76 and the polemical debates that erupted between its adherents (Jim Kitses, Peter Wollen, Alan Lovell) on the one hand, and Robin Wood, a defender of traditional auteur theory, on the other. The essay considers the epistemological values behind the debate, and ends by outlining the incompatible types of knowledge and evidence each side in the debate held.

*La politique des auteurs* and film semiotics share an innovative way of conceptualizing and generating knowledge: each studies select properties of film using specific criteria from a particular standpoint. Cinema is not examined in its totality (as it is, for example, in Jean Mitry's monumental and encyclopedic two-volume *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma*<sup>1</sup>), but is scaled down to a small series of questions and problems that emerge from one theoretical perspective. *La politique des auteurs* is a narrowly focused, evaluative form of film criticism that not only privileges the work of directors over other above-the-line filmmakers (screenwriters, cinematographers, producers, etc.), but also isolates a small, elite group of directors, conferring upon them the title of auteur. The specific object of analysis is comprised of one or two properties of film – style, themes – which are, furthermore, defined in terms of the criterion of consistency, for consistency signifies the director's control and mastery over film. The semiotic theory that emerged out of the structural linguistics of Saussure systematically employs concepts (*langue/parole*, signifier/signified, syntagmatic relations/paradigmatic relations, arbitrariness, double articulation, etc.) to analyze one aspect of film (film as a sign system), rather than study the cinema 'as such' from an all-encompassing omniscient position.

The success of this new epistemological perspective on film is measured in terms of its ability to focus, in a systematic and consistent way, only on specific properties of its object of study: in *la politique des auteurs*, the ability to identify consistent themes

and/or stylistic patterns in a director's films; in semiotics, the ability to identify film's level of signification, defined from a strict semiotic perspective.

### **Empiricism vs Constructivism**

Yet, within this shared epistemology, a radical split can be detected – between an empiricist epistemology and a constructivist epistemology. Whereas an empiricist epistemology posits its object of study as pre-existing (already formed objects that generate knowledge when they are correctly observed, identified, and catalogued), the object of study in a constructivist epistemology is not given in advance and cannot, therefore, simply be observed, but is an abstract entity that needs to be constructed or modeled. The constructivist does not discover a specific object of study, but instead constructs it, for this object is defined as being inaccessible to perception. Saussure realized this in relation to the specific object of linguistic study when he stated that '[f]ar from it being the object that antedates the viewpoint, it would seem that it is the viewpoint that creates the object'.<sup>2</sup> Samuel Weber has said that '[t]his assertion marks out the epistemological space of Saussure's theoretical effort, and to neglect its far-reaching implications has inevitably meant to misconstrue the status of his arguments'.<sup>3</sup> Saussure's theoretical effort consists of developing a method that constitutes its object of study. Focus shifts to the significance of methodologies, for linguists need to follow the same methods in order to constitute the same object of study.

In the realm of criticism, empiricism conceives its object as a work of art produced by an author, which embodies a primary, original meaning that the reader directly experiences, whereas constructivism (including structuralism and semiotics) instead conceives its object as a text that partly manifests an unobservable, abstract, underlying system of codes. The key object of study within a constructivist framework is this unobservable underlying system. Empiricists, by contrast, are skeptical of the existence of these unobservables.

These two epistemological positions were played out in relation to auteur criticism in British film studies in the late 1960s-early 1970s. The next section will present this fertile period of British film culture chronologically, as manifest in publications, followed by a section detailing the polemics that erupted between the traditional

critics and the scholar theorists, together with the different types of knowledge and evidence held by each side of the debate.

### **Traditional Auteur Criticism: Robin Wood**

Although François Truffaut initially formulated *la politique des auteurs* to identify and privilege a small number of French directors – Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson, Jean Cocteau, Jacques Becker, Abel Gance, Max Ophuls, Jacques Tati, and Roger Leenhardt<sup>4</sup> – auteur criticism soon transformed the critical climate towards popular American cinema, for it promoted the serious study of Hollywood films – it expanded its purview to analyze Hollywood films with the same care and attention film critics used to praise European art films. Andrew Sarris translated *la politique des auteurs* into auteur theory for an American audience in the 1960s,<sup>5</sup> while Robin Wood was key to disseminating auteur criticism in Britain around the same time, beginning with his book on Hitchcock in 1965, quickly followed by a short study of Arthur Penn in 1967, and a study of Howard Hawks in 1968.<sup>6</sup> Wood's critical values are evident in the Introduction to his book on Hawks when he briefly discusses *Red Line 7000* (1965):

What I really like about *Red Line 7000* is the vital tension that is expressed throughout in the great complex of action, gesture, expression, speech, camera movement, camera placing, and editing, that is cinema: the sense of the film's being the work of a whole man, intuitively and spontaneously, as well as intellectually, alive.<sup>7</sup>

The extract begins with Wood simply expressing his liking for the film, but he justifies his evaluation using a series of direct observations of filmic techniques understood in terms of spiritual and humanist values. He celebrates the film's ability to express what he regards as life's moral dualism, or vital tension. He perceives life as a dynamic spiritual process oscillating between direct, spontaneous, intuitive, immediate experiences on the one hand and abstract rules and conventions on the other. Vital tension between the abstract and concrete creates the film's sense of 'aliveness', all the more significant for being expressed by a 'whole man', a director whose life embraces this dynamic conflict. Wood implicitly posits a seamless continuum between the director and the film, in which the film becomes the natural

expression of the director's whole being. This extract also catalogues the concrete, directly observable components of *mise en scène* that Wood sees as expressing the film's vital tension – from gestures to camera movement and editing. He views these components as forming an organic whole, interacting with each other to create the film's overall thematic meanings. For the most part, Wood's auteur studies focus on the thematic meanings and moral values in films rather than style and *mise en scène* per se.

Wood's language and his values derive in part from the liberal humanism of his teacher F.R. Leavis. In *The Great Tradition*, Leavis wrote that great writers (he names George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad) have 'a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity'.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in a discussion of poetry, Leavis noted that 'all that we can fairly ask of the poet is that he shall show himself to have been fully alive in our time'.<sup>9</sup> For Leavis, the successful writer lives life on an intense level, and expresses those experiences directly and effectively in his or her work. Similarly, reading literature requires an innate sensitivity to language and its ability to express experiences, human psychology, and moral values. To read literature, Leavis did not advocate the need for an explicit theory or method; instead, his liberal humanism posited an empiricism based on the close, direct, first hand reading of a poem or novel, and use of one's innate sensibility, formed from a deep understanding of language and its use by a wide variety of writers in specific texts.

### **Auteur Structuralism**

Focus on direct expression, first hand lived experience, primacy given to the individual, and a critical vocabulary of taste became anathema to critics and academics who adopted the methods of structuralism and semiotics in the 1960s. Structuralism, primarily in the form of Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology, tentatively filtered into auteur theory in the late 1960s, at the same time Wood's traditional auteur studies were published. An initial acknowledgement of structuralism emerged in a short statement by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith in his book on Visconti, first published in 1967:

The purpose of criticism becomes therefore to uncover behind the superficial contrasts of subject and treatment a structural hard core of basic and often recondite motifs. The pattern formed by these motifs, which may be stylistic or thematic, is what gives an author's work its particular structure, both defining it internally and distinguishing one body of work from another.<sup>10</sup>

Auteurism is no longer conceptualized here as a search for the film's creative source, but instead analyses distinctive structures internal to films. Nowell-Smith mentions that these structures can be either stylistic or thematic, although in practice he examined a few thematic oppositions in Visconti – opera/real life, opera/pop music, decadence/progress, idealism/realism. Yet, most of the book reads like a traditional auteur study – for example, this comment on *La Terra Trema* (1948) is typical: 'It is in the choice of concrete and immediate determinations that Visconti reveals most clearly his own artistic personality'.<sup>11</sup> Nowell-Smith expressed doubt in the feasibility of carrying out a completely structural analysis of a director's work.<sup>12</sup>

Alan Lovell's chapter-length thematic reading of Don Siegel followed in 1968. Lovell identified a system of oppositions at work in Siegel's world view: adventurer/society, crime/law, passion/control, anarchy/organization, and violence/tranquility.<sup>13</sup> Lovell noted that he used structuralism in order to offer a precise description of the films, in opposition to an evaluation. What stands out today in Lovell's reading is his clear-cut delineation of themes, rather than the structuralist methodology, which is used with a light touch. Structuralism is more evident in Jim Kitses' *Horizons West*, a study of three directors of the Western (Budd Boetticher, Anthony Mann, and Sam Peckinpah).<sup>14</sup> In this book-length study, Kitses has space to study the structural elements of the Western and a director's manipulation of its conventions. He defines a genre as 'a vital structure through which flow a myriad of themes and concepts'. He then delineates the director's relation to the genre: 'As such the form can provide a director with a range of possible connections and the space in which to experiment, to shape and refine the kind of effects and meaning he is working towards'.<sup>15</sup> The director is not a free expressive agent; instead, he must constantly work against the Hollywood mode of production, which, for Kitses, means the director must work within and manipulate the pre-existing genre conventions and structures.

Nowell-Smith, Lovell, and Kitses from 1967-69 represent a transitional period for auteur structuralism, where structuralism was tentatively introduced into film studies. Auteur structuralism achieved a fuller statement in Peter Wollen's chapter on auteur theory in his seminal book *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*.<sup>16</sup> In the Postscript to the 1972 edition, he noted that: 'by a process of comparison with other films, it is possible to decipher [...] a structure which underlies the film and shapes it, gives it a certain pattern of energy cathexis. *It is this structure which auteur analysis disengages from the film*'.<sup>17</sup> Wollen employed Lévi-Strauss' structural study of myth to analyze an auteur's underlying structure (although technically it is more accurate to call the object of analysis an auteur's underlying *system*). Yet, Wollen's chapter is programmatic: it only applied structural analysis informally and schematically to the comedies and dramas of Howard Hawks, and more rigorously but still schematically to the Westerns of John Ford.

Wollen sees Hawks' films as falling into two mutually exclusive categories, which are the inverse of each other: Hawks' claim as an author 'lies in the presence, together with the dramas, of their inverse, the crazy comedies', which represent 'the agonized exposure of the underlying tensions of the heroic dramas'.<sup>18</sup> A binary opposition therefore exists between Hawks' adventure dramas and comedies. Because of this opposition, Wollen argues, Hawks' corpus of films becomes rich.

Wollen then shifts his attention to Ford's Westerns, which he analyzes in structuralist terms by focusing on binary oppositions: 'The most relevant are garden versus wilderness, ploughshare versus sabre, settler versus nomad, European versus Indian, civilised versus savage, book versus gun, married versus unmarried, East versus West'.<sup>19</sup> 'Wilderness versus garden' is, according to Wollen, the 'master antinomy in Ford's films'<sup>20</sup> – and, in fact, one of the master antinomies of American culture, structuring its founding myth. A second related antinomy is between nomad (living in the wilderness) and settler (in the cultivated garden).<sup>21</sup> Both pairs feed into the quest for the Promised Land, a major theme in Ford's films. In terms of heroes who rule in his new land, Wollen divides them into another binary opposition: rational legal authority versus charismatic authority. Wollen therefore identifies three binary oppositions dominant in Ford: wilderness/garden; nomad/settler; rational legal

authority/charismatic authority. He gives three examples, focusing on the heroes in *The Searchers* (1956), *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* (1962), and *My Darling Clementine* (1946).

The traditional Romantic notion of the auteur theory is premised upon an expressive theory of causality. This traditional notion posits the director as a specific, purely subjective psychological cause, whose free will, desires, beliefs, and intentions consciously determine a film's meaning. Structuralism opposes this psychological theory, particularly its solipsistic philosophy of the subject. A film's meaning is not the product of an individual's private consciousness freely creating, nor is it determined by a film's relation to reality, but is the result of taking a small system of pre-existing signs and following pre-existing rules of combination and transformation to manifest a new permutation of signs. Structuralism therefore privileges the autonomous symbolic realm of language and signs, while downplaying individual subjectivity and reality as sources of meaning. What is important for auteur theory is that the structuralist location of meaning in language and other unconscious sign systems replaced the Romantics' location of meaning in the private subjective experiences of an individual freely creating meaning. The structuralist's approach to auteur theory redefines the status of director as auteur, by reducing the auteur to a specific structure that underlies and gives shape to their films.

Wollen reminds us that it was Jean Renoir who said that a director spends his whole life making one film.<sup>22</sup> Wollen uses Renoir's comment to align auteur theory with a fundamental tenet of Lévi-Strauss' structural study of myth: to conceive each film as a variant or incomplete version of a director's 'archi-film', just as the anthropologist collects and studies variants of the same myth: 'Underlying the different, individual tales was an archi-tale, of which they were all variants'.<sup>23</sup> In his 1972 postscript, Wollen stresses that this 'archi-film' does not pre-exist analysis; instead, it is constructed *a posteriori*, just as there is no one true version of a myth, but several incomplete variants – and it is from those variants that the anthropologist constructs a synthesis, the archi-tale.

Lévi-Strauss uses the term 'analysis' in its strict sense: a procedure that takes apart objects to reveal their ultimate constituents. Lévi-Strauss' work is premised on a form



of structural analysis that reduces a heterogeneous array of observable surface phenomena (linguistic messages, myths, films, etc.) down to an underlying unobservable system of finite codes, which are rearranged into paradigms.<sup>24</sup> A paradigm is a virtual, non-manifest set of associated or similar codes that can appear in the same place in a message. A code selected to be manifest in a message becomes a sign, and gains its meaning both in opposition to the codes in the paradigm that were not selected to be manifest and also from its syntagmatic relations to other signs manifest in the message.

In sum, structural analysis defines meaning from an intrinsic rather than extrinsic perspective, and holistically, in terms of paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations between codes and signs (rather than in terms of a sign's one-to-one relation to a referent).<sup>25</sup> Lévi-Strauss employed this structural method of analysis to identify paradigms within myths, a process that identifies the myths' latent symbolic meanings.

From the initial similarity of *la politique des auteurs* and film semiotics (delimited focus on specific properties of its object of study) to their epistemological opposition (empiricism vs constructivism), we now see an attempt at a synthesis, to bring traditional auteurism into the epistemological framework of structuralism and semiotics. This attempt generated a heated polemical debate.

### **Polemics: Criticism vs Scholarship**

The polemics around auteurism that emerged in the late 1960s in the UK parallels the fierce debate between traditional literary historian Raymond Picard and 'new school' young Turk Roland Barthes in Paris in 1964, shortly after the publication of Barthes's structural analysis of Racine.<sup>26</sup> This debate (documented by Serge Doubrovsky<sup>27</sup>) galvanized the fundamental epistemological shift from an empiricist to a constructivist epistemology. This shift can also be characterized in terms of the opposition between 'criticism' and 'scholarship', with the traditional critics (Picard, Leavis, Wood) threatened by the rise of a professionalized class of academics trained in theory, which they applied reflexively to their chosen objects of study. Rather than evaluate individual works in their concrete specificity, literary theorists began positing unobservable abstract entities such as 'literariness', paradigms and syntagms,

*la langue* (and other systems of codes), narrative kernels/satellites, and connotative meanings.

Nowell-Smith, Kitses, Lovell, and Wollen adopted structuralism to promote auteur theory to the level of scholarship – although Wollen still tried at first to use it for the purpose of criticism, to make value judgments. Whereas the Picard/Barthes debate was initiated by the publication of research written from an innovative perspective (Barthes' structural analysis of Racine), in the UK it was the publication in 1968 of traditional criticism, Wood's monograph on Hawks, that sparked the debate. Lovell's essay 'Robin Wood – A Dissenting View'<sup>28</sup> reviews the book in order to attack the old orthodoxy of film criticism. Lovell finds no exposition of theory or method in Wood's book, and a lack of reflexivity in the way he evaluates and applies moral values to films. Instead, the book simply consists of a series of assertions: 'Too often I am confronted by a sense of nothing more than critical assertions. I am puzzled by Robin Wood's conclusions and the way he reaches them'.<sup>29</sup> Lovell traces this attitude back to Leavis's influence on Wood.

In place of this old critical orthodoxy, Lovell restated (from his study of Siegel) his non-evaluative descriptive approach to film auteurs:

By the 'auteur' principle I understand a descriptive method which seeks to establish, not whether a director is a great director, but what the basic structure of a director's work is. The assumption behind this principle is that any director creates his films on the basis of a central structure and that all of his films can be seen as variations or developments of it.<sup>30</sup>

Lovell does not develop the idea of structure further, except to say it consists of themes, and that a structural analysis therefore involves identifying 'thematic resemblances' between a director's films.

Lovell's structuralism is fairly modest, in terms of his shift to a constructivist epistemology, but sufficiently distinct from Wood's form of film criticism. Lovell is more direct in his emphasis on analysis rather than evaluation (he uses the word 'description', which still belongs to the terminology of empiricism; but the contrast

with evaluation remains). As with scholarship in general, he encourages reflexive research, whereby one's theoretical premises, methods, and objects of analysis are made explicit.

Wood's response to Lovell, 'Ghostly Paradigm and H.C.F.',<sup>31</sup> begins in typical fashion by challenging Lovell on the micro-level, pointing out his misinterpretations of and false attributions in particular sentences – although he also spends a great deal of time defending Leavis, and he briefly mentions the achievements of Wollen's *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*. When addressing Lovell's theory and method, Wood does so by using the two phrases employed in his essay's title, both of which reinforce his empirical epistemology. He characterizes the director's basic structure, as posited by Lovell and Wollen, as nothing more than a ghostly paradigm, existing in an ideal Platonic world of non-material abstract Forms. Wood then uses the opportunity to reassert the need to engage with the concrete reality of individual films, a focus that characterizes all of his work. Secondly, he evokes the mathematical activity of factorization (finding the Highest Common Factor) as a way to characterize Lovell's structural analysis: 'Mr. Lovell is proposing, essentially, that we apply this principle to the cinema. Question: Find the H.C.F. of the films of Arthur Penn. Answer: unsocialized adolescent versus father-figure. As in Mathematics, it has its uses'.<sup>32</sup> More generally, factorization is a form of reductionism, a defining trait of structuralism and semiotics, which reduce vast sums of variegated data (kinship structures, hundreds of diverse myths, narratives, images etc.) down to a small cohesive system of underlying invariant codes. Wood ends by asserting that the structural approach is unable to determine the value of a film. Lovell acknowledged this and bracketed out evaluation from structural analysis, while Wollen (who was the most successful in reformulating auteurism from the perspective of structuralism's constructivist epistemology) initially employed it to carry out evaluation.

However, Wood is not entirely dismissive of the structural method of film analysis. He claims to use it when grouping films together in his book on Hawks:

I grouped *Only Angels Have Wings*, *To Have and Have Not* and *Rio Bravo* precisely because they reveal clearly the kind of common pattern or sub-structure Mr. Lovell wants us to look for in a director's work. Its recurrence

suggests its importance to Hawks, but not that the films in which it is most manifest are necessarily superior to those in which it is submerged or only marginally present.<sup>33</sup>

Later in his reply, Wood says he regards the structural method simply as a tool, to be used and discarded at will. Such a non-committed attitude means he did not embrace structuralism's constructivist epistemology, but instead simply regarded it as another empirical tool for classifying and grouping films. He did not see a contradiction between his focus on the concrete specificity of films and the ruthlessly reductive agenda of structuralism to isolate from films a deep underlying abstract structure. This is evident in the above quotation, where he understands structure simply as an observable surface detail, a 'common pattern' in the three Hawks films, which he attributes directly to Hawks' intentionality ('Its recurrence suggests its importance to Hawks').

Alan Lovell responded to Wood a year later in 'The Common Pursuit of Pure Judgement'.<sup>34</sup> He used the opportunity to develop a more trenchant critique of both Leavis and Wood, arguing that 'I wanted to shift the emphasis from *the critic* to *criticism*, from personal qualities to impersonal ones, from moral qualities to intellectual ones'.<sup>35</sup> This is a clear statement of the rise of a professionalized class of academics trained in impersonal, intellectual theory replacing the old traditional critics writing criticism in terms of their own personal moral values.<sup>36</sup>

In 1976 Wood took up the debate again, this time in book form. In the opening chapter of *Personal Views: Explorations in Film*, he responded to Lovell's challenge to spell out his own critical values. He begins by distinguishing his work from abstract theory, and reaffirms his previous remarks about privileging the critic's personal engagement with individual works, guided by an openness to experience rather than a set of theoretical doctrines. From this open-minded, personal experience, he argues, the critic is able to evaluate a work's aesthetic and moral values. As a critic, Wood says he draws upon 'absolute human qualities' such as generosity, tolerance, intelligence, creativity, sensitivity, tenderness, and compassion.<sup>37</sup> These personal qualities are supplemented with a focus on a work of art's coherence, which, Wood emphasizes, 'is only meaningful in conjunction with concepts like

“complexity,” “density,” “inner tensions”; it can never be an *absolute* criterion’.<sup>38</sup> A complex work of art needs to overcome insurmountable obstacles to achieve coherence, increasing its value if it is successful, in opposition to a simple work of art, which can achieve coherence more easily – although Wood privileges complex works of art that strive for (without reaching) coherence over simple works that do achieve coherence. This is because, Wood argues, complex artworks present sophisticated insights into human experience, and those that fail to achieve coherence are still valuable because they attempt to express previously unarticulated experiences. Wood cites chapters 6 and 7 of D. H. Lawrence’s novel *The Rainbow* as uneven but nonetheless invaluable for their ‘intensive exploration of areas of experience previously untouched in literature’.<sup>39</sup> In sum, Wood’s critical values privilege an organic understanding of an artwork as a living whole, and the way that whole is presented to the critic’s consciousness for contemplation and moral evaluation.

In another chapter of *Personal Views*, ‘Hawks De-Wollenized’,<sup>40</sup> Wood launched a full-on assault of Wollen’s auteur chapter in *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*. His main target is Wollen’s reductionism, which, Wood argues via several examples, leads to inflexible criticism that misses or distorts the subtlety of individual films and scenes in Hawks’ films. Wood attributes this distortion to Wollen’s structuralist method and its excessively abstract approach to film criticism. ‘Are we interested in works of art’, Wood asks, ‘or in the abstractions that can be made from an artist’s work? My answer is that for me art is concrete and specific’.<sup>41</sup> Wood’s main response to the abstractions of structuralist theory is to cite another example from a specific film. A different answer to his question would be one in which there is more to art than a critic’s personal response to it, however well that response may be articulated in criticism. Privileging personal views can become confessional and autobiographical, which can ultimately lead to solipsism. William Van Wert presents the following example from Wood:

I have come to feel, during the past few years, that *Sansho The Bailiff* and *Tokyo Story* may be superior to any American film I know — superior even to *Vertigo*, to *Rio Bravo*, to *Letter From an Unknown Woman* — superior in a greater maturity of vision, and in the completeness and conscious authority with which that vision is realized.<sup>42</sup>

Van Wert asks how do we measure ‘maturity of vision’, ‘completeness’, and ‘conscious authority’ except in relation to Wood’s own personal development in the past few years. In place of this ‘freelance facile criticism’, Van Wert argues for ‘a working methodology for viewing films’, that is, a series of formulated methods that can serve as a reference point that critics can follow. That is, he argues for a shift from a first person perspective to an impersonal or third person perspective.

### **First and Third Person Perspectives**

The structuralist revolution decisively overturned this philosophy of consciousness, which reduces existence to consciousness, and replaced it with impersonal symbolic structures. Structuralism initiated a radical critique of the ‘first person perspective’ (focus on introspection, or private mental events) and replaced it with the public, ‘third person perspective’ of language and signs. Prior to structuralism, conscious mental processes were regarded as the foundation of knowledge (including self-knowledge). ‘However’, writes Thomas Daddesio, ‘once this privilege came to be viewed as illusory, introspection was replaced by methods relying on a third-person perspective. From this new perspective, the access individuals have to their own thoughts could no longer be taken as the foundation for knowledge and, consequently, private events were replaced, in discussions of language, meaning, and reason, by events that were open to public scrutiny such as the behavior of others, the words they utter, and the uses to which they put words’.<sup>43</sup> The structuralists’ assumption of indirect access to one’s thoughts via language and other intersubjective sign systems replaced the misguided, first person assumption of immediate access to the thoughts in one’s own mind.

When Wood says he employs structuralism as a tool, he misperceives this fundamental shift from the first to third person perspective. He again downplays the constructivist epistemology of structuralism, for he views it only within his own empiricist epistemology. Both Wood and Wollen study films intrinsically, but Wood adopted a traditional thematic reading that isolated implicit meanings, viewed as pre-existing meanings that need to be unearthed, while Wollen isolated a more abstract *structure* of themes. Meaning does not emerge simply from the content of themes, but from a web of signification – from the syntagmatic relations and paradigmatic

oppositions between themes. These structural relations do not have the same epistemological status as the themes; they do not pre-exist in some fully formed state and cannot, therefore, be simply read from the film, but are constructed and modeled. Structuralism analyses themes in terms of a logic of difference rather than a logic of identity, in terms of the structural relations between what is manifest in a film and what is not manifest, rather than in terms of manifest, self-sufficient content.

The traditional and structural schools of auteurism therefore have incompatible standards for what counts as knowledge and what counts as evidence. They fundamentally disagree on what properties of film to focus on; whether auteurism is a form of criticism or scholarship; the role of the individual in creating and understanding films; and whether films are conceived as expressive works of art or as impersonal texts. Traditional auteurism relies on observation and experience as sources of knowledge, together with classification and comparison. It is premised on the Romantic notion of a subjective, pre-rational authentic intuition, one that spontaneously expresses interior human meanings ignored by rationalism. For auteur structuralism, the source of meaning is the unobservable system of codes that pre-exist messages and interlocutors. Rather than direct observation and experience, knowledge derives from the construction of models. Traditional auteurism operates at a low level of abstraction from the data, whereas auteur structuralism operates at a high level of abstraction.

Within polemical disputes involving different epistemological positions, the proponents talk past one another; they translate the concepts from one paradigm into their own paradigm before criticizing them, leaving the opponent open to the charge of distortion and misrepresentation. But this is common in polemical disputes – indeed, it is the precondition of the dispute.

Wood's concrete counter-examples to Wollen's abstractions simply miss the mark. Wollen is not trying to imitate traditional auteur criticism in its attention to the surface specificities of individual films; instead, he is discarding that empirical type of auteurism and is reconfiguring auteurism from a structuralist perspective. So when Wood cites individual films to counter Wollen, the effort is wasted, for these counter-examples belong to the paradigm Wollen is discarding. Both authors are working

within different epistemological positions, each with their own intellectual presuppositions.

Yet, Wollen initially wrote traditional auteur criticism before the publication of *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, in a series of essays published in the *New Left Review* in the mid-1960s (and subsequently published in later editions of *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*). The significance of his auteur structuralism lies in his ability to work within one paradigm before supplanting it with another paradigm. In his subsequent work in the 1980s, Robin Wood did not so much transform his own criticism, but expanded it. He remained committed to the individual consciousness and to writing about individual films, but from a political perspective. In *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, published in 1986, he mentioned his previous ‘critical innocence (or culpable ignorance, as you will) – innocence, above all, of concepts of ideology, and of any clearly defined political position’.<sup>44</sup> In the 1980s, he wrote new essays and re-evaluated his previous auteur studies to determine ‘how individual films dramatize, as they inevitably must, the conflicts that characterize our culture: conflicts centered on class/wealth, gender, race, sexual orientation’.<sup>45</sup> Wood and Wollen therefore demonstrate two different modes of transformation – Wollen shifted auteurism to a new paradigm, while Wood gradually expanded it to include politics as an essential dimension of his film criticism.

*I wish to thank Pete Boss for his comments on an earlier version of this essay.*

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Mitry. *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma, 1: Les Structures*; Paris: Editions universitaires 1963; *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma, 2: Les Formes*. Paris: Editions universitaires 1965.

<sup>2</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin. London: Peter Owen, 1960, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Weber, ‘Saussure and the Apparition of Language: The Critical Perspective’, *Modern Language Notes*, 91, 1976, p. 916.



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<sup>4</sup> François Truffaut: 'Une certaine tendance du cinéma français', *Cahiers du Cinéma* 31 (January 1954).

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Sarris's auteur theory is based on three premises: technical competence; personal style; and, most importantly, interior meaning. He defined interior meaning as 'the tension between a director's personality and his material', adding that interior meaning 'is an élan of the soul' – in which soul is defined as 'that intangible difference between one personality and another' (Andrew Sarris. 'Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962'. *Film Culture* 27, 1962, p. 7). Sarris therefore relies on a mystical, ineffable, Romantic notion to distinguish one director from another.

<sup>6</sup> Robin Wood, *Hitchcock Films*. London: Zwemmer, 1965; *Arthur Penn*. London: Studio Vista, 1967; *Howard Hawks*. London: Secker and Warburg/BFI, 1968.

<sup>7</sup> Wood, *Howard Hawks*, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> F.R. Leavis. *The Great Tradition*. New York: George W. Stewart, 1950, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of the Contemporary Situation*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1932, p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Visconti*. Secker & Warburg/BFI, 1967, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Nowell-Smith, *Visconti*, p. 48.

<sup>12</sup> Nowell-Smith, *Visconti*, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> Alan Lovell, *Don Siegel: American Cinema*, revised edition. London: BFI, 1975, p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> Jim Kitses, *Horizons West*. London: Thames and Hudson/BFI, 1969.

<sup>15</sup> Jim Kitses *Horizons West*, p. 26.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Wollen. *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*. London: Secker & Warburg/BFI, 1969 (revised edition, 1972).

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<sup>17</sup> Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, 1972, p. 167 (emphasis added).

<sup>18</sup> Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, 1972, p. 91.

<sup>19</sup> Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, 1972, p. 94.

<sup>20</sup> Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, 1972, p. 96.

<sup>21</sup> Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, 1972, p. 97.

<sup>22</sup> Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, 1972, p. 104.

<sup>23</sup> Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, 1972, p. 93.

<sup>24</sup> Lévi-Strauss followed the structural linguistics of Saussure and Roman Jakobson, who defined language (*langage*) as a system of underlying paradigms (*la langue*), although it is also important to note that other linguists, such as M.A.K. Halliday, also privileged the study of an underlying system of paradigms in his systemic functional linguistics, based in part on his borrowings from Hjelmslev (who rigorously formalized the work of Saussure).

<sup>25</sup> Roman Jakobson emphasized comparable ways of thinking in mathematics and biology: ‘Modern mathematics suggests that “it is not things that matter but the relations between them.” In biology also, as Schrödinger professes, the discrete differences of properties are “really the fundamental concept rather than the property itself.” Since the phonemic entities are purely relative, their correlations within the pattern are the core problem which has engrossed linguists of various countries and interests’. *Selected Writings, volume 2*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1971, p. 225.

<sup>26</sup> Roland Barthes, *Sur Racine*. Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1963.

<sup>27</sup> Serge Doubrovsky. *The New Criticism in France*, trans. Derek Coltman. Introduction by Edward Wasiolek. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973.

<sup>28</sup> Alan Lovell, ‘Robin Wood – A Dissenting View’, *Screen*, 10, no. 2, 1969, pp. 42-55.

<sup>29</sup> Lovell, ‘Robin Wood – A Dissenting View’, p. 45.

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<sup>30</sup> Lovell, 'Robin Wood – A Dissenting View', pp. 47-48.

<sup>31</sup> Robin Wood, 'Ghostly Paradigm and H.C.F.: An Answer to Alan Lovell', *Screen*, 10, no. 3, 1969, pp. 35-47.

<sup>32</sup> Wood, 'Ghostly Paradigm and H.C.F.', p. 40.

<sup>33</sup> Wood, 'Ghostly Paradigm and H.C.F.', p. 36.

<sup>34</sup> Alan Lovell, 'The Common Pursuit of Pure Judgement', *Screen*, 11, no. 4/5, 1970, pp. 76-88.

<sup>35</sup> Lovell, 'The Common Pursuit of Pure Judgement', p. 77.

<sup>36</sup> British auteur structuralism received additional commentary and criticism from outside the UK, particularly from Charles Eckert, who focused on the significance of Lévi-Strauss in their work ('The English Cine-Structuralists'), and Brian Henderson, who developed a critique of both Wollen and Eckert ('Critique of Cine-Structuralism'). I will not dwell on these well-known essays, except to say that Geoffrey Nowell-Smith entered the debate by replying to Eckert ('I Was a Star-Struck Structuralist', *Screen* 14, no. 3, 1973, pp. 92-99), denying a British school of auteur-structuralism ever existed, although it is important to note that Nowell-Smith, Lovell, Kitses, and Wollen all worked for the BFI education department, and their books were published in its 'Cinema One' Series (co-published with Secker & Warburg and Thames and Hudson).

<sup>37</sup> Robin Wood. *Personal Views: Explorations in Film*. London: Gordon Fraser, 1976, pp. 14-15.

<sup>38</sup> Wood, *Personal Views*, p. 18.

<sup>39</sup> Wood, *Personal Views*, p. 19.

<sup>40</sup> Wood, *Personal Views*, pp. 191-206.

<sup>41</sup> Wood, *Personal Views*, p. 203.

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<sup>42</sup> Wood, quoted in William Van Wert, 'Robin Wood as Poddleganger', *Jump Cut*, no. 16, 1977: <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC16folder/RobinWoodRev.html>

<sup>43</sup> Thomas C. Daddesio, *On Minds and Symbols: The Relevance of Cognitive Science for Semiotics*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1995, p. 50.

<sup>44</sup> Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 11.

<sup>45</sup> Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, p. 4.