

**Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael:**  
**The Duel For the Soul of American Film Criticism**

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For My Parents

”When we think about art and how it is thought about [...] we refer both to the practice of art and the deliberations of criticism.”

–*Charles Harrison & Paul Wood*

“[H]abits of liking and disliking are lodged in the mind.”

–*Bernard Berenson*

“The motion picture is unique [...] it is the one medium of expression where America has influenced the rest of the world”

–*Iris Barry*

“[I]f you want to practice something that *isn't* a mass art, heaven knows there are plenty of other ways of expressing yourself.”

–*Jean Renoir*

“If it's all in the script, why shoot the film?”

–*Nicholas Ray*

“Author + Subject = Work”

–*Andrè Bazin*

## **Table of Contents**

Preface and Acknowledgements	p. 6.
Introduction	p. 8.
Defining Art in Relation to Criticism	p. 14.
The Popular As a Common Ground– And an Outline of Study	p. 19.
Career Overview – Andrew Sarris	p. 29.
Career Overview – Pauline Kael	p. 32.
American Film Criticism From its Beginnings to the 1950s – And a Note on Present Challenges	p. 35.
Notes on Axiological Criticism, With Sarris and Kael as Examples	p. 41.
Movies: The Desperate Art	p. 72.
Auteurism – French and American	p. 82.
Notes on the Auteur Theory 1962	p. 87.
"Circles and Squares: Joys and Sarris" – Kael's Rebuttal	p. 93.

Raising Kane: Kael As Film Historian	p. 112.
Sarris As Film Historian: Directors and Directions Part One :The Rankings.	p. 125.
Directors and Directions Part Two: Toward a Theory of Film History	p. 135.
Final Thoughts	p. 153.
Conlusion – What Has Been Done?	p. 165.
Bibliography	p. 168.

## Preface and Acknowledgements

A while back, my undertaking to write this thesis seemed permanently stalled. I am grateful to my supervisor Søren Birkvad, who essentially gave me the same advice that Andrew Sarris had been given by his editor while he was writing his last book: “One can never finish. One can only stop.” The twin subject of Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael had been in the back of mind long before I put pen to paper. In my late teens, I saved up to buy a Laserdisc-player. (It is a nostalgic reminder of my advanced years that I came of age cinematically in an era before DVD, VOD and High Definition.) My friends and I would devour the films of the New Hollywood filmmakers and discuss performances, sequences, camera placement, and themes. I guess in some ways I owe this thesis to Ole Jacob Rosten, Jarle Øverland and Trond Ola Wiigen, with whom I have shared so many movies and discussed so many stylistic epiphanies—to use a phrase Sarris is fond of.

I can still remember vividly the elation I felt the first time I saw *Mean Streets*, in a widescreen Laserdisc transfer. I did not realize it at the time, but my friends and I were actually applying Sarris’s critical methods to the films Kael adored and fought for. Not only that, we were responding to what she saw as the particular greatness of movies. As a freshman, I discovered not only the writings of Sarris and Kael, but also fell in love with the old Hollywood movies to which Sarris has dedicated his career. The rest, as the saying goes, is history.

Many people have shaped this thesis in profound ways. I would like to thank Kristin Sandvik for going above and beyond the call of duty to get the source material I needed, or in some cases, simply *thought* I needed. I also extend my heartfelt thanks to Geir Neverdal and Kari Bjølgerud Hansen, without whom I could have never written a text of this magnitude and complexity in what is for me a second language. Thanking your therapist strikes me as a uniquely American thing to do, but since this is a thesis about American film criticism, it seems appropriate. So, thank you, Hilde Johanne Aafoss. Our discussions of everything in my life during the past few years (including this thesis) have been an inspirational factor in simply getting the thing done. On a similar note, I also thank my brother Roald Fossen for technical assistance when it seemed my computer was about to give in. Ane Faugstad Aarø and David M. Smith have served me well as proof-readers.

My friend and fellow student Håvard Berstad has read the manuscript throughout and has been unstinting with his perceptive comments. I should go on record to thank Pauline Ann Hoath at the University of Bergen for her insights on pop art and the cultural climate in the 1960s.

Most of all, I would like to thank Stèfan Snævarr. Although his direct involvement in this project has been less than nominal, his intellectual keenness and unwavering generosity have influenced it in more ways than I can remember, much less mention. You have all made this work possible. Its faults are of course entirely my own doing.

Inge Fossen, April 2009, Uppsala

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## **Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael: Analogies and Contrasts in the Duel for the Soul of American Film Criticism**

### Introduction

In his book, *The Function of Criticism* (1984), Terry Eagleton makes the following statement, which I find rather depressing because substantially true:

[C]riticism today lacks all substantive social function. It is either part of the public relations branch of the literary industry, or a matter wholly internal to the academies. [...] The contradiction in which criticism finally runs aground is one between inchoate amateurism and socially marginal professionalism.<sup>1</sup>

It would not be unfair to say that this polarisation of criticism has become increasingly pronounced in writing about film—even more so than in writing about literature. On the one hand, there are those instantly quotable, nearly subliterate exclamation blurbs (the *WOW* being the extreme, but far from unheard-of case) by more or less nondescript general interest reviewers diffused through the various and ever-expanding channels of mass media that serve merely to prop up massive ad campaigns.<sup>2</sup> At the other extreme are the various branches of scholarly criticism, laden with highly specialized jargon and totally unconcerned with issues of artistic merit.

The latter has been the case in most of what is usually labelled *film theory* since the mid-sixties. At present, a somewhat similar trend is making itself strongly felt in the field of academic *film history*, which is becoming less concerned with detailing the genesis of masterpieces, seminal turning points of the medium and other *canon*-related questions, shifting instead to more holistic and empirical approach—no doubt to bring film history closer in line with other branches of hyphenate history like social and cultural history, which are older and more prestigious disciplines. I believe

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Eagleton (1984) *The Function of Criticism: From The Spectator to Post-Structuralism* London: Verso Books. p.7ff

<sup>2</sup> The internet and the spread of blogging may also be the ultimate step towards making film criticism democratic in the banal sense of being a “free for all” genre for the millions who have access. This development also raises disconcerting questions of editorial responsibility, which, admittedly, are more pressing in other areas of journalism.



the very broad distinctions outlined above to be, on the whole, a quite adequate summary of the present situation.

Sceptical and historically-minded readers may object to my thinly-veiled implication that film theory and film history are concomitant with criticism, or even special branches of criticism at large. I stand by this implication, which cannot be entirely original, since it is also present in the quotation from Terry Eagleton presented in the opening paragraph of this thesis.

Regarding film history, it is my firm conviction that the only truly relevant difference between aesthetic film history and film criticism is that the historian *by definition* has to deal with the tension between change and stasis over time, whereas the mere critic may *potentially* disregard the temporal aspect. Still, this a minority view, and for practical purposes I shall modify it somewhat. It is expedient for analytical purposes to distinguish between critical film history and empirical or contextual film history, and I shall do so in this thesis. I shall give a much fuller account of the relationship between film history and film criticism in my examination of our protagonists' sharply divergent efforts as film historians.

Returning to Eagleton's lament and taking it at face value, I wish to compare two film critics, Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael, whose bodies of work are neither socially marginal nor amateurish. On the contrary, I believe these two to be socially substantial as well as aesthetically significant. While Susan Sontag should probably be regarded as *prima inter pares* among American critics and cultural commentators in the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Sarris and Kael belong in her company, at least, as distinctive critical essayists and accomplished belletrists. Unlike Sontag, however, they must be counted as “dedicated no bones about it film critics.”<sup>3</sup> They broke into print at a very pregnant moment in the mid-fifties, a decade or so before the rising tide irrevocably broke the dam of resistance against film scholarship in America.

In that cultural climate, film critics and reviewers working the journalistic beat in general interest magazines and specialized, almost underground film magazines could, if they were smart enough and bullish enough and witty enough, become instrumental in defining film as an academic field that exploded in the culturally volatile sixties—and matter to moviegoers at the same time. Sarris put it like this when he looked back on the sixties from the vantage point of 1973:

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<sup>3</sup> Francis Davies (2002) *Afterglow: A Last Conversation with Pauline Kael*. New York: DaCapo Press. p.62.

While my debate with Pauline Kael in *Film Quarterly* attracted a great deal of attention as a squabble between two schools of thought, it served also to propel two obscure polemicists from the little magazine backwaters into the mainstream of the critical establishment.<sup>4</sup>

It is worth belabouring at this juncture that Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael are journalists first and foremost. Notwithstanding the considerable amount of important interpretive news reporting, the perceptive reader may counter by stressing that the journalistic ideal is embodied in our collective psyche as the newshounds who simply follow and report the breaking news, without any literary or rhetorical pretensions. I hereby submit that Sarris and Kael, by virtue of their work as film critics, primarily belong to cultural journalism.

According to Norwegian media scholar Martin Eide, the fabled newshound is the journalistic ideal type: a reporter who does not see himself as someone actively engaged in the construction of narratives and the production of ideology.<sup>5</sup> If one requires an example of this ideal, the nominally emancipated comic book character Lois Lane strikes me as its purest distillation imaginable in fiction, though we encounter them (the real ones) several times a day on CNN. It is my contention that the *conscious* construction of narratives and the production of ideology is exactly what the cultural journalist or critic, as opposed to the news reporter, is engaged in. When Sarris returned from a life-changing spell in Paris, he returned, by his own admission, with “a foreign ideology”:

As I remember that fateful year in Paris, deliriously prolonged conversations at sidewalk cafes still assault my ears with what in Paris passed for profundity and in New York for peculiarity. I have never really recovered from the Parisian heresy (in New York eyes) concerning the sacred importance of the cinema. Hence I returned to New York not merely a cultist but a cultist with a foreign ideology.<sup>6</sup>

Pauline Kael's criticism, reflecting her complex attitudes about the tension between trash and art, is of course no less ideological for being indigenously American and for revolving around a countercultural understanding of *Art* and *Pop*. I ought to move swiftly to dispel any lingering suspicions that the mere mention of the word *ideology* entails a dour Marxist exposé of American film criticism's false consciousness. Far from it. I feel the need to point this out, since Western

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Sarris (1978) *Politics and Cinema*. New York: University of Columbia Press p. 188.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Eide (1991) *Nyhetens Interesse-Nyhetsjournalistikk Mellom Tekst og Kontekst*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget. p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Sarris (1970) *Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema 1955/1969*. New York. Simon & Schuster. p. 13.

Marxists of different stripes (but of the same colour) have all but monopolized this term in academic discourse. Therefore, I shall, with some hesitation, propose the replacement of Eide's rather tainted word *ideology*—which has a downright sinister ring due to the cataclysmic events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that were perpetrated in its name—with the more neutral, or even positive word *ideas*. What does this mean? It simply means that criticism, understood as cultural journalism, is as dependent on a personal voice and opinions and reflections as on newsworthy events.

Two eminent historians who have written extensively on the American press, Michael and Edwin Emery, define journalism in the foreword of their seminal book, *The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media*, in a concise way that seems especially poignant when connected to the work of Sarris and Kael and their shared place in the stream of the history of film criticism. “Journalism history is the story of humanity’s long struggle to communicate, to discover and interpret news and to offer intelligent opinion in the marketplace of ideas.”<sup>7</sup> Since the end of the nineteenth century, when films first appeared, the latest releases in cinemas worldwide have been considered newsworthy, and the reviews we encounter routinely, in the popular press and specialized film magazines alike, typically lay claim to news-value of some sort or another.<sup>8</sup> Film critics, who, as opposed to mere reporters, would offer their “opinions in the marketplace of ideas”, did not however really proliferate until the 1950s onwards—even if the battle to elevate film as such from novelty entertainment to art had been fought (and in a restricted sense, won) in the twenties while the movies still were silent. It is, however, fair to say that Sarris and Kael would move quite a bit beyond their predecessors by popularizing the notion of movies as art.<sup>9</sup>

It could be argued with conviction that what may be designated the Sarris-Kael feud over the *auteur theory* is the only substantial polemical debate about film carried out by journalistic critics in America. Cultural historian Raymond J. Haberski Jr. has called their much publicised feud “the duel for the soul of American film criticism.”<sup>10</sup>

Like Addison DeWitt, a critic who declared himself central to the theatre in Joseph Mankiewicz’ *All About Eve* (1950), Sarris and Kael wielded their power as tastemakers in a way that affected the course of (American) film and how we think and talk about it.

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Emery & Edwin Emery (1988) *The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Publishers. 6<sup>th</sup> Edition. p.v.

<sup>8</sup> Exemplified, for instance, by Kael’s capsule reviews in the pages of the “On the Town” section in the *New Yorker* throughout her tenure at the magazine. These capsules were collected in book form and published as *5001 Nights at the Movies*. Boston: Owl Books.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond J. Haberski Jr. *It's Only a Movie: Films and Critics in American Culture*. Kentucky: Kentucky University Press. p. 124.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 122-143.

Sarris still stands as the auteur critic *par excellence* in America and is often credited with adopting the French *La Politique des Auteurs* and translating it for an Anglophone public by coining the much-used and abused term *auteur theory*.<sup>11</sup> His counterpart Pauline Kael was a fiercely combative and roving intellectual propelled to fame by attacking other critics and scholars. She was also a great populist in the American tradition. While Sarris pioneered the use of European concepts to discuss American genre films and European and Asian art films on an equal aesthetic footing, Kael preferred to make use of a quintessentially American pragmatism to deflate pretension.

In the sixties, Sarris and Kael both defended the vitality of American films, at a time when foreign films (i.e. European and Japanese) were probably regarded, relatively speaking, as more intellectually *chic* than they are today.

Like no other critic, Kael pointed out and forcefully brought home the point that the immediately gratifying sensuousness of the popular and the trashy (to use one of her favourite critical terms) in movies is integral to their aesthetic appeal and their claim to art status. She conveyed this beautifully in her writing. The complexities and strengths and flaws of her position lie in giving film as a popular art its aesthetic due and insisting on its particular intrinsic value, while at the same time countering the tendency to treat it with solemnity.

Her collection *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* came with an explanatory note which has come to serve as an emblematic summation of her thinking, and above all her feelings about film: “The words ‘Kiss Kiss Bang Bang,’ which I saw on an Italian movie poster, are perhaps the briefest statement imaginable of the basic appeal of the movies. This appeal is what attracts us, and ultimately what makes us despair when we realize how seldom movies are more than this.”<sup>12</sup>

At the height of her clout from the late sixties and throughout the rest of her career, Kael embodied that most problematic and most American of virtues: the influence and prestige that stems from popular success.

That I find these two critics worth discussing should by now be obvious, but at the risk of jumping to premature conclusions, I shall express my prejudice even more bluntly: Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris to me loom large as the most important film critics in America. No doubt they loom large because they were and are considered classic rivals, with the auteur theory and its application

<sup>11</sup> Strictly speaking, this is incorrect. John Caughie points out that the term *Auteur Theory* was first used by French critic Luc Moullet as early as 1959 in a *Cahiers* article on Sam Fuller. John Caughie (ed.) (2001[1981]) *Theories of Authorship*. London: Routledge. p. 62. Sarris should, however, be credited for giving the term widespread currency.

<sup>12</sup> Pauline Kael (1970[1968]) *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* London: Calder & Boyars. Preface. Unpaginated.

their bone of contention. In academia and the popular press alike, much has been made of their status as antagonists. Almost all the secondary literature on Sarris's and Kael's criticism is slanted strongly in favour of one or the other, which is to say that the battle lines between *Sarrisians* and *Paulettes* are still keenly felt. An indication, perhaps, of the always very human and sometimes very ugly need to take sides when exposed to brilliant and sometimes inflammatory polemic.

All fields of inquiry thrive on heuristic dichotomies to some extent, but these can be overstated. Systematic comparison of any kind presupposes that there are relevant similarities as well as relevant differences. While it perhaps seems somewhat high-minded and inappropriate to invoke the authority of political scientists in a thesis about belletristic film criticism, I still cannot resist referring to the comparative sociologists Mattei Dogan and Dominique Pelassy, who point out that any systematic comparison consists of uncovering and studying relative analogies and contrasts.<sup>13</sup>

The driving force behind this thesis is to go beyond the conventional and still-persistent pigeonholing that often barely scratches the surface of Sarris's and Kael's rich and often frustrating bodies of criticism. For example, in a current BFI teacher's manual, one finds the most bombastic declaration imaginable, with talk of a Pauline Kael who *hated everything* Sarris stood for.<sup>14</sup> I do not mean to imply that the antagonism between them did not exist, but it is doubtlessly at once more tempting and more correct to see Sarris as the harassed Spencer Tracy to Kael's spunky and sexually assertive Katharine Hepburn. This movie analogy was very clear in Sarris's own mind when he first met his arch-nemesis:

As I sped on the F train to my rendezvous with destiny, I fantasized about the scene in *Woman of the Year*, in which Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn play two feuding journalists who meet for the first time in their editor's office. Tracy enters just as Hepburn is straightening the seam of her stocking. The leggy lechery of this meet-cute scene vanished from my mind the moment I saw Pauline Kael.<sup>15</sup>

Physically, the diminutive Pauline Kael was no movie star, and the sallow-featured Andrew Sarris has never been anything like a leading man. But that is hardly the point. If one superimposes what they have put down in writing, we get close to the spirit of the jostling of opinions over *something*

<sup>13</sup> Mattei Dogan & Dominique Pelassy (1990) *How to Compare Nations: Strategies in Comparative Politics*. New Jersey: Chatham House Publishers p. 5ff. Second Edition

<sup>14</sup> David Wharton and Jeremy Grant (2005) *Teaching Auteur Study*: London. BFI Education. p.33. Italics added.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Sarris "Sarris vs. Kael, the Queen Bee of Film Criticism.", *Village Voice*. 1980 Vol. 2-8 July. p. 1, 30-31, 70.

*that matters* in way that seems very close in spirit, if not in form, to the best Spencer/Hepburn outings.

Most of us will probably readily admit that this analogy may fuel mythology rather than facilitate any clear assessment of their criticism, but at least it shows the extent to which they made film criticism seem sexy and glamorous, at almost exactly the same time film studies became academically respectable. They were by no means alone in establishing new ways of *writing* about film by finding new ways of *seeing* film, but they were preeminent.<sup>16</sup> As critics, they were interested in what constitutes film art and how this relates to other aspects of culture. This has shaped my key thesis, which is that Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael represent different ways of approaching film aesthetically that are culturally and historically conditioned. Through their criticism, Sarris and Kael disclose basic underlying assumptions on the *generic concept* of art by writing about the *specific concept* of film as an art form.

However, their volumes of collected criticism are also aesthetic artefacts, and thus belong in the firmament of aesthetic literature by virtue of being what Wilbur S. Howell has termed nonfictional imaginative prose.<sup>17</sup> Which is to say that Sarris's and Kael's criticism, like the best criticism in any field, was created for the sake of expression as well as for the sake of impression.<sup>18</sup>

### Defining Art in Relation to Criticism

*Art* is a notoriously difficult concept to define, even if most of us have some notion of what it entails. To define art disjunctively can be done quite easily. This is what we do when we say that painting, sculpture and architecture are the three basic visual arts that constitute the core of what art historians study. Using this method, we can define film as the seventh art, as art critic Ricciotto Canudo did back in the 1920s.<sup>19</sup> The most important thing in this context, however, is to know how the term *art* and the corresponding term *artist* have been understood in practical circumstances as historically infused ideas. I will, however, already at this point, make one very brief comment about auteurism, which we shall return to and explore from several perspectives. Grossly simplified, we

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<sup>16</sup> In terms of longevity if not cultural relevance, it is fair to say that Sarris and Kael were outlasted by their still-active near-contemporary, the British critic Robin Wood. Wood was originally a New Critic auteurist who reinvented himself as a radical in the 1970s.

<sup>17</sup> Wilbur S. Howell (1975) *Poetics, Rhetoric and Logic: Studies in the Basic Disciplines of Criticism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press p. 18.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 218-219.

<sup>19</sup> Ricciotto Canudo quoted in Jack C. Ellis & Virginia Wright Wexman (2001) *A History of Film*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon. p. 115. 5<sup>th</sup> Edition.

might say that the director as *the* film artist and authorial agent arose out of a pressing need to legitimize commercially released entertainment films as works of art. The art of movies became evident before its artists were appraised. If the artist of a collective mass medium based on mechanical recording and playback did not present himself as self-evident, or even evident, then he (almost invariably male) simply had to be *invented* in order to be *discovered*. This concludes what I have to say about disjunctive definitions of art.

Functional definitions of art, however, are another matter altogether. In this thesis, I shall refrain from arguing any particular definition that postulates necessary and sufficient conditions for my own concept of art, since I firmly believe, despite the strenuous efforts of a score of thinkers since Leo Tolstoy first insisted on the pressing need for a definition in *What Is Art?*<sup>20</sup> (1896), that no such fully satisfactory definition exists. At the risk of sounding snide, it is a more fruitful route for aesthetics to dissolve the problem of functional definitions of art once and for all, rather than persist with futile attempts to solve it. Lest the reader think that I am completely oblivious to problems in aesthetics during the last half-century, I should mention one definition which has been regarded as having great explanatory force in recent decades, the institutional definition of art, most notably developed and continually refined by George Dickie. The institutional definition defines art as a more or less informal network of social practices where agents within the art-network nominate candidates for aesthetic appreciation.<sup>21</sup> As a definition, however, properly speaking, it has been exposed as faulty. Monroe Beardsley has argued forcefully against it in his article, “An Aesthetic Definition of Art” (1983). According to Beardsley, the institutional theory of art inverts the logical order:

To define any form of activity in terms of the concept of institution, rather than the other way about, seems to me to invert the logical order: how can we conceive of religious, political and artistic and other institutions except in the terms of the forms of activity that they sponsor and regularize?<sup>22</sup>

I want to reaffirm, in the strongest possible terms, that I do not see the philosophical need to define art functionally. I do not wish to dispute that *art* may be used in a classificatory sense in most, or perhaps all instances.

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<sup>20</sup> Leo Tolstoy (2001 [1896]) *What Is Art?* New York: Replica Books. Translated by Aylmer Maude.

<sup>21</sup> See for example George Dickie (1974) *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

<sup>22</sup> Monroe Beardsley (1983) “An Aesthetic Definition of Art.-”, Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (2004) (ed.) *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition*. New York: Blackwell Publishers. pp. 53-59.

However, I share philosopher Sung-Bong Park's view that the common denominator in all definitions of art is that at its core, it is seen as a term of *value-orientation*.<sup>23</sup> (This is in fact also true of art in a pre-modern or rather pre-classical sense, the real difference, albeit of the greatest importance, being one of degree.) Even George Dickie (who, as I mentioned, originated the institutional theory of art, which aims to be a descriptive theory) admits that *art* serves as an *evaluative weapon-word*.<sup>24</sup>

We should, I think, simply acknowledge that *art* above all is a *normative premise*. Following up on that, I take what I assume to be a common-sense position: that the cultural activity of creating and consuming art is seen as culturally valuable and self-evidently desirable, even if individual artworks may be aesthetically deficient, or even fail as art. And here we have a clue as to the relationship between art and criticism, a relationship that is by its very nature reciprocal. Literary theorist Elder Olson has outlined the relationship between criticism and art as its subject in exhaustively detailed terms:

Whatever art itself may be as a *subject*, it is clear that criticism has employed certain aspects of it as subject matters. Thus one aspect of an art is its product; another, its instrumentality, active or passive, which produced the product; another, the product as relative or determined by that instrumentality, whether this last be viewed as actual or potential. Another is the relation of an art to a certain subject or means, as a consequence, and hence as a sign, of these; still another aspect is the production of a certain effect, either of activity or passivity, upon those who are its spectators or auditors; and lastly there is art viewed as instrumental to that effect. We may sum up all this by saying that criticism has viewed art variously as a product; as an activity or passivity of the artist; as certain faculties or as a certain character of the artist; as a certain activity or passivity of the audience; as certain faculties or as a certain character of the audience; as an instrument; or as a sign, either of certain characteristics of the artist and his audience or of something else involved in art, e.g. its means, subject etc.<sup>25</sup>

Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael may be placed comfortably within such a general matrix, with film as their chosen artistic subject. This is perhaps most readily apparent in the case of Sarris, who became famous (and in Kael's opinion, should have become infamous) for focusing very specifically on the Hollywood director as the figurative author and as the constant yet evolving factor in a body of films that constitute an *oeuvre*. Kael's underlying perspective was more modern

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<sup>23</sup> Sung-Bong Park (1993) *An Aesthetics of the Popular Arts: An Approach to the Popular Arts from the Aesthetic Point of View*. Uppsala. PhD. Diss. Uppsala University. p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> George Dickie (2001) *Art and Value*. Malden Mass.: Blackwell Publishers p. 21.

<sup>25</sup> Elder Olson "An Outline of Poetic Theory", R.S. Crane (ed.) (1957) *Critics and Criticism: Essays in Method By a Group of Chicago Critics*: Phoenix Books. University of Chicago Press. Abridged Edition pp. 3-24.



than classical, more clearly and specifically grounded in the theory and practice of modern art, even as she lamented many of the developments in 20<sup>th</sup> century visual, literary and dramatic art.

As our digital society is evolving at a breakneck pace, it has long since become apparent that celluloid projected in public places where people converge to share somehow miraculously private experiences defined the 20<sup>th</sup> century in a way that will not, strictly speaking, define the 21<sup>st</sup>. In that sense, this comparative study of Sarris's and Kael's criticism is an attempt at interpretive intellectual history, or perhaps more precisely, interpretive intellectual biography.

The paradox of the movies as art and mass medium may have seemed less fuzzy back in the days when you *had* to see films by going to the cinema. Sarris is awed by this almost unfathomable if not quite indefinable trait of the medium:

[A] curious paradox emerges out of our supposedly shared experiences with movies. Obviously a part of us recognizes that any given movie may have been seen by millions and millions of people, and yet, in some ineffable way it belongs to each of us individually, not even really to each of us, but to the me, me, me alone in each of us.<sup>26</sup>

Sarris's and Kael's views on art and criticism, as well as their deliberations on the aesthetic situation somewhat unique to the medium of film, are not necessarily logically and empirically free from contradictions or thought out in an especially lucid form. As Monroe C. Beardsley points out, journalistic and scholarly criticism alike usually blur the line between two distinct levels of meaning when talking about art: "When writers speak of art [...] they often do not make it clear to themselves if they are proposing a way of using the word art or a generalization about the thing [called] art."<sup>27</sup>

I am not entirely convinced, however, that Beardsley's analytical separation is all that relevant. Teddy Brunius has gotten closer to the heart of matter when he says that the term *art* performs two functions simultaneously: It appoints *and* confers value.<sup>28</sup> This being the case, the distinction between using the word *art* and generalizing about art dissolves into a single concept; we are left with ways of using the term *art*.

It would be fair to say that Kael and Sarris *use* the term *art* in roughly the same way, namely, in an evaluative sense to describe films on the same level as other art objects that tend to

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<sup>26</sup> Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen: Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York: Simon & Schuster p.14.

<sup>27</sup> Monroe Beardsley (1981) *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*. Indianapolis:Hackett Publishing Inc. p. 64.

<sup>28</sup> Teddy Brunius (1970) *Elementär Estetik: En Inledning Til Studierna*. Stockholm: Utbildningsförlaget Liber AB. p. 81.

provoke aesthetic responses. In my view, it is to their everlasting credit that they never locked themselves into rigid or monolithic preconceptions about what cinematic art should be; rather, they could appreciate and find art within a wide range of filmic expressions, while at the same time defending basic underlying preferences that are anything but arbitrary. If Sarris tends towards a definition of art as the expression of a single metaphorical author's vision, Kael, in slightly more modern terms, once defined it as a formalized expression of experience.<sup>29</sup>

Kael's intellectual grounding and tastes were two conflicting but by no means mutually exclusive strands of thought manifested in art history during the short spell that marks the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: high modernism, represented by abstract expressionism and its very dominant ideologue Clement Greenberg on the one hand, and pop art on the other. I do not claim that she was a connoisseur of pop art and abstract expressionism, but she shared some of the basic aesthetic assumptions of both trends.

Discussing pop art, Kael once summed up Andy Warhol's alleged legacy with a gloomily foreboding rhetorical question that I think frightened her—because of what were perhaps pangs of recognition and a guilt she would never quite admit: “*What's the matter with shallow?*”<sup>30</sup>

*Art*, for Kael the modernist, is an accolade whose antonym is junk or trash or kitsch.<sup>31</sup> In her writing, Kael's energies and confusions are usually centred on keeping this distinction meaningful, if not exactly clear and simple. As she pointed out, movies are so rarely great art that if we cannot appreciate great *trash*, we have very little reason to be interested in them.<sup>32</sup>

It has been argued by film scholar Edward Murray that Kael never offered a definition of either trash or art, thus making her application of these key terms semantically meaningless.<sup>33</sup> This very strict and pedantic critique could perhaps be levelled against Kael if her work was in formal, academic philosophy rather than journalistic criticism. In any event, I believe she *did* define art in the above quotation. Whether or not she actually defined trash is perhaps more debatable.

At any rate, Murray's critique will not do for our purposes, and I shall attempt to define Kael's usage of these terms very closely in our general chapter on axiological criticism, where her practical criticism will be discussed. We might, in any case, claim without too much controversy that her usage of the term (even more so than her concept of art) is determined by modernist

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<sup>29</sup> Pauline Kael (2002[1965]) *I Lost It at the Movies: The Essential Kael Collection. '54-'65*: London: Calder & Boyars p. 278.

<sup>30</sup> Pauline Kael (1992[1976]) *Reeling: Film Writings 1972-1975*. London: Marion Boyars. p. 237.

<sup>31</sup> Craig Seligman (2004) *Sontag and Kael: Opposites Attract Me*. New York: Counterpoint. p 170.

<sup>32</sup> Pauline Kael (1970) *Going Steady*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company p. 113.

<sup>33</sup> Edward Murray (1975) *Nine American Film Critics: Studies in Theory and Practice*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company p. 131.

theories of art and culture. This is one of the key points that, hopefully, this thesis will help clarify. For now, however, it will suffice to say that there are unresolved tensions, which we might relate to brow-levels and divided loyalties in her thinking.

Sarris has no such qualms. In fact, he spent a career defending the appreciation of old movies from what he felt were the pernicious frivolities of pop, camp and trivia.<sup>34</sup> He was not too enamoured of pop art and its implications, but he recognized the relevance of Warhol and Lichtenstein as something that tapped into modern life in a way the immediately preceding, hermetic, self-centred and masturbatory aesthetic based on high-toned ideas of singular genius, represented in the works of the action painters, did not:

The fallacy of all-wise antiquity is replaced by the fallacy of all-meaningful modernity. The nostalgic yearning for hand-woven linen handkerchiefs is ridiculed in order to worship the efficiency and expendability of a Kleenex. This is part of the mystique of pop art, and there is a great deal to be said for its frank recognition of technological change. You may not like Campbell's soup cans, but it is futile to pretend you still pick herbs in Arcady where the new housing development is located.<sup>35</sup>

If popular culture could be the subject matter for high art, who is to say popular culture itself is not artistic and does not afford genuine aesthetic pleasure? Moreover, it is the aesthetic of the popular that seems not only most honest, but also most responsive to current needs and tastes. Here, Kael and Sarris are in agreement.

Unlike Kael, Sarris has made no moral issue out of the intellectual split this entails. In sharp contrast to Kael, Sarris may have consciously and restlessly revised his opinions, but his commitment has been to the excellence of individual films and directorial careers without worrying unduly about questions of brow-levels, and as a consequence his writing is less unstable, less hypnotically volatile, and less neurotic.

### The Popular as a Common Ground—and an Outline of the Study

Many of Kael's and Sarris's generalizations about film as an art—specifically, their realization that film is primarily a popular art—are at times strikingly similar. “Popular” can mean two things. First, it can mean tangible success in terms of box-office receipts. Inevitably, mass art aims at satisfying

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<sup>34</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996[1969]) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. New York: DaCapo Press. p.16.

<sup>35</sup> Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen: Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York: Simon & Schuster. p. 69.

large audiences and vast consumer groups. As such, mass art correlates to the rise of mass media: “It is the development of mass communication technologies that has augured, in the era of mass art, i.e., an era dominated—at least statistically—by artworks incarnated in multiple instances and disseminated widely across space and time.”<sup>36</sup> As far as movies were concerned, this was seen as the great democratic advantage of that particular medium at the beginning of the previous century: “Shipped in tins, the movies could go anywhere in the world, taking a synthesis of almost all the known art forms to rich and poor. In terms of the number of people they could reach, movies were so inexpensive that they could be hailed as the great democratic art form.”<sup>37</sup>

While true and important, this is not what I have in mind. What I mean, quite independently of questions of quantity and technological mediation, is an understanding of popular art, of which the movies are among the most pervasive, as made up by certain *qualities of experience*—certain elementary fixtures. I believe that Sung-Bong Park's five-tone scale of the popular is sufficiently well-rounded to be universally acceptable, and I hazard a guess that Sarris and Kael would concur:

In my view there are above all five main characteristic qualities of the popular when we experience the popular arts. They are: The comic—the world of nonsense, roar of laughter, pie-casting and crazy people; the erotic, the world of kissing, passion, raping and strip-teasing, love-making and black underwear, suspenders and silk stockings; the sensational, the world of fear, terror, horror, violence, disaster and agony; the fantastic, the world of enchantment, reveries, magic and miracle; and the sentimental, the world of sweet solitude, sobbing, tear-jerking, nostalgia and melancholy.<sup>38</sup>

The elements outlined by Bong-Park could be a summary of the basic plot elements in a Griffith epic or a Chaplin two-reeler as well as anything Renoir and Welles have put their names to—unassailable gods in Sarris's pantheon of cinema, all. Moreover, it is important to note that Bong-Park sees the popular as intimately embedded in and conditioned by a narrative form or structure. Peter Greenaway, a maker of coldly clinical art films, has claimed that the cinema is far too rich and capable a medium to be left to the storyteller.<sup>39</sup> As a feature film director, however, Greenaway has not found a way to do without narrative—nor, for that matter, have inventive mainstream fantasists like Terry Gilliam or Tim Burton. It could be further argued that Quentin Tarantino has taken some of these popular elements to their logical, yet absurd extremes by synthesising every socially

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<sup>36</sup> Noël Carroll (1998) *A Philosophy of Mass Art*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> Pauline Kael (1970) *Going Steady*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company. p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Sung-Bong Park (1993) *An Aesthetics of the Popular Arts: An Approach to the Popular Arts from an Aesthetic Point of View*. Uppsala PhD. Diss. Uppsala University. p. 114.

<sup>39</sup> Peter Greenaway quoted in John Alexander (1991) *All in the Script: Dramatic Structure in Narrative Film*. Surrey: Inter-Media Publications. p.94.

irresponsible (albeit wickedly exciting) exploitation film under the sun and giving these amassed sugar-rush highlights a shot of adrenaline. It seems, in fact, to be an overly conscious strategy and a ravishing one-note performance on his part.

When quizzed on *Pulp Fiction* (1994), the writer-director opined, “It’s doing something exciting for cinema. I have this really eggheaded theory that it’s like the ultimate postmodern movie, because it takes fifty years of film and pop culture history and synthesizes it into something new.”<sup>40</sup>

In popular art, the elements of the five-tone scale outlined above are always used in combination; the erotic element by itself, for instance, would simply be pornography rather than popular art. Some media seem to be uniquely suited to the popular themes and forms, and film is arguably one of them precisely because it grew out of popular traditions and because of the features inherent feature of the medium. Movies have a sensory appeal beyond the combination of density and precision that characterize words on the printed page. In 1968, film scholar Gordon Gow had the following to say about the film medium and the older artistic form from which it has traditionally drawn most of its inspiration:

It might be argued that many films [...] have derived their plots and ideas from novels. But the images and sounds of cinema are another language: A transformation is wrought: the ideas impinge in a different manner, and more strongly. For no matter how deep a spell the written word may cast, none but the recluse can surrender completely.<sup>41</sup>”

Gow’s quote leads us quite naturally and directly to a key difference between popular art and high art. In a traditional understanding of the term: A signal difference between the elite and the popular

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<sup>40</sup> Quentin Tarantino, quoted in Jami Bernard (1995) *Quentin Tarantino: The Man and His Movies*. New York: Harper Perennial. p. 240.

I have no inclination to debate Tarantino’s assumptions about *Pulp Fiction*. I shall, in fact, refrain from using the term postmodern and its conjugations in my descriptions of Sarris’s and Kael’s criticism in this thesis. I also, perhaps controversially, wish to make the case that pop art was not actually a postmodern movement. Too many writers use the term postmodernism as a catch-all phrase to issue lazy blanket statements on the current condition, frequently in either dystopian or utopian terms with very little in between. These writers tend to treat its supposed antipode, modernism, as a monolithic and ideologically stable concept, a notion of which art history clearly disproves. Significantly, for the first exhibition of pop art, the artists were grouped together as *New Realists*. If anything, it is was the pop artists who recognized the cultural and technological reality of the modern world, whereas the abstract expressionists had taken refuge from modern reality in an introverted and essentially private romanticism that celebrated the irreproducible uniqueness of externalized impulses and the mystique of the (male) genius.

That a piece of popular art is self-reflexive does not automatically qualify it as postmodern. An equally necessary condition for postmodernism, in both popular and high art, is a conception of modernism as a style like any other rather than as an obligation or solution to formal and moral challenges. In the visual arts, it actually makes very little sense to speak of postmodernism (if at all) before the 1970s. The seminal work that gave the term legitimacy, along with its aesthetic, was probably one book above all others: Robert Venturi et al. (1972) *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press. I am indebted to art historian Emilie Karlsmo at Uppsala University for this clarification.

<sup>41</sup> Gordon Gow (1968) *Suspense in the Cinema*. London: A Zwemmer Ltd. p. 13.

is is in the spectator's actual approach to the work. What I have in mind is that both cultural forms privilege certain, quite specific ways of looking, which are diametrically opposed in a high art/popular (low) art dichotomy. Central to ideas of high art are the Kantian notions of disinterested contemplation and the aesthetic attitude. Popular art, on the other hand, caters to popular tastes, which are altogether anti-Kantian in such a way that we can (in a classical understanding of the issue) speak of the term popular art as an oxymoron—an example of either/or binary opposites:

[P]opular taste is altogether anti-Kantian. [...] It privileges subject matter over form, participation over disinterestedness, utilitarian and moral criteria over purely aesthetic ones, and entertainment over art. [...] The pleasures of fine *Art* are allegedly pure, refined, serious, complex, deep and reflective, whereas those of entertainment are impure, vulgar, facile, shallow, merely sensory and physiologically induced.<sup>42</sup>

We have already detailed how this idea became almost impossible to defend during the 1960s, and Sarris's and Kael's criticism (along with that of Susan Sontag), albeit in somewhat different ways, are as crucial to this development as Beatlemania and the *Brillo-Boxes* (1964), which saw popular culture invade art and vice versa. Norwegian film scholar Anne Gjelsvik is partly correct about the film culture of that era when she claims:

The distinction between high and low culture is re-negotiated by, among others, the critics, and that auteur criticism is the best example of entertainment movies and B-culture being elevated within an institution we may call the institution of art.<sup>43</sup>

Gjelsvik is correct in pointing towards a re-contextualisation and re-interpretation of popular movies with regards to auteur criticism, but, like many other scholars, she is mistaken in her belief in the institutional definition of art. I believe Jerrold Levinson is right when he argues that “the institutional definition of art comes uncomfortably close to conflating art and *self-conscious art*, art and *socially situated art*, art and *declared art*. [...] In no case must one invoke the shadowy infrastructure of the art-world to make what one makes into art.<sup>44</sup>” Most of the American films

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<sup>42</sup> Bernard Gendron, “Pop Aesthetics: The Very Idea”, Jostein Gripsrud (ed.) *The Aesthetics of Popular Art*. Kristiansand: Høyskoleforlaget A/S. pp. 15-32.

<sup>43</sup> Anne Gjelsvik (2001) Mørkets Øyne: *Filmkritikk, Vurdering og Analyse*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget. p.101. My Translation

<sup>44</sup> Jerrold Levinson (1979) *Defining Art Historically*, Peter Lamarque & Stein Haugom Olsen (2004) *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: the Analytic Tradition*. Malden Mass: Blackwell Publishers. pp. 35-46. Levinson is actually criticising not Dickie's theory but Arthur C. Danto's slightly earlier and very similar definition of the *Artworld*. Danto does not see the artworld as an institution with semi-formal participants nominating aesthetic objects on behalf of same institution, but rather as current ideas that artist and audience share. Danto's artworld consists of two elements; an atmosphere of theory, and a knowledge of art history. Arthur C. Danto (1964) "The Artworld", Peter Lamarque & Stein Haugom Olsen (2004) *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition*. Malden Mass: Blackwell Publishers. pp. 27-34.

rescued from cultural limbo by way of re-interpretation by auteur critics were certainly not, in any usefully strict sense, self-conscious art.

In fact, it could be argued that the first self consciously artistic American studio film of the sound era, was *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941.) (Kael made the biggest waves of her career for insisting that *Citizen Kane* is firmly grounded in *popular art*) Another, much later test case for the auteur theory, the thematically rich but stylistically wholly functional and totally transparent work *Rio Bravo* (Howard Hawks, 1958) was certainly not intended in an artistically self-conscious way.<sup>45</sup> In fact, the film was not even deemed worthy a review *when it was first released* *Sight & Sound*, which was still staunchly non-auteurist at that time.<sup>46</sup>

Gjelsvik also raises an interesting general question about the nature of the concept of aesthetic *quality* or worth; a question we must grapple with if we want to understand the changing status of film beginning in the last half of the twentieth century.

Is *quality*, aesthetic or otherwise, inherent, or is it imputed? Is the aesthetic experience itself simply a question of an attitude adopted to any object whatever, as philosopher and psychologist Edward Bullough believed?<sup>47</sup> To put it in a more directly relevant way, did the auteurists invent the aesthetically positive qualities in old Hollywood movies that gave them status as artworks, or did they only discover something already there? This is not a straightforward question, but I shall provide an answer of sorts. After some deliberation, Gjelsvik reaches no final conclusion in the question whether or not quality is inherent to the work or imputed to it. Imputed can be substituted with the marginally stronger term, *superadded*.-

There is no question that the surrogate authors of old Hollywood films *were* constructed by the auteur critics in order to evaluate commercial films as art. But it does not follow from this assumption that because the new status of commercial films as artworks was the result of renegotiation by the critics (Gjelsvik's term) that the qualities *within* the work that legitimize their

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Levinson's critique, however, is equally valid against both theories,

<sup>45</sup> Howard Hawks's excellent biographer, Todd McCarthy, has summed up the unmistakable but elusive style of Howard Hawks thus:

[T]he Hawks style is, at a glance, invisible. His films' visuals are less distinctive than any of the major directors, his works less identifiable than that of most masters. Ironically, Hawks was one of the most stylized of all filmmakers, but the style had more to do with rituals, behaviour, dialogue delivery and abstracting the action from the real world than with distinctive camera angles, editing patterns, a regular stock company or anything else that would breed familiarity in the viewer. In other words the stylization was disguised by a deceptive directness, by humor, by the openness of the characters and the liveliness of the players.

Todd McCarthy (1997) *Howard Hawks: The Grey Fox of Hollywood*. New York: Grove Press. pp. 3-4.

<sup>46</sup> David Thomson (2003) *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. pp. 379-381.

<sup>47</sup> Edward Bullough (1957) *Æsthetics: Lectures and Essays by Edward Bullough*. Edited With an Introduction by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson. London: Bowes & Bowes Publishers Ltd.

claims to art status are altogether superadded by the critic, An interpretation will change over time, but this does not typically mean that the work changes. In most cases the work as referential object (the film, novel or painting etc.) remains identical, irrespective of the passage of time or cultural differences. To deny this is to give in to the temptation of extreme constructivism. Jerrold Levinson explains:

It is not artworks that, in the crucial sense, change over time, it is rather *us*. We think more, experience more, create more – as a result we are able to find more in an artwork than we could previously. But these works are what they are, and remain from the art-content point-of-view, what they always were. It is not their content that changes over time, but only our access to the full extent of that content, in virtue of our and the world's subsequent evolution. The latent and unnoticed must not be confused with the newly acquired and superadded; later history may *bring out* what *was* in earlier art, but it does not progressively bring about that there is *now* more in it.<sup>48</sup>

This is not to belittle interpretation but merely to acknowledge the critic's object of study. The recontextualization of popular films afforded by the auteur theory did not so much change the object of study as expand the field of art.

The auteur theory dealt mainly with American film from the outset, but it was a janus-face, adaptable also to a new kind of film that even the most conservative highbrow could not easily dismiss as simply entertainment. Just as a spate of foreign art films began to be the subject of an openly invited Kantian mode of viewing among relatively large audiences, the virtues of American entertainment movies in the near past were thus being rediscovered for their energy and beauty.

In all areas of art and culture since the early sixties the post-Kantian (or more precisely in an American context, post-Greenbergian<sup>49</sup>) aesthetic has moved through several stages from the ideal to the corporeal.<sup>50</sup> Attendant to this development has been the sexual revolution in the Western world. A few years before pop art arose independently at The Royal College of Art in London and in the New York art world, ushering in a decade of social, political and cultural dissent, auteurism

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<sup>48</sup> Jerrold Levinson (1990) *Music, Art and Metaphysics: Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press pp. 180-181.

<sup>49</sup> Clement Greenberg (1909-1994) made his name as the world's most influential art critic in the forties and fifties by championing Jackson Pollock and other abstract expressionists. His most famous work is arguably the article "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", which first appeared in *Partisan Review* (1939). Reprinted in Francis Frascina (ed.) (2000 [1985]) *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*. London & New York: Routledge. pp. 48-59 Second Edition. Here Greenberg postulates the fault-lines between genuine high art (avant-garde), folk art, and kitsch. Greenberg saw kitsch as morally and aesthetically corrupt and corruptive. His usage of the term included both products of mass culture and debased art of the kind which is no longer aesthetically relevant. Both kinds of kitsch cannibalize and vulgarize a fully formed aesthetic tradition that has run its course. Kitsch is thus ersatz art in Greenberg's terminology.

<sup>50</sup> Sara Danius (1998) *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception And Modernist Aesthetics*. Uppsala. PhD. Diss. Uppsala University. p.211



in France had, as we have seen, showed the way towards an aesthetic of popular culture in the fifties.

We might say that pop art was, among many other things, an at least partly successful attempt to claim some of the popular qualities of cartoons and movies (particularly the domestic melodrama) for high art. However, we might also perhaps argue with some justification that the equation of cinema in and of itself became more muddled and chaotic with the rise of art films and what we might designate the *Film Generation* avant-garde in the sixties, the decade Sarris and Kael came of age as critics. However, I ask you to consider how many films, American and foreign (or for that matter, works of modern high art from Picasso to Hirst) have combined at least two or more of the popular qualities listed in Bong-Park's analysis? But in the movies, more so than most artistic media, these qualities are important. Although there are examples in the cinema that disprove the assumption that they are essential, I must confess that I prefer reading about them rather than actually spend time watching them. According to Kael, the combination of popular elements is the reason why audiences love them, as well as why we *should* love them—not, as it was assumed in some academic quarters in the sixties, because of their transparent ontological purity, but because film was a bastard, cross-fertilized super-art.<sup>51</sup>

Sarris too discounted the purity in form and content, even if he phrased it in more directly cine-aesthetic terms: “*Mise-en-scène* as an attitude tends to accept the cinema as it is and enjoy it for what it is—a sensuous conglomeration of all the other arts.”<sup>52</sup> A specialized vocabulary for film studies is something that set Kael's teeth on edge, but what about authorship in film, a long-standing tradition in the other arts?

I pose this question because the relationship between Sarris and Kael must be analysed to a great extent around a cluster of ideas related to cinematic authorship. In American critical discourse, Sarris may be held largely responsible for erecting a near-contemporary pantheon of film directors which still holds sway. The auteur-theory from then on became impossible to ignore for anyone interested in film. As David A. Cook points out:

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<sup>51</sup> Pauline Kael (1970) *Going Steady*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen: Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York: Simon & Schuster. p. 86.

By the time this influential volume [*The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*] had appeared, even critics like Pauline Kael, who were initially hostile to the idea of the auteur theory, had begun to accept its fundamental premise, if only by inverse corollary.<sup>53</sup>

This is the conventional wisdom. Cook is thinking here about Kael's controversial attempt at film history, "Raising Kane," which resurrected the reputation of Joseph Mankiewicz, the forgotten man in the genesis of *Citizen Kane*, and in so doing, stressed the collaborative nature of feature film-making as the expense of Welles's conception of his precocious debut as a one-man show. Like Sarris, however, Kael did believe in authorship as a basic premise of art, something which is plain to see even in "Circles and Squares: Joys and Sarris", without question the most brilliant piece of anti-auteurist polemic ever written.

While the auteur theory *is* the focal point of Sarris and Kael's antagonism, I shall try to place their work within the greater context of film criticism as a whole, conceptually and historically. There are two major reasons for this. Firstly, Andrew Sarris is primarily an intuitive and impressionistic critic, and his work, though a function of the auteur theory, cannot be fully explained by a reference to any single theoretical doctrine: "My response to my role as a critic has generally been intuitive, and nothing is to be gained from institutionalizing my intuitions."<sup>54</sup> The second crucial reason is perhaps more obvious. Pauline Kael was an extraordinary critic, and so deserves to be defined positively on her own terms, rather than negatively as a simple antipode to auteurism in general and Sarris in particular.

That close readings of primary texts are paramount goes without saying. As such, I have chosen to concentrate almost exclusively on reviews and essays published in comprehensive text anthologies available as books. In this sense, the academic legwork of collecting data has largely been done for me. I am fully aware that this leaves me vulnerable to charges of shoddy scholarship, but in this case hermeneutic interpretation takes precedence over empirical methodology.

My approach to this subject is at once narrow and wide. In addition to close readings and comparison of judiciously selected texts, it is equally necessary to provide the appropriate theoretical and historical framings that fix their meanings.

As the reader already will have noticed, my background in art history and aesthetics will no doubt influence the nature of this thesis and give it a somewhat different character than if it were

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<sup>53</sup> David A. Cook "Auteur Cinema and the 'Film-Generation' in 1970s Hollywood" in Jon Lewis (ed.) (1998) *The New American Cinema*. Durham And London: Duke University Press. pp. 11-35.

<sup>54</sup> Andrew Sarris (1970) *Confessions of A Cultist: On The Cinema 1955/1969*. New York: Simon & Schuster. p. 14.

written by someone with a background in English or literature, as is more customary in film studies. Nevertheless, art history and aesthetics are very useful tools for opening up perspectives on two critics who had very definite views on criticism as well as the intersection of art and popular culture.

It should also be noted that the style adopted for this thesis is consciously essayistic. My justification for this is identical to that provided by Paul Coates in the preface to his brilliant, if not quite accessible book, *Film at the Intersection of High and Mass Culture* (1994):

After all, is not the essay the fruit of an exploded, primitively pre-methodological impressionism? One may wonder, however, to what degree an object—in this case a work of art—may be comprehended by an observer who lacks the sort of sympathy for it that the essay displays.<sup>55</sup>

This approach mirrors and is perfectly congenial with the way Sarris and Kael approach film in its many manifestations. Fred L. Bergmann describes the essay as follows:

To write an essay is to record a reaction to and interpretation of experience. The essay may merely record that reaction or interpretation; it may explain it; it may argue against it; it may attempt to persuade others to accept a like reaction or interpretation. In any event, the essay communicates.<sup>56</sup>

In the course of this thesis, to fully exploit the essay as a literary form is my ambition more than my aim.

Despite the leeway I have given myself by openly opting for an essayistic impressionism, it would be perverse in a thesis such as this not to include a firmer and more rigid outline of purpose and intent. I have already identified Sarris and Kael primarily as journalistic critics or cultural commentators that also helped define film scholarship. As such, a comparison of their bodies of criticism may be tentatively partitioned in three levels. Firstly, there are the general critical essays. Secondly, we must stress their conscious efforts to make sense of the past—i.e. their efforts as film historians. Thirdly, there is what may be termed lower-level reviewing. Without in any way giving reviews short shrift, we might say that the review has a specific consumer function. It is a public service, and as such is the most purely journalistic subgenre in film criticism.

In terms of level of abstraction, it ranks below the critical essay, which deals with concrete films in a wider perspective, and the theoretical essay, which seeks to draw general conclusions applicable to

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<sup>55</sup> Paul Coates (1994) *Film at The Intersection Between High and Mass Culture*. Cambridge, Mass: Cambridge University Press. p. xiii.

<sup>56</sup> Fred L. Bergmann (1975/1970) *Essays*. Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Publishers p. xxi. Second Edition.

all films.<sup>57</sup> This does not mean that I in my own thesis have practised an absolute partition between critical essays and reviews. Most of the time, quotations from reviews will serve to illustrate, buttress and deepen our understanding of the usually more general propositions and ideas found in the critics' longer essays. However, a partition is still in place, even if not absolute. Limited space has forced me to make this thesis in some ways drastically selective.

My focus is thus on selected essays rather than reviews. This has its drawbacks. Particularly when dealing with concrete textual material which aspires to being belle-lettres, such partitions serve mainly an analytical function. If the longer essays could be seen as something laboured over in seclusion, like an architect designing some monumental structure, and their reviews were simply the practical application of these blueprints, my job would be easy. But such is not the case. Sarris's and Kael's works are more often than not written on journalistic rather than scholarly deadlines, and (at least in the sixties and seventies) put forward in a climate of feverishly polemical frenzy. To compare reviews side-by-side in order to determine divergence and convergence of opinion on individual films would be a highly interesting empirical exercise, but it is not the project I shall attempt here.

The suggestion of the loose tripartite division I have outlined, however, is worth noting. The main aim is to elucidate the nature of Sarris's and Kael's criticism on a more abstract level than single reviews can offer.

Context is the most overused word in academia, but for all their uniqueness and singularity, Sarris and Kael grew out of an American tradition in film criticism which will be addressed in the form of a brief chapter on American film criticism from its beginnings up to the mid-fifties. I shall make no attempt to evaluate their contemporaries, nor offer a weighted opinion on current American criticism. What I offer at the end of this chapter, however, are some general remarks on the challenges—and opportunities—any contemporary critic of movies (film is all but a thing of the past) must face—and exploit.

A long chapter on the general nature of film criticism, with Sarris and Kael as examples, will be a major issue in this thesis. Then there is the concrete discussion of primary texts. As already indicated, this includes analyses of Sarris's and Kael's critical essays, and perhaps even more importantly, their consciously historical narratives about film. Their plainly historical writings will be presented last—Kael's first, then Sarris's—before a few concluding remarks that render final

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<sup>57</sup> The film theorist's outlook may be essentialistic and ontological, as in classical film theory, or contextual and sustained by what is generally called *critical theory*—be it Marxism, psychoanalysis, semiotics or gender studies.

judgements and a general summary of final thoughts that rounds out this thesis as an essay. Finally I will briefly point to what has what has done to illuminate our subjects.

A note on my selection of primary texts is in order. The centrepiece of this study is of course the controversy that ensued from the original “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962” and Kael's emphatic rebuttal, “Circles and Squares”. There is, however, a need for background. As a gateway to the genesis of the auteur theory, I have included a blow-by-blow description of Kael's brilliant but not widely read sociological piece, “Movies, the Desperate Art” (1956). The piece was collected in an anthology edited by Daniel Talbot in the sixties, but it has never been included in any of Kael's mass-market publications, and has not garnered the same attention as the later but equally brilliant “Trash, Art, and the Movies” (which, due to space limitations, will be only briefly mentioned in this thesis). So much for critical essays. The selection of plain, film-historical narratives is easier because relatively self-evident. The only major explicitly historical work ever attempted by Kael is “Raising Kane” (1971), which, as already noted, is a controversial debunking of Orson Welles's mythic status as a solitary genius.

Apart from his monographs on Von Sternberg and Ford, Sarris has contributed two major works of cinematic macro-history: *Directors and Directions: The American Cinema 1929-1968* (1969) and *You Ain't Heard Nothing Yet: The American Talking Film in History and Memory 1927-1949* (1998.) Of these, the former is clearly more influential and thus will provide the main thrust of my outline of Sarris the film historian. Just as the discussion of the critical essays is meant to illuminate criticism as such, the plainly historical texts will hopefully serve to illuminate film history and its relationship to history proper, on the one hand, and film studies on the other.

I have now presented this text's organization and chronology, which will hopefully lead the reader from the universal to the particular with regards to an at once broad and incisive understanding of the primary texts forming the core data of this thesis. We might now begin in earnest by outlining a few general aspects of criticism after a brief summary of our protagonists' respective careers.

### Career Overview – Andrew Sarris

In 1955, Andrew Sarris began writing about film in the pages of the radical cult periodical *Film Culture*, and for the *Village Voice* from 1960: “At the time I started writing for *Film Culture*, I was not quite twenty-seven years old, a dangerously advanced age for a writer *manqué* if not *maudit*, a dreadfully uncomfortable age for a middle-class cultural guerrilla without any base, contacts or

reliable lines of supply.”<sup>58</sup> Sarris’s emphasis on filmmakers who, for all intents and purposes, already were grizzled veterans and who essentially belonged to another era, must initially have made him seem like the odd man out in the magazine’s offices—considering that many of those active in the magazine *Film Culture*, most notably Jonas Mekas (the art curator and avant-garde filmmaker who was vital in opening journalistic doors for Sarris) were actively pursuing counter-cinema practices as conscious East Coast alternatives to the Hollywood mainstream. *Film Culture* was notable for two things.

First, it managed to be a hotbed for what was at the time termed *New American Cinema*, the standard under which very diverse avant-gardists with an interest in film and a distaste for supposedly vulgar Hollywood illusionism were camped in the first half of the sixties. But second, *Film Culture* was for a short time also, quite paradoxically, the hotbed of American auteur criticism. Not only did Sarris cut his teeth at the magazine, it was also here that a certain young upstart and would-be filmmaker named Peter Bogdanovich, who as a director would specialize in fond valentines to old-style Hollywood films, published his first pieces. Whatever we might feel about Jonas Mekas’s inane musings on avant-garde art, his publication did fill a function which was highly significant, irrespective of its low circulation figures:

In England they had *Sight and Sound*, and in Paris, *Cahiers du Cinema*. But in the U.S. the only thing there was *Films in Review*, which was a very conservative, low-level monthly. There was *Film Quarterly* at the University of California, which came out once a year or something, and the leftists had something that came out, *Film Sense*. That’s why we felt we needed *Film Culture*. It was a way for young people to write and exchange ideas about film. We had a network of outlets at university bookshops that took *Film Culture* from its third issue. By the late sixties we had 5,000 subscribers.<sup>59</sup>

Sarris’s second journalistic home, and the one with which he is most often identified, was the weekly *Village Voice*. There is no question that this was a paper more congenial with Sarris’s general outlook on life than *Film Culture*. Founded in 1955, the *Village Voice* was the earliest of the so-called underground papers, a branch of publishing that rose to prominence and became a force in the mid-sixties. Politically, the paper’s outlook was anti-Establishment Democrat—a political stance which may fit without too much friction with Sarris’s centrist liberalism. In 1978,

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<sup>58</sup> Andrew Sarris (1970) *Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema 1955-1969*. New York: Simon & Schuster. p.

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<sup>59</sup> Jonas Mekas quoted in Marshall Fine (2005), *Accidental Genius: How John Cassavetes Invented the American Independent Film*. New York: Hyperion. Miramax Books p. 103.

Sarris summed up his political position thus: “Rabidly centrist, liberal, populist, more Christian than Marxist, [and] libertarian to the point of licentiousness.”<sup>60</sup> Sarris’s political orientation marks the point where his views most frequently converge with Kael’s. Apart from its commitment to the arts, the *Village Voice* deserves its place in history for breaching the four-letter-word taboo in American mass media.<sup>61</sup> What *Film Culture* and the *Village Voice* shared was, in Sarris’s words, a cranky individualism.<sup>62</sup> From 1990 to the present day, Sarris has been a staff critic in the pages of the *New York Observer*.

It seems fitting that Sarris’s first review in the *Village Voice* concerned *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960). Looking back on this watershed moment in his own career as well as Hitchcock’s from the vantage point of 1984, we are left in no doubt of the film’s importance:

“The first time I saw *Psycho* I screamed with authentically Freudian fright. (Mother invading my shower with a knife?) I have witnessed this scene many times since, and have even ‘taught’ the scene in a classroom, and I now regard it as one of the most profoundly religious expressions in this century.”<sup>63</sup> Sarris was the only critic in America who gave a rave review of the film at the time of initial release. He relates this episode with characteristic candour:

As it happens, I came of age as a film critic in the sixties. Although I had published pieces in esoteric film periodicals beginning in 1955, it was not until my first review in the *Village Voice* that I first made contact with the masses of outraged readers. My offence? I praised Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* in high-brow terms, indeed in *Cahiers du Cinema politique des auteur* terms (later “auteurist” terms). For weeks afterwards there came angry letters, demanding my head and my job. (Actually, I was not getting paid at the time for my reviews, but I valued a personal byline as the currency of immortality.)<sup>64</sup>

Today, it seems almost surreal to consider that Hitchcock’s greatest commercial (and arguably artistic) success at the time of release was generally regarded as wayward and exploitive nastiness. The formative experience that would fundamentally shape Sarris’s way of thinking was an extended sojourn in Paris in 1960-61 on the back-end of the Cannes film festival that year. This brought Sarris in close contact with a more enveloping and romantic conception of film as an art than any American critic or film historian before him. The

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<sup>60</sup> Andrew Sarris (1978) *Politics and Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press. pp. 9-10.

<sup>61</sup> Michael & Edwin Emery (1988) [1954] *The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Publishers. p. 482. 6<sup>th</sup>. Edition.

<sup>62</sup> Andrew Sarris (1978) *Politics and Cinema*. New York. Columbia University Press p. 5.

<sup>63</sup> Andrew Sarris, “Alfred Hitchcock: Prankster of Paradox”, Gene D. Philips (1984) *Alfred Hitchcock*. Boston: Twayne Publishers. Preface. Unpaginated.

<sup>64</sup> Andrew Sarris (1978) *Politics and Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press. pp. 181-182.

lasting impact of this experience can be gauged by the fact that Sarris actually published twelve editions of a publication called *Cahiers du Cinema in English* in the years between 1965 and 1967.<sup>65</sup> While always maintaining his commitment to journalism and belles-lettres, Sarris was also a pioneer in the early development of American hands-on film scholarship. Since 1965, Sarris has taught at The School of Visual Arts, New York University, Yale University and his *alma mater*, Columbia University. In the foreword to the anthology *Confessions of a Cultist* (1970), Sarris touchingly relates his bemusement at finding himself as a central protagonist in film scholarship simply because he as a young man had taken the plunge for film cultism in an attempt to defer the pressures of choosing a career:

I didn't realize at the time that I was slowly but surely gaining seniority in a profession that was about to explode. I didn't even have to maneuver or manipulate. All I had to do was stand my ground, and suddenly I would find myself at the centre of the cultural landscape, returning in triumph to Columbia University, a scholar more prodigal than prodigious.<sup>66</sup>

### Career Overview – Pauline Kael

Andrew Sarris is a cinephile expounding the glories of commercial narrative cinema, whereas Pauline Kael simply loved *the movies*—without a smidgen of remorse or intellectual pretension. One must take note of their diverging choice of words. Kael generally declined to use movie-specific jargon like “*Mise-en-scène*”, “cinema”, “cinematic” and “filmic.”

Although Kael earned a reputation as a great impromptu lecturer, she was extremely sceptical of the academization of film, which of course can be summed up fairly adequately by pointing the finger at exactly the cultural shift from *movies* to *cinema*. “A movie becomes cinema when it can bore you as much as your worst experiences at lectures, concerts and ballet; i.e., when it becomes something you feel you shouldn't walk out on.”<sup>67</sup> This, of course, is a lament that points to two parallel developments that were crucial to Sarris and Kael's status as critics of a different kind than their predecessors.

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<sup>65</sup> By that time, the writers in *Cahiers du Cinema* had discovered structuralism and semiotics and moved violently away from the kind of criticism in which Sarris found a flexible and workable simile through which he could harness his critical voice.

<sup>66</sup> Andrew Sarris (1970) *Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema 1955-1969*. New York: Simon and Schuster, p.

15.

<sup>67</sup> Pauline Kael (1970 [1968]) *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*. London: Calder & Boyars. p. 24.



One development, of course, is the rising tide of avant-garde and foreign art films, and the other is the inclusion of film studies in the liberal arts curriculum at colleges and universities across America. As Kael would claim during a film symposium she attended in the 1970s: “If you think movies cannot be killed by education, you underestimate the power of education.”<sup>68</sup> This has not endeared her to film academics, and in some circles, Kael has been something close to a pariah. Sarris, somewhat paradoxically, even went on record to blast “her cinephobic admirers in the cultural Establishment.”<sup>69</sup> While there is a core of truth to Sarris’s statement, I find it very harsh, since giving up movies, for Kael, would have been like giving up “a vital appetite.”<sup>70</sup> It is also fair to say that Sarris understood Kael’s reservations about the academic appreciation of film, even if he disagreed with her. In 1970, he would write: “Until very recently, the earliest movie-going experiences—silent and sound both, were mercifully free from the stink of culture. There were no courses on the subject. No obligations and no imperatives.”<sup>71</sup> Sarris, however, did see film scholarship as not only inevitable, but self-evidently desirable. This, perhaps, when all is said and done, is what most distinguishes his writings from Kael’s.

David Bordwell, generally regarded as the leading film scholar of his generation, who indeed contributed to a *Festschrift* in honour of Andrew Sarris in 2001, is content to dismiss Kael as a “vulgar but righteous film fan.”<sup>72</sup>

Unlike Sarris, a native New Yorker of Greek descent, the Californian Kael had no continental yearnings. In San Francisco during the 1940s, which was, of course, the stomping ground of the beat artists, Kael experimented with various forms of prose as well as avant-garde filmmaking together with James Broughton, a gay artist who fathered Kael’s daughter Gina, a virtually unprecedented move in the sexually repressive climate of those times. Before making a living as a film critic, Kael worked in a variety of jobs, including as a cook and a seamstress, as well as programmer at the Berkeley Cinema Guild and Studio, a repertoire cinema, reportedly the first such venue with two screening rooms in America. Her long struggle for recognition goes a long way towards explaining her enormous zest and energy as a critic.

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<sup>68</sup> Pauline Kael “It’s Only A Movie!” *Performing Arts Journal* No. 17 (1995). p. 8-19.

<sup>69</sup> Andrew Sarris “Sarris vs. Kael – The Queen Bee of Film Criticism”. *The Village Voice*. 1980. Vol.2. 8. Jul. pp. 1, 30-31, 70

<sup>70</sup> Pauline Kael (1956) “Movies, The Desperate Art”, Daniel Talbot (ed.) (1966) *Film: An Anthology*. Berkeley: California University Press pp. 51-71.

<sup>71</sup> Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen: Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York: Simon & Schuster p. 13.

<sup>72</sup> David Bordwell (1989) *Making Meaning: Rhetoric and Inference in the Interpretation of Cinema*. Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press. p.35.

That Kael's programme notes became instant collectibles is a measure of her stimulating freshness as a precocious stylist. Her first piece of criticism, a review of Charlie Chaplin's *Limelight* (1952), appeared in 1953 in the San Francisco quarterly *City Lights*. (She disliked the film intensely, referring to it with the singularly unflattering neologism "Slimelight".) This served as a precursor to Kael's in many always brilliant, always harsh, sometimes unfair put-downs, which became a hallmark of her prose style.

A genuine breakthrough came two years later, when she got a regular, albeit unpaid show at the listener-sponsored KPFA radio station. Several of these broadcasts are included in her best-selling first anthology, a seminal work in 1960s non-fiction which set the tone for her brashly sexual metaphors, the aptly titled *I Lost It at the Movies* (1965).<sup>73</sup>

For a while, Kael wrote freelance, her work appearing in such serious-minded film and art periodicals as *Sight & Sound*, *Film Quarterly*, *Partisan Review* and *Kulcher*. A stint in the glossy magazine *McCall's* ended prematurely. A caustic review of *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965) is often cited as the reason why her contract was not renewed. The review, actually a two-hander on *The Sound of Music* and *The Singing Nun* (Henry Koster, 1966), ends like this:

It's the big lie, the sugar-coated lie that people seem to want to eat. [...] Why am I so angry about these movies? Because the shoddy falseness of *The Singing Nun* and luxuriant falseness of *The Sound of Music* are part of the sentimental American tone that makes honest work almost impossible. It is not only that people who accept this kind of movie tend to resent work which says that this is not the best of all possible worlds, but that people who are gifted give up the effort to say anything. They attune themselves to *The Sound of Money*.<sup>74</sup>

A brief interlude at the *New Republic* eventually led Kael to a job as a staff critic of the *New Yorker* in 1968. That she ended up on the East Coast was no accident. Critical clout, as well as the real economic power in the American film industry, is concentrated in New York. Apparently, the culturally conservative magazine approached Kael in an attempt to attract a more youthful readership. Mark Feeney offers a consensus view on this symbiotic relationship:

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<sup>73</sup> All of Kael's collections of criticism but one play up sexual metaphors, the exception being the clinically named *State of the Art* (1985).

<sup>74</sup> Pauline Kael (1970) *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*. London: Calder & Boyars. p. 178.

Mismatched though the patrician *New Yorker* and pugnacious Kael may have seemed, the marriage turned out to have been made in magazine heaven. It was Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers all over again: The magazine gave her class, she gave it sex appeal.<sup>75</sup>

Kael's first published piece in the *New Yorker* was a review of *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967). (It almost seems scripted that way, considering her critical role in championing key figures of the Hollywood renaissance like Altman, Peckinpah and the early films of Scorsese and Coppola.) In the late sixties and seventies, sometimes misguidedly, she used her considerable power to further the careers of these filmmakers. Nobody, except perhaps Diane Jacobs, has contributed more to our current understanding, rightly or wrongly, of American films in the seventies as a golden age of personal filmmaking. "Our filmmakers seem to be on a quest—looking to understand what has been shaping our lives. A few decades hence, these years may appear to be closest our movies have gotten to the tangled, bitter flowering of American letters in the early 1950s."<sup>76</sup> Critic David Thomson has hit on this counter-cultural understanding of the New Hollywood film as central to Kael's writing: "At this particular time in American film, her rescue act of *Bonnie and Clyde* placed her in the camp of the of the new, the American, the sexy and the violent."<sup>77</sup> Kael made herself central to the *New Yorker*, and the magazine was as firm a base for Kael as the *Village Voice* was for Sarris. After a brief, luckless stint as a producer attached to Paramount Pictures in 1979 (at star and producer Warren Beatty's request), she returned to the magazine in 1980 as the *New Yorker's* sole film critic on a flexible, bi-weekly basis, having formerly shared the job with Penelope Gilliat. Kael's working relationship with the *New Yorker* lasted until her retirement from reviewing in 1991.

### American Film Criticism from Its Beginnings to the 1950s—And a Note on Present Challenges

In the introduction, I argued the perhaps idiosyncratic and debatable point that Sarris and Kael are the most important film critics in American history. The reader may agree or disagree, but I shall simply restate this as an axiom or dogma, if you will, and I do not intend to subject this assumption to thorough empirical inspection of their relative merits or demerits *vis-a-vis* other American critics. A brief historical framework to place their work (and mine) on a surer footing is nevertheless in

<sup>75</sup> Mark Feeney "The Pearls of Pauline" *The Boston Globe Magazine* 11. June. 1989:. Reprinted in Will Brantley, (1996) *Conversations With Pauline Kael*. Literary Conversations Series. Jackson, Mississippi: Mississippi University Press pp. 122-132.

<sup>76</sup> Pauline Kael (1992[1976]) *Reeling: Film Writings 1972-1975*. London: Marion Boyars .p.xiv.

<sup>77</sup> David Thomson (2003) *A New Biographical Dictionary of Film*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. pp. 449-450.

order. To do so, we must briefly trace the evolution of film criticism from its beginnings to the mid-1950s, when Sarris and Kael first appeared on the critical scene.

Journalistic writing about film is virtually as old as film (for a theatre audience) itself. The first instance of what may be called *proto-film criticism* in America appeared in the *New York Times* on April 24, 1896, when an anonymous journalist reported the opening of the *Koster & Bial's Music Hall Theatre* which had taken place the previous day. Most reviews during the first decade of film history resemble this first ever film review on American soil. They are journalistic hybrids, combining factual description of the programme and the venue with a pointed public-service pronouncement on whether or not the prospective patrons should pay to see the spectacle on show. According to Sarris, these snippets of information are invaluable as sources to the film historian because they are simple descriptions of an event.<sup>78</sup>

As the general run-of-the-mill film gradually extended to feature-length and became more structurally complex around 1905, trade papers began appearing, publications which treated film as an economic fact and a permanent feature of urban life. Periodicals such as the *Moving Picture World* were primarily concerned with film as a booming business enterprise, but also offered articles of marked critical value. The first influential, if not exactly famous, film critic in America, Frank E. Woods, wrote for the trade paper the *New York Dramatic Mirror* between 1908-1912 under the byline “the Spectator”—a moniker, perhaps, with just an ounce of voyeuristic self-deprecation.

In the history of film criticism, as well as film history proper, D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) is a highly significant milestone. In Sarris's most important film-historical narrative, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*, Griffith's film marks the beginning of cinema as a fully-fledged art, in the sense that everything prior to that film constitutes archaeology and prehistory in Sarris's conception of aesthetic film history. In the words of film scholars Tim Bywater and Thomas Sobchack, *Birth of a Nation*, in its own contemporary context, gave a great impetus to film criticism as a professional activity.<sup>79</sup>

The American critical scene was largely untouched by the European ontological trends of formalism and realism in the search for the essence of film art in the 1920s and 1930s, but the last decade before the Second World War saw the arrival of stylish critics in the American press. Chief among these was Otis Ferguson, who made his mark in the short time span of 1934-1941. Ferguson

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<sup>78</sup> Andrew Sarris “Film Criticism: From Blurbs to Belles Lettres”, Andrew Sarris (ed.) (1968) *The Film*. New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Series in Composition and Rhetoric. pp. 5-9.

<sup>79</sup> Tim Bywater and Thomas Sobchack (1989) *Film Criticism: Major Critical Approaches to Narrative Film*. New York and London: PearsonLongman Inc. p. 210.

was himself a verbal entertainer who treated the movies not as art but as a lively form of entertainment which could be either good, bad, or indifferent. Ferguson was a marked influence on Sarris, who provided the foreword to the former's anthology of criticism, and claimed that several of Ferguson's reviews "were so close to top of American journalism that it isn't worth measuring the difference."<sup>80</sup> That film criticism was gaining prestige in the thirties is incontestable, and nothing denotes prestige like books. It is no coincidence that the first Anglo-American anthology of film criticism was published in 1937: *Garbo and the Night Watchmen*, edited by Alistair Cooke.<sup>81</sup> Cultural historian Michael Kammen comments:

The development of serious film criticism required a full generation to emerge, because for several decades, even through the 1920s, many publishers and editors mistakenly perceived moviegoing as primarily a vulgar mindless phenomenon. When Nunally Johnson asked to review films for the *New Yorker*, Harold Ross, its founder and editor, dismissed the proposal archly by declaring that "movies are for old ladies and fairies."<sup>82</sup>

In the forties and fifties, there emerged two figures more important than even Otis Ferguson: Robert Warshow, a sociologically oriented critic who was a pioneer in genre criticism, and above all James Agee.<sup>83</sup> Agee holds the rare honour of being Pauline Kael's favourite film critic (and this is no mean feat, considering how ungenerous Kael was to most scribes in her profession). Agee is generally regarded as the most distinctive and perceptive film critic in America before the beginning of the boom years from the mid-fifties and onward. Collections of Warshow's and Agee's criticism were published posthumously at the end of the fifties (both died in 1955, the year Sarris broke into print) and these collections helped fuel interest in serious film scholarship. There are other names of interest, notably Manny Farber and Parker Tyler, but their writings are too esoteric and obscure to exert much influence on the critical mainstream in a country where criticism and philosophy alike have always been primarily pragmatic.

If Agee was the American yardstick against whom both Sarris and Kael measured themselves, they were both also sharpening their critical knives to do battle with their common

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<sup>80</sup> Andrew Sarris, Foreword to *The Film Criticism of Otis Ferguson*. Robert Wilson (ed.) (1971) Philadelphia: Temple University Press. p. xii.

<sup>81</sup> Alistair Cooke (1971[1937]) *Garbo and the Night Watchmen: A Selection Made in 1937 From the Writings of British and American Film Critics* London: Secker & Warburg.

<sup>82</sup> Michael Kammen (1999) *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. p. 34.

<sup>83</sup> James Agee was a novelist and screenwriter as well as a film critic. He adapted C.S. Foster's novel *The African Queen* for John Huston (1951) and co-wrote Charles Laughton's marvelous fairytale-like noir thriller *Night of The Hunter* (1955)

contemporary foes. Apart from each other, their favourite target was the very influential and very socially conscious Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times*. It is without question primarily Crowther and critics like him that Sarris had in mind when he wrote:

Unfortunately, too many bookish film critics have perverted the notion of ecumenical erudition by snobbishly subordinating film to every other art. Whereas the late James Agee discovered cinema through his love for movies, too many of his self-proclaimed successors choose to abuse movies in the name of *Kultur*.<sup>84</sup>

Note the strategic use of the word *Kultur*, which denotes gravitas but also connotes a kind of stuck-up stuffiness and a condescending attitude towards American popular culture. On this score, I would venture to guess that Sarris and Kael are in agreement. In fact, Kael would press the issue of American popular culture vis-a-vis the Old World one step further than Sarris:

As a schoolgirl, my suspiciousness about those who attack American “materialism” was first aroused by the refugees from Hitler who so often contrasted their “culture” with our “vulgar materialism” when I discovered that their “culture” consisted of their having had servants in Europe, and a swooning acquaintance with the poems of Rilke, the novels of Stefan Zweig and Lion Feuchtwanger, the music of Mahler and Bruckner. And as the cultural treasures they brought over with them were likely to be Meissen Porcelain, Bierdermaier Furniture, wax fruit, oriental carpets wax fruit, and bookcases with glass doors, it wasn't to difficult to reconstruct their “culture” and discover that it was a stuffier, more middle-class materialism than they could afford in the new world.<sup>85</sup>

It is significant in this context that the film followed followed the opposite trajectory to first real mass medium: the newspaper. Sociologist and historian Paul Starr puts the matter thus:

The movies' low status beginnings were of particular importance because of the deepening divide between high culture and popular entertainment at the turn of the century [...] Whereas newspapers and magazines had begun among the elite and evolved in a more popular direction, movies acquired a lowbrow image at an early point in their history and faced a challenge in achieving respectability.<sup>86</sup>

After sixty years of film history, nobody could argue against the fact that this tide was turning. In “Trash, Art, and the Movies” Kael voiced her by now familiar complaint; that the movies would be killed if rendered respectable:

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<sup>84</sup> Andrew Sarris (1970) *Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema 1955-1969*. New York: Simon & Schuster. p. 14-15.

<sup>85</sup> Pauline Kael (2002[1965]) *I Lost It at the Movies: The Essential Kael Collection '54-65*. London: Marion Boyars. p. 78.

<sup>86</sup> Paul Starr (2004) *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications*. New York: Basic Books. A Member of the Perseus Book Group. pp. 296-297.

“When you clean them up, when you make movies respectable, you kill them. The wellspring of their *art*, their greatness, is in not being respectable<sup>87</sup>”

Stil, Kael depended on a growing respectability of the medium. After all, the impetus behind both Sarrisian auteur theory and Kael's art/trash interplay was to confer artistic status and aesthetic value on a medium whose dominant expression is derived from neither courtly/bourgeois high culture nor ancient European folk culture, and so could be more easily claimed to be both American and popular. The state of film criticism in America in the fifties helped pave the way for critics looking to break away from the petrified timidity and plodding surface of tastefulness and restraint that characterize the period, but other external factors were important in giving Sarris's and Kael's criticism a more profound impact than their predecessors. The single most important historical extraneous factor that explains the greatness Sarris and Kael share was the emergence of what fellow critic Stanley Kauffmann crystallized as the *Film Generation* in a 1966 essay.<sup>88</sup> The Film Generation might be described as quite a large segment of the population, or rather a subculture within the American (and European) population born after 1935. This generation was, in their turn, dependent on another vastly important external factor.

The golden age of film criticism, from the fifties into the seventies, came about largely because the movies as a social institution and dominant mass medium became supplanted by television. Only by shedding a part of their universal mass appeal, and by attracting a more discerning audience who had broken free of the movies as a habit like any other, could mainstream narrative movies as *the dominant form of expression in a mass medium* aspire to a much-coveted (by a new breed of filmmakers, critics and audiences) status as *legitimate works of art*. More than anything, Sarris's example showed that film art could be found where none had previously been thought to exist, something which truly captured the serious moviegoer's imagination. Taking this into account, Kael would write in 1973:

Right now, movie critics have an advantage over critics in most other fields: responsive readers. And it can help you to concentrate your energies if you know that your subject is fresh and that your review can make a difference to some people. I would suspect that my reviews gain rather than lose from the speed and urgency of making deadlines and reaching the public before the verdicts are in on a film.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Pauline Kael (1970) *Going Steady*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company. p.115.

<sup>88</sup> Stanley Kauffmann (1966) *A World of Film: Criticism and Comment* New York: Harper & Row Publishers. pp. 415-429.

<sup>89</sup> Pauline Kael ] (2002[1973) *Deeper Into Movies*. London. Marion Boyars p. xv.

Media sociologist Melvin L. DeFleur has pointed out that motion picture attendances reached their two highest peaks ever in 1930 and 1946, with 90 million patrons per week domestically, only to plummet to 46 million in 1955, less than a decade later.<sup>90</sup> Today we can easily observe that the social mechanics of this development is in the process of repeating itself. As the Internet has to some extent come to replace some of the more directly social functions of television, we now have television series on cable that aspire to being genuinely artistic. Sarris and Kael could not have predicted this at the height of their relevance and influence. But it is very telling that Kael, highly critical of television in the sixties and seventies, lived to see *The Sopranos* and compared the series favourably to its big-screen cousin, *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1990).<sup>91</sup>

Yet who can seriously imagine Sarris and Kael writing for *TV Guide*, or for that matter as critics on TV like Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert? They belong so much to an age when movies and moviegoing both seemed rebellious and heroic. How they managed to see almost everything of relevance makes the mind reel, if we consider the system of distribution in place forty years ago, even in a movie-mad metropolis like New York City. In a sense, they spent large parts of their lives in the darkness with an illuminated screen, so that filmgoers less avid than themselves did not necessarily have to in order to discover what was durable, timely or worthwhile.

If it is easier to be a critic today because of the sheer availability of movies—in cinemas or on home formats with directors' commentaries in a more pristine state than an old classic film ever is when shown in revival houses—it is also more difficult to be a critic of genuine consequence. If film and its social—or more precisely, societal status within the media matrix has changed since Sarris and Kael's heyday, it is because audiences as well as filmmakers have changed with the technology.

On the present situation, Josh Horowitz has noted: “For the first time we have a generation of moviemakers who did not need to leave their homes to study the greats of the past. In fact, this might be the first filmmaking generation whose greatest influence wasn't the world around them as much as the world they saw in their living room on TV.”<sup>92</sup> While this is true of a new generation of critics and film scholars, I wonder if the scholar/critic has not been playing catch-up with the filmmakers for a generation or so.

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<sup>90</sup> Melvin L. DeFleur (1966) *Theories of Mass Communication*. New York: David McKay Company Inc. p. 40.

<sup>91</sup> Francis Davis (2002) *Afterglow: A Last Conversation with Pauline Kael*. New York: DaCapo Press. p. 79.

<sup>92</sup> Josh Horowitz (2006) *The Mind of the Modern Moviemaker: 20 Conversations with a New Generation of Filmmakers*. New York: A Plume Book. p. xiii.



On this count, the Americans were actually way ahead of most of the world. The first generation of movie brats who would irrevocably change the film industry in the seventies and beyond began their cine-aesthetic education as kids by soaking up old films on television during the Eisenhower Administration, developing a sense of what works on the big screen by immersing themselves in the medium one step removed from the movie theatre.<sup>93</sup> For the most formidable of all movie brats (in every sense), Steven Spielberg—who had the enthusiastic support of Kael in his early career—television became both an educational medium and a security blanket.<sup>94</sup> Diane Jacobs sums up the first television/film school generation as being excruciatingly conscious of the medium and its history.<sup>95</sup>

In the thirty years since that was written, the trend has intensified. In the current situation, the need for critics who can help us find our bearings in a world saturated with visual culture is more pressing than ever. Central to that pressure are issues of value. Value, in its most vulgar and basic sense, means simply knowing what you like. But Sarris and Kael also brought something else into the equation of value: “If the clamour of our critics is ever to provide insight it must be stimulated by a grasp of the essential relationship of the American movies with the mass American audience of moviegoers. The critic must throw out his credo of I know what I like and consider closely what *they* like.”<sup>96</sup>

This could be construed as an open invitation to sociological film criticism. Judging by Kael's criticism, she would perhaps be closer to this spirit than Sarris, but that is not a point I wish to stress here. Sarris may possibly disagree, but when considered jointly, what he and Kael achieved—indeed, what makes them unique in American critical discourse—is exactly that they maintained a *double* focus: insisting on the value of what they liked, while factoring in the audience in the total picture.

Issues of value in this sense must be termed meta-criticism. How does one approach the problem of meta-criticism—criticism inscribed in criticism? It is obvious that one must examine

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<sup>93</sup> The term “movie brats” is well-established in the academic discourse about American film. It was first introduced in a highly influential book: Michael Pye and Lynda Miles (1979) *The Movie Brats: How the Film Generation Took Over Hollywood*. New York: Holt, Rhinehart & Winston. The directors discussed by the authors are Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, John Milius, Martin Scorsese and Steven Spielberg.

<sup>94</sup> John Baxter (1996) *Steven Spielberg: The Unauthorised Biography*. London. HarperCollins Publishers p. 19.

<sup>95</sup> Diane Jacobs (1977) *Hollywood Renaissance: Altman, Cassavetes, Coppola, Mazursky, Scorsese and Others*. South Brunswick & New York: A.S. Barnes & Co. p. 22.

<sup>96</sup> Sam L. Grogg and John G. Nachbar. “Movies and Audiences: A Reasonable Approach for American Film Criticism”. Michael T. Marsden. et.al. (eds.) (1982) *Movies as Artefacts: Cultural Criticism of Popular Film*. Chicago: Nelson Hall. pp. 1-9.

criticism from a conceptual standpoint. Some times asking simple questions can yield profound answers. And the question we must now ask is: What is film criticism?

### Notes on Axiological Criticism, with Sarris and Kael as Examples

Since this thesis aims to offer a comparative discussion of the works of two preeminent film critics, it might seem strange not to have already answered the nagging question with which I rather ominously and with great foreboding left hanging at the end of the last chapter. Pauline Kael, in particular, dealt with this question explicitly throughout her career. In *I Lost It at the Movies*, she offers a clear summary of the critic's task:

The role of the critic is to help people see what is in the work, what is in it that shouldn't be. He is a good critic if he helps people understand more about the work than they could see for themselves; he is a great critic if by his understanding and feeling for the work, by his passion he can excite people so they want to experience more of the art that is there, waiting to be seized. He is not necessarily a bad critic if he makes errors in judgement (infallible taste is inconceivable; what could it be measured against?). He is a bad critic if he does not awaken the curiosity, enlarge the interest and understanding of his audience. The art of the critic is to transmit his knowledge and enthusiasm for art to others.<sup>97</sup>

As this stands, I find terribly hard not to concur. Kael did not conceal that criticism as she outlined it above is a difficult task, a task which requires craft and skill. In fact, she would often flaunt the artistic aspects of criticism as essential. Responding to radio listeners who felt she had been too hard on a crop of avant-garde filmmakers, the toughness of her intelligence shone through:

I regard criticism as an art, and if in this country and in this age, it is practised with honesty, it is no more remunerative than the work of an avant-garde film artist. My dear anonymous letter writers, if you think it is so easy to be a critic, so difficult to be a poet or painter or film-experimenter, may I suggest you try both? You may discover why there are so many poets, so few critics.<sup>98</sup>

Notwithstanding that forty years of film studies and an ever-widening array of media channels has increased visibility drastically and made the film critic a much less rare creature, the force of Kael's argument is undimmed, at least in one important respect.

<sup>97</sup> Pauline Kael (2002[1965]) *I Lost It at the Movies: The Essential Kael Collection '54-'65*. London. Marion Boyars. p. 308

<sup>98</sup> Pauline Kael (2002[1965]) *I Lost It at the Movies: The Essential Kael Collection '54-'65*. London: & Boyars p. 234.

In making the case for criticism as an art, Kael is simultaneously arguing that criticism is not a science. If this axiom holds true, critics have not only the license to be eclectic, creative and personal, but an obligation. One of Kael's most eloquent and incisive supporters, Will Brantley, has put the matter thus: "The goal of any subjective critic is not only to find associations, patterns and connections in a work, or group of works, but to make them come alive on paper."<sup>99</sup> It would be difficult to think of a film better suited to Kael's intensely subjective style than *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976). The film, of course, is a feverishly nightmarish study in urban alienation and ultimately sexual release through annihilation, followed by an ironically disturbing, because heroic, vindication. "Travis becomes sick with loneliness and frustration; and then like a commando preparing for a raid, he purifies his body and goes into training to kill. *Taxi Driver* is a movie in heat, a raw tabloid version of *Notes from the Underground*, and we stay with the protagonist's hatreds all the way."<sup>100</sup>

This amounts to the realization, shared by Kael and Sarris, that criticism does not have nomothetical rules. Many later film scholars have been troubled by Kael's disparagement of close analysis:

I don't think analysing a movie shot-by-shot is any more scientific than describing your emotions when you see it. There is no such thing as scientific criticism. Value judgements are not made on a scientific basis and there is no scientific criticism in any of the arts.<sup>101</sup>

Consciously or unconsciously, Kael is here echoing Ludwig Wittgenstein, who claimed that criticism, phenomenologically speaking, is generally non-theoretical, and that it involves only an illuminating verbal activity. *Keine lehre, sondern eine Tätigkeit*, was one of his most famous dictums.<sup>102</sup> It is tempting to see Kael's lack of a formal critical method as a function of her empiricism:

"There are not—and there never were—any formal principles that can be used to judge movies but there are concepts that are serviceable for a while and so pass for, or are mistaken for 'objective'

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<sup>99</sup> Will Brantley. "In Defense of Subjectivity: The Film Criticism of Pauline Kael". *New Orleans Review*. No. 19. 1992, pp. 38-52

<sup>100</sup> Pauline Kael (1980) *When the Lights Go Down*, Boston: Holt, Rhinehart t & Winston, p. 131.

<sup>101</sup> "The Economics of Film Criticism: A Debate [between] Jean-Luc Godard and Pauline Kael". In *Camera Obscura* 8/9/10 (1982) 162-185. Reprinted in Will Brantley (ed.) (2001) *Conversations with Pauline Kael*: Mississippi, Mississippi University Press. pp.55-74

<sup>102</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein. Quoted in Virgil C. Aldrich (1963) *Philosophy of Art*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Publishers p. 5.

rules until it becomes obvious that the work that we respond to violates them.”<sup>103</sup> Kael is not claiming here that there are no formal ways of *describing* films, but I doubt if she ever saw matter-of-fact descriptions as very relevant in criticism, or very rewarding on a personal level for any writer. Judgements were her forte, and she left frame-by-frame analysis to more timid and usually lesser writers. It is too often overlooked how genuinely modern this idea is. In 1967, a sour, certified modernist like Theodor W. Adorno claimed: “Binding norms [for art] produce nothing but pastiche.”<sup>104</sup> Interpreting Kael's pronouncements, something similar apparently applies to the art of criticism, at least if we take the dubious modernistic/moralistic view that pastiche must be dead and empty.

Sarris, on the other hand, has always seen himself as a film scholar, even if high theory was not his game. As he remarked in reference to a semiotics conference he attended in 1975:

If anything, my talk was considered too informal for the august halls of academe, and the joint was packed with aspiring semioticians. [...] Hence, I consider myself in the role of a gainfully employed journalist. [...] I have dutifully read Barthes on Garbo, Wollen on Eisenstein and Metz on *Adieu, Philippine*. I have struggled with *Tel Quel* and *Cinethique* and the revamped *Cahiers du Cinema*. I have toiled through Derrida, Lacan and Foucault, and have found to my amazement that Freud has been converted to Marxism and Structuralism. Nonsense, I keep telling myself. But that was what most of my contemporaries and colleagues were saying about stylistic auteurism at the time I was preaching *that* gospel in America. Am I then simply the victim of the generation gap? Not entirely. Listening to the semiologists at the conference I suddenly realized how much romantic individualism remains in my makeup.<sup>105</sup>

Kael shared Sarris's individualism and, in fact, her romantic streak on criticism gives us useful clues to criticism in general, but what can be said to be unique to her criticism expanded into a philosophy? The obvious place to look is in “Trash, Art, and the Movies”, where she made the point that the particular greatness of movies resides in their opposition to an official school culture covered with reverential moss. While I have been unable to find evidence of any actual conscious influence on Kael's work from earlier American philosophers, it is quite plausible that she knew and respected the deep-dish American aesthetic pragmatism of someone like John Dewey:

<sup>103</sup> Pauline Kael (1970) *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*. London: Calder & Boyars. p. 6.

<sup>104</sup> Theodor W. Adorno quoted in Ingeborg Hoesterey (2001) *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film and Literature*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. p. xi.

<sup>105</sup> Andrew Sarris (1978) *Politics and Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press. p. 148-158.

Even a crude experience, if authentically an experience, is more fit to give clue to the intrinsic nature of aesthetic experience than is an object already set apart from any other mode of experience. Following this clue we can discover how the work of art develops and accentuates what is characteristically valuable in things of everyday enjoyment.<sup>106</sup>

Reflecting this idea and bringing it down to earth, Kael remarks that most movies we enjoy are not works of art in any exalted Arnoldian sense, and not every movie has to matter.<sup>107</sup> (A very non-auteurist idea!) Moreover, this is OK as long as we don't falsify what we respond to, which is often just the attractive glamour of pretty trash:

Movie Art is not the opposite of what we have always enjoyed in movies, it is not to be found in a return to official high culture, it is what we have always found good in movies, only more so. It's the subversive carried further, the moments of excitement sustained longer and extended into new meanings. [...] When we go to the movies we want something good, something sustained, we don't want settle for just a bit of something, because we have other things to do. If life at home is more interesting, why go to the movies? And the theatres frequented by true moviegoers – those perennial displaced persons in each city, the loners and the losers, depress us. [...] If we've grown up at the movies we know that good work is continuous not with the academic, respectable tradition but with the glimpses of something good in trash, but we want the subversive gesture carried to the domain of discovery. Trash has given us an appetite for art.<sup>108</sup>

No one has summed up the consequences of this aesthetic doctrine more succinctly and, as it turns out, sympathetically, than fellow critic Martha Davis:

She [Kael] is most moved by the cinema of sensations – she is a kind of connoisseur of sex, violence and suspense – and most appreciative of these elements when they are presented honestly, without plot contrivances that attempt to validate or apologize for this excitement. She wants movies to be vivid, thrilling, surprising, and she wants filmmakers to take risks with their form and their subject.<sup>109</sup>

Kael could find this vitality in the best films by Jonathan Demme or Martin Scorsese (both, significantly, had graduated from exploitation films produced by Roger Corman) and sometimes in foreign films where American genres were re-imagined, such as Kurosawa's “Easterns” like *Yojimbo* (1961):

<sup>106</sup> John Dewey (2005[1934]) *Art as Experience*. New York: Penguin Books. pp. 9-10.

<sup>107</sup> Pauline Kael (1973) *Deeper into Movies: The Essential Kael Collection 1969-1972*. Marion Boyars. p. 5.

<sup>108</sup> Pauline Kael (1970) *Going Steady*. Boston. Little, Brown & Company. pp. 87-129.

<sup>109</sup> Martha Davis, Introduction to “Pauline Kael on Jonathan Demme: A Selection of Reviews Accompanying the Retrospective Jonathan Demme: An American Director.” Presented by Walker Art Center 5-27 August 1988. pp.7-9.

Other directors attempt to create a pastness for the story, to provide distance, perspective. For Kurosawa, the setting may be feudal, or, as in this case, mid-nineteenth century, but we react (as we're supposed to react) as modern men. His time is now, his action so immediate, sensuous, raging, that we are forced to disbelieve, to react with incredulity, to admire. (This is partly due to the telephoto lenses that puts us right into the fighting, into the confusion of bared teeth and gasps and howls.) He shakes spears in our faces. This is more alive than any living we know; this, all our senses tell us, is art, not life. Ironic detachment is our saving grace. Of all art forms movies are in most need of having their concept of heroism undermined.<sup>110</sup>

An undermined, if not actually repudiated heroism, and a more frank recognition of sex and violence, are the elements that arguably most attracted Kael to the content of much of the so-called New Hollywood Cinema of the seventies. However, it is perhaps difficult to fathom the ironic audacity of *Yojimbo* for a current audience, or for that matter young filmmakers who have grown up on that other great foreign imagist who drew even more directly on American forms, Sergio Leone. After seeing *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1969), Sarris was convinced, quite rightly, that Leone was the only living director who could do justice to the baroque elaboration of revenge and violence in *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972). Fortunately, Leone did live to make his monumental gangster epic, *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984). Few have summed up this film more succinctly than critic, novelist, and noted biographer of film personalities, John Baxter: “The strength and weakness of *Once Upon a Time in America* is Leone's willingness to stand and stare at America, as the first explorers had done, ‘face to face for the last time in history’, as Scott Fitzgerald put it, ‘with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.’”<sup>111</sup> Leone's final film serves brilliantly to sum up Pauline Kael's views on the interpenetration and mutual enrichment of trash and art, or probably more correctly, the transformation of kitsch into *Art*:

The movie might seem a compendium of kitsch – and in a certain sense it is. But it is kitsch aestheticized by someone who loves it and sees it as the poetry of the masses. It isn't just the echoing moments that keep you absorbed. It is those reverberant dreamland settings and Leone's majestic, billowing sense of film movement; the images seem to come at you in waves of feeling. Despite the film's miscasting and its craziness, Leone sustains the mood for an almost incredible three hours and forty-seven minutes – most of it unusually quiet. The movie has a pulse; it's alive. But not now. It's alive in some golden-brown past of the imagination.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Pauline Kael (2002[1965]) *I Lost It at the Movies: The Essential Kael Collection from 54` to `65*. London: Marion Boyars p. 241.

<sup>111</sup> John Baxter (2002) *De Niro: A Biography*. London: HarperCollins Publishers. p.233.

<sup>112</sup> Pauline Kael (1987[1985]), *State of the Art: Film Writings 1983-1985*. London: Arena Books p. 364.

But Kael did not always follow her aesthetic prescription, as evidenced by her review of a later American gangster film with a less operatic feel, which was, if anything, a lot more vivacious and filled with in-your-face energy than Leone's reverie of time, loss, dreams and memory. I am referring to *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1990):

Scorsese the arousal junkie makes you feel you'd want to hang out with him and listen to him tell you how he brought off the effects; he's a master. But this picture does not have the juice and richness that come with major performances. It has no arc, and doesn't climax; it just comes to a stop. Conceivably the abruptness could work, but I don't think it does. Will the lift of the movie-making still carry some people aloft? Maybe, because watching this movie is like getting strung out on pure sensation. That's Scorsese's idea of a hood's life. It's also the young film enthusiast's dream of a director's life, and in Scorsese's case, it's not too far from the truth.<sup>113</sup>

Note that Kael is faulting the film on formal (although modernist would be stretching the truth) grounds, even if the film should be a perfect fit for her taste for visceral sensation. For Kael the film critic, as opposed to the merely casual viewer, the aesthetic doctrine of sensation must be tempered with lucidity and superimposed with a countervailing force inspired not by popular culture or pop art, but moderate and cool modernism, which is as close as Kael came to being pedagogical:

“Movies operate in a maze of borderlines; criticism is a balancing act, trying to suggest perspectives on the emotions viewers feel, trying to increase their enjoyment of movies without insulting their susceptibility to simple, crude pop.”<sup>114</sup> As we have seen, Kael shared that susceptibility to pop she attributes to the mass audience, but she saw it as the critic's task to help us reflect upon how we respond to the pleasures of popular art. One related, pressing problem for the film critic, according to Kael, is that films can be

effective on shameless levels. [...] When a movie has startled people, like *The Towering Inferno* or enlisted their sympathies and made them weep like *Walking Tall*, or made them feel vindictive and sadistic like the Charles Bronson picture *Death Wish*, the hardest thing for a critic to do is convince them that it isn't necessarily a great picture. It is almost impossible to persuade people that a shallow, primitive work can give them a terrific kick.<sup>115</sup>

The pop art sensibility of Kael's aesthetic has been duly noted by most observers, even if no one has stressed these links as much as I have. However, as I pointed out in the chapter where we delineated

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<sup>113</sup> Pauline Kael (1991) *Movie Love: Complete Reviews 1988-1991*. New York: A William Abrahams Book. Dutton. p. 270.

<sup>114</sup> Pauline Kael (1992[1976]) *Reeling: Film Writings 1972-1975*. London: Marion Boyars p. xiii.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* p. xiif.

the relationship between art and criticism, there is a disconcerting flip-side to this coin. I am talking about her sometimes neurotic misgivings about the popular art, the trash that she loves and sees as an essential component of film art. Sometimes, Kael actually metamorphoses into a venomous critic of mass culture. While always maintaining that mass culture does not sink under its own weight because there is vitality contained in it and because of its responsiveness to the needs of the public,<sup>116</sup> her tone is nevertheless, if only on a couple of occasions, so aggressive that it makes you wonder if she is giving elitists like Clement Greenberg and Theodor Adorno a run for their money:

After half a century in which movies were indeed a medium that linked people, and gave us, for good or ill, common experiences, we get this public-relations “suddenly” stuff when the bulk of American movies are being aimed directly at the young audience and are sold to it on the basis that it's different from all previous audiences. In its small way, the pitch is deliberately calculated as the teenage magazine ad (the two are even dotted the same way). By the time the media men, with the teachers at their heels, have finished indoctrinating school kids to be the film generation, that “core language” —whatever it is—may be only language they've got left. The Joker in this stacked deck is that school kids and college students go to the movies less frequently than earlier generations did. Although students are saturated from watching television at home (which may be a major factor in why they expect to be passively entertained at school and turn off when they aren't), movies are being pushed in the school systems because the number of paid movie admissions is about a fourth of what it used to be. Movie companies are trying to develop new customers, like tobacco companies when they sent free cartons to the soldier in the Second World War, to get them hooked on cigarettes.<sup>117</sup>

I do not wish to dispute that those who make decisions on behalf of vast media conglomerates, of which the film studios have been but one branch since the (still-ongoing) industry realignment began in the mid-sixties, oftentimes may have cynical agendas. Still less do I wish to argue that there is no reason to debate the effects of an uncritical consumption of the ever-widening array of media products. Still, this extraordinary quotation from Kael strikes me not only as neurotic, but paranoid. Indeed, one of her collections is called *Hooked*, which seems to me a way of telling the world she had become afflicted, in what is perhaps a moment of painful sincerity. Sarris, of course, could not let this play to the opposition go unnoticed:

It is strange enough for a highly regarded professional film critic to describe the movie-going habit as a probable cause of cultural cancer. It is stranger still to suggest that film courses have been sneaked into high

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<sup>116</sup> Pauline Kael (2002[1965]) *I Lost It at the Movies: The Essential Kael Collection '54 to '65*. London: Marion Boyars. p. 45.

<sup>117</sup> Pauline Kael (2000[1973]) *Deeper Into Movies: The Essential Kael Collection 69-76*. London: Marion Boyars. p. 146.



schools and colleges by the same old nameless media monsters. THEM! Quite the contrary. What is left of the film industry has been cashing in on the rising academic interest in the cinema. Film rentals go up every year, especially for the fashionable classics like *Citizen Kane*, and *Potemkin* and *Persona*. I wish to go on record right here that I would love to be corrupted by free films for my students from any source.<sup>118</sup>

What this boils down to essentially, I think, is the conflict between someone who welcomed film scholarship as an end in itself, and someone who detested the idea and resisted it despite fighting a losing battle. Could the greatest populist of American film criticism be a snob at heart? She seems to have felt that since movies are so sheerly enjoyable, we should resist studying them. Whatever we may think on that issue, it does appear to be a recurring theme in Kael's criticism.

I have now given an extensive run-through of Pauline Kael's aesthetics and criticism, using Andrew Sarris mainly as a sounding board. But we have not dealt with film criticism in a more general sense, and to this we must now turn.

It is probably well-advised to be somewhat more prudent and less greedy for particulars than we have been if we are to discuss criticism in the broadest and most general sense. At this point, we want to take as our point of departure a less idiosyncratic and more level-headed account of criticism in general than either Kael or Sarris can muster. To do so, we might continue by referring to a textbook in film studies aimed at undergraduates. One such current book is Stephen Prince's *Movies and Meaning*, which has been published in several editions.

In this textbook, Prince offers a definition based on characteristic functions performed by the film critic:

The critic (1) teases out implicit or subtle meanings, (2) clarifies seemingly contradictory messages or values in a given film, and (3) creates a novel way of interpreting or understanding a film. This last function is the central act of criticism: the creation of a new interpretation that extends or deepens the viewers' appreciation of a film.<sup>119</sup>

Prince highlights the interpretive, creative aspect of film criticism as the central functional act in the process. David Bordwell has taken this approach several steps further and places film criticism (begrudgingly, as it turns out) within the greater context of ancient literary theory when he defines the interpretations of film criticism as a form of rhetoric. Bordwell's *schemata*, identical to that of classical rhetoric, consist of *inventio* (the devising of arguments), *dispositio* (their arrangement) and

<sup>118</sup> Andrew Sarris (1978) *Politics and Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press. p. 146.

<sup>119</sup> Stephen Prince (2004) *Movies and Meaning: An Introduction to Film*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon. Third Edition. p. 379

*elocutio* (their stylistic articulation). “Rhetoric is the shaping of language to achieve one's ends, and in the act of shaping the language, the ends get sorted and sharpened.”<sup>120</sup> Søren Kjørup is even more direct when he calls rhetoric a form of strategic action.<sup>121</sup>

Since its original inception, rhetoric has taken on a variety of meanings, and is often equated with the orator's style and delivery, but it is useful for our purposes to refer briefly to its original historical status. Wilbur S. Howell points out that rhetoric in ancient, classical times was a mode of communication tied to popular democracy, designed to communicate with the populace through the convincing arrangement of arguments, whereas logic was the preferred mode of communication amongst scholars. The golden age of criticism proper in early modern times similarly served a political function as a midwife of democracy, a driving force in the development of what Jürgen Habermas, perhaps with an overly romantic phrase, has termed the public sphere, with the new urban coffeehouses as major flashpoints. Howell writes:

“Perhaps the most significant change that has come over the theory of communication during the last four hundred years is that logic has dissolved its alliance with the communication arts and aligned itself with scientific investigation.”<sup>122</sup>

I will not detail the tools of rhetoric any further, but merely affirm that the orator uses language as a form of symbolic material to communicate. Following up on this assertion, I now specifically want to call attention to the communicative function of rhetoric. Sonja K. Foss puts the matter thus:

The choice of whether to use the term *rhetoric* or the term *communication* to describe the process of exchanging meaning is largely a personal one, often stemming from the tradition of inquiry in which a scholar is grounded. Individuals trained in social scientific perspectives on symbol use often prefer the term communication, while those who study symbol use from a more humanistic perspective, tend to select the term rhetoric.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> David Bordwell (1989) *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. Malden, Mass: Harvard University Press. p. 205ff.

<sup>121</sup> Kjørup, Søren (1999) *Människo-vetenskaperna: Problem och Traditioner i Humanioras Vetenskapsteori*. Lund: Lund Studentlitteratur. p. 202. Translated From Danish by Sven-Erik Torhell. Originally published as *Menneskevidenskaberne: Problemer og Traditioner I Humanioras Videnskapsteori* (1996). Fredriksberg: Roskilde Universitetsforlag.

<sup>122</sup> Wilbur S. Howell (1975) *Poetics, Rhetoric and Logic: Studies in the Basic Disciplines of Criticism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. p. 144.

<sup>123</sup> Sonja K. Foss (2004) *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press. p. 5-6.

My own inclination as a writer is toward the humanistic tradition, but in film and media studies, which of course draw heavily on sociology, *communication* is probably the established convention. In any event, this semantic distinction is of very little consequence for my main line of argument, which brings us back to the point made earlier by Bordwell.

If criticism, as Bordwell contends, is an off-shoot of rhetoric—a form of communication consisting of the shaping of language to one's ends, as he puts it—what are the implications? Bordwell readily admits that rhetoric is not the disinterested manipulation of language. He roughly distinguishes between three kinds of institutionalised film criticism, I have inverted the chronological of Bordwell's scheme in order to present them in descending order based on prestige: There exists the kind of criticism that is internal to academia and results in dissertations and scholarly books; the essayistic form found in specialized film magazines; and lastly the journalistic reviews typical of newspapers and general interest magazines.<sup>124</sup>

We may note that purely academic criticism may or may not be value-oriented, while the personal essay typically is value-oriented and the review is so by definition. Sarris and Kael are essayists, yet they straddle all three types of criticism, with aesthetic evaluation as the ultimate aim of their activity.

If we take Bordwell's assertion about criticism as a form of rhetoric at face value, we are in effect saying that criticism typically communicates ideas and feelings that are not value-free. Taking this as a point of departure, I now want to narrow the field drastically to examine the nature of value judgements as an inherent and essential component of criticism. As Kael claimed, these are not scientific in any usefully strict sense of the term, but they do provide us with special kinds of knowledge.

Etymologically, “criticism” is derived from the Greek verb *krinein*, which simply means to discern or to judge. Judging, of course, is a prescriptive action rather a descriptive one. When criticism openly and explicitly emphasises issues of value, we say that it is *axiological*. Sarris and Kael, who are deeply concerned with film as an art form, share an unabashedly axiological outlook. In her first real think-piece, originally published in 1956, Kael saw the axiological variant of criticism as being under severe pressure:

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<sup>124</sup> David Bordwell (1989) *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. Cambridge, Mass Harvard University Press p. 20.

As the mass media developed, the finer points of democratic theory were discarded, and a parody of democracy became public dogma. The film critic no longer considers that his function is the formation and reformation of public taste (that would be an undemocratic presumption); the old independent critic who would trumpet the good, blast the bad and tell his readers they were boobs if they wasted their money on garbage gives way to an amiable fellow who feels responsible not to his subject matter, but to the tastes of his stratum of the public.<sup>125</sup>

As an auteurist, Sarris more or less upheld a Francophile criterion of enthusiasm as an ideal in criticism, but distinctions and differentiations have always been his stock-in-trade as a critic. All the same, Sarris's attitude to his profession is less high-minded and more sardonic than Kael's:

[M]ost movie reviewers fancy themselves as magistrates of merit and paid taste consultants for the public. The "best movie" reviewer is the "toughest" movie reviewer, and a reputation is made and measured by the percentage of movies the reviewer pans. The more movies panned, the more honest the reviewer. Everyone knows how assiduously the movie companies seek to corrupt the press. Hence, what better proof of critical integrity than a bad notice? Besides, the journalistic beat of a movie reviewer takes in all movies, not just the ones he likes. The highbrow critic can pick and choose, the lowbrow reviewer must sit and suffer.<sup>126</sup>

Whatever the outlook, the critic's job is to differentiate and discriminate. To differentiate between an unimportant bad movie and a bad movie that matters, as Kael once put it,<sup>127</sup> is of course also to be understood within axiological parameters.

So, axiological criticism in general is concerned with making value judgements on a scale of good or bad. What does this mean? Does it mean that criticism is no more than emotive reports on the critic's state of mind that tell us nothing about the object he wishes to praise or condemn? Philosophers have mulled over this problem for centuries. Curt J. Ducasse represents the extreme subjectivist viewpoint, which seemingly amounts to anarchy in criticism:

The critic's evaluations [...] ultimately are just as purely matters of taste as those of the unsophisticated amateur. The great difference [...] is that the naive amateur is pleased or displeased without knowing exactly why, whereas the critic does know what specific features are responsible for his own pleasure or displeasure in

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<sup>125</sup> Pauline Kael (1956) "Movies, The Desperate Art", Daniel Talbot (ed.) (1966) *Film: An Anthology*. Berkeley. California University Press. pp. 51-71.

<sup>126</sup> Andrew Sarris (1969) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. New York: DaCapo Press. p. 33-34.

<sup>127</sup> Pauline Kael (1968[1970]) *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*: London: Calder & Boyars p. 14.

a work of art. But in both cases the situation is in the end just the same as with, let us say, the taste of pineapple.<sup>128</sup>

In a sense, Ducasse's view seems perhaps intuitively right if applied to the specific subjects of our study, Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael, since their careers were built upon their being opinionated. They both take pride in describing their immediate emotive responses as directly and truthfully as possible, making few concessions to "balanced objectivity". It must be admitted that even if Ducasse is correct, criticism can still perform a couple of important functions which are different from and more than simply telling the patron/consumer of art what he ought to like or dislike. The critic of course functions as a guide analogous to a guide in a foreign city, but he also fills an additional, closely related function:

If a person has read often enough what a given critic has to say concerning books or pictures with which he himself is familiar, then he may form an idea of the relation between the critic's judgements and his own. He [sic] may find for instance that he himself usually likes or finds interesting the works that the critic approves; and may thus be able to infer, from what the critic says about a given work, whether or not he will find it worthwhile.<sup>129</sup>

It would probably be fair to say that most people *use* film criticism, or at the very least, reviews, in this manner. It could also be argued that the best critics foster exactly this sort of identification. According to noted jazz critic Francis Davis, reading Kael's reviews was "like going to the movies with someone you adored; when you disagreed with her, it was like having a lover's quarrel."<sup>130</sup>

Ducasse, we should note, essentially advocates a sophisticated view of the critic as a consumer guide. The implicit ideal reader asks, "Is it any good?" Answering this question *is* the primary function of a journalistic critic, whatever the publication. According to Sarris:

This is initially the least interesting question one can ask about a film and ultimately the most important. I suppose every wishy-washy reviewer in captivity has known that awesome moment of truth when Aunt Minnie has put the question in its most brutal form: "Should I see it or shouldn't I?" The crowd roars; the bull snorts.

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<sup>128</sup> Curt J. Ducasse (1955[1944]) *Art, the Critics and You*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill. p. 126.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, p. 128.

<sup>130</sup> Francis Davis (2002) *Afterglow: A Last Conversation with Pauline Kael*. New York: DaCapo Press p. 23.

There is no escape. All the iconography, *mise-en-scène*, *politiques* and the commitments in the world are useless. A simple yes or no will suffice.<sup>131</sup>

Still, this is conditional, and the principal problem of Ducasse's position seems emphatically evident. If Ducasse is right, it is perhaps difficult to see how any evaluative and normative statements about works of art would have any epistemological value. I would certainly like to think that the upper echelons of (film) criticism, where Sarris and Kael belong, can play a somewhat a more prominent role than Ducasse affords them.

The analytic philosopher Morris Weitz disagrees with Ducasse, maintaining that true criticism has an empirical core, and that taste and explicit or implicit standards of criticism are potentially two different entities, which can be, and frequently are, separated. If we say that something is *better* than something else, we are always referring to certain standards, but these standards need not always be reduced to an arbitrary expression of preferences. Morris Weitz convincingly argues that extreme subjectivism, of which Ducasse is a test case, rests on the fallacy that our value judgements are by necessity identical with our preferences, our *taste*. I will take stock of Weitz's rejection of Ducasse's position shortly, but first we must perform a close inspection of the key concept in his argument, taste, with empirical examples gleaned from Sarris's and Kael's criticism. Taste itself is an ambiguous concept, referring to habitual preferences as well as a refined perceptiveness required in persons said to have *good* taste.

Matters of taste occupy a central position in any critic's outlook, and Sarris and Kael are both acutely aware of this. "[Criticism is] all a matter of taste (and education and intelligence and sensibility) and one person's taste is not as good as another's."<sup>132</sup> Sarris, characteristically somewhat more measured in his explication of taste, quotes Paul Valery to flaunt his vast knowledge of film history. "Taste [...] is made up of a thousand distastes."<sup>133</sup> Neither Kael nor Sarris were up in arms over the greatest divider in taste, the avant-garde film. In 1966, Kael would write:

Good liberal parents didn't want to push their kids in academic subjects but oohed and aahed with false delight when their children presented them with a baked ashtray or a woven doily. Did anyone guess or foresee what

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<sup>131</sup> Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen: Essays on Film and Other Related Subjects*. New York: Simon & Schuster. p. 73-74

<sup>132</sup> Pauline Kael "Movies, the Desperate Art", Daniel Talbot (ed.) (1966) *Film: An Anthology*. Berkeley: University of California Press. p. 51-71.

<sup>133</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996/1969) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968* New York: DaCapo Press. p. 27.

narcissistic confidence this generation would develop in its banal “creativity”? Now we're surrounded and inundated by artists. And a staggering number of them wish to be, or already call themselves filmmakers.<sup>134</sup>

According to Sarris, avant-garde films are dictated not primarily by often-trumpeted formal concerns, but rather by an impulse towards the shattering of content taboos, political, religious, and sexual.<sup>135</sup> A decade later, he would elaborate: “At best, the avant-garde cinema is an eccentric reaction to the narrative cinema. To argue that it is more is to ignore the evidence of the perennial walkouts.”<sup>136</sup> Kael would more or less inadvertently describe something that can be construed to sum up both this kind of filmmaker and his core audience in relation to movies at large, in *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*:

Movies have always seemed to be both behind and ahead of the culture. Though the sexual revolution has scarcely found its way onto the screen, and movies rarely deal with the simplest kind of heterosexual life in our time, they're already treating bisexuality—like the kids who are on pot and discussing the merits of LSD before they've had their first beer.<sup>137</sup>

Kael believed in the traditional prerogatives of the critic, which is why, in the brilliant piece that opens *I Lost It at the Movies*, “Zeitgeist and Poltergeist; Or, Are Movies Going to Pieces?”, she blasted Susan Sontag's controversial views on Jack Smith's scandalous success *Flaming Creatures*—a milestone in the New American Cinema avant-garde cycle to which Sarris had been a bemused onlooker, if actually much more as a mole than as an agent. Kael felt that Sontag's review was a rationale that extolled indiscriminateness *as a value*, and by extension, promoted meaninglessness and anarchy in art and criticism:

In Los Angeles, among the independent film-makers at their midnight screenings, I was told that I belonged to an older generation, that Agee-alcohol generation they called it, who could not respond to new films because I did not take pot or LSD and so couldn't learn just to *accept* everything. This narcotic approach of torpid acceptance, which is much like the lethargy of the undead in those failure-of-communication movies, may explain why those films have seemed so “true” to some people (and why the directors' moralistic messages seemed so false).<sup>138</sup>

<sup>134</sup> Pauline Kael (1970) *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*. London: Calder & Boyars p. 17.

<sup>135</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996[1968]) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions – 1929-1968*, New York. p. 23.

<sup>136</sup> Andrew Sarris (1978) *Politics and Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press. p. 206.

<sup>137</sup> Pauline Kael (1970) *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*. London: Calder & Boyars. p. 167.

<sup>138</sup> Pauline Kael (2002[1965]) *I Lost It at the Movies: The Essential Kael Collection '54-'65*. London: Marion Boyars p. 19.

And elsewhere about the baby boomer avant-garde: “

Kids who can't write, who have never developed any competence in photography, who have never acted in nor directed a play see no deterrent to making movies.”<sup>139</sup>

Having doubled as a film experimenter, Kael is, as to be expected, not entirely dismissive of the avant-garde, dishing out praise to avant-gardists Bruce Baillie, Carroll Ballard and Jordan Belson. However, her loyalties lie with commercial films, which she more often than not called movies. Sarris would wholeheartedly agree with Kael's claim that even the worst overstuffed Hollywood film is often easier to sit through than an experimental film, because the former has actors and a story.<sup>140</sup>

I should now like to digress about a closely related phenomenon: what Kael terms the “failure-of-communication movie.” These films do not constitute a segment of the avant-garde, since they do have characters and a story, but rather are (or were in the sixties) a dominant “genre” within the commercially released art-house film—the most telling sign that alienation, long since a mainstay in modern painting and literature, had reached the fringes of popular culture. I choose to detail this development now, because it has a great bearing on the theme of this present chapter, which is, as noted, axiological criticism the way Kael and Sarris practised it, with its emphasis on the matter of taste.

The failure-of-communication cycle began in earnest with *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959) and continued throughout the sixties with the progressively ever more fantastical films of Federico Fellini, and above all Michelangelo Antonioni's austere yet modish works. The best-known example of the cycle is probably *Last Year at Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961). Neither Kael nor Sarris have ever been *a priori* opposed to praising “art films”. Both, for instance, loved the still-perplexing and deeply ambiguous *L'Avventura* (1961) by Antonioni. On this particular occasion, Kael even praised the film in the high-brow terms derived from modernist literature, a strategy of interpretation that Antonioni blatantly courted. Kael's strategy in this particular review is noteworthy, because much so of her impact in the sixties stemmed from attacking, often quite viciously, critics she felt over-relied on similar high-cultural cross-references as tools for explication and interpretation. When she finds a film worthy of praise in such terms, Kael can be as high-toned as anyone:

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<sup>139</sup> Pauline Kael (1970) *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*. London: Calder & Boyars p. 18.

<sup>140</sup> *Loc Cit.*



Antonioni's subject, the fall, that is to say the exposure of a rich handsome gifted man, is treated accumulatively and analytically. An oblique, tangential view of love and society, a view not raised to the plane of despair. In its melancholy, *L'Avventura* suggests Chekov. Because it is subtle and ascetic, it suggests a Henry James who chewed more than he bit off. And perhaps because the characters use sex destructively as a momentary blackout, as a means of escaping self-awareness by humiliating someone else, it suggests D.H. Lawrence. Most of all I think, it suggests Virginia Woolf of *The Waves*. The mood of *L'Avventura* is disparate are we.<sup>141</sup>

Sarris, on the other hand, ends his review of the same film with the following paragraph:

The travels of the characters are paralleled by the meaningfully shifting backgrounds of geography, architecture and painting. This intellectual muscle of *L'Avventura* should appeal to anyone who seeks something more from the cinema than the finger exercises of conventional films.<sup>142</sup>

There are two major observations about the contrasting styles of Sarris and Kael to be gleaned from these brief quotations, and both are less than obvious for anyone with only a passing acquaintance with their criticism. If anything, Kael's review is more grounded in literary tropes and steeped in modernist traditions—and this is a side to her critical personality which is too rarely considered. Sarris's review is more visually oriented, and we may also detect a caution in his tone and surmise that he is less likely to either pan a film or rave about one than the perennially unstable Kael. All things being equal, Sarris's tastes have always been more classical than the foremost representatives of the “failure-of-communication” mode of filmmaking (who were, for a time, *La mode*) could offer. Sarris pinpointed the characteristic traits of modernist films in his profile of the emblematic actress Monica Vitti, in whose visage the perplexing ambiguities of female sexuality become amplified as style as well as the dominant theme. It is not unjustified to regard Ms. Vitti as the pin-up of the intellect, as Sarris does.<sup>143</sup> It is worth noting what Sarris has to say on this paragon of the modern woman. Not at least because Sarris, undeterred by such awesome predecessors as Plato and Ludwig Wittgenstein, twice attempted the dialogue form as a epistemological mode of communication, one of which ended in him defining the cinema in a threefold exclamation: *Girls! Girls! Girls!*<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Pauline Kael (1965) *I Lost It at the Movies: The Essential Kael Collection '54-'65* London: Calder & Boyars. p. 148.

<sup>142</sup> Andrew Sarris (1970) *Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema 1955/1969*. New York: Simon & Schuster p.

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<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.* p. 69.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.* p. 70.

Monica Vitti clearly represents a certain kind of modern woman found at almost any intellectual cocktail party. She is usually searching for something, and as she strives to communicate what that something is, the unwary male becomes enmeshed in a hopeless guessing game. It is not marriage exactly, not money exactly, not security exactly, not sex exactly, not companionship exactly, not a career exactly – in fact, not anything exactly. Ultimately, inexactitude becomes the modern woman's secret weapon.<sup>145</sup>

The key phrase in the context of this kind of film is “not anything *exactly*”. Always a master at encapsulating a filmmaker’s style in striking epigrams, Sarris nails both the appeal and shortcomings of Antonioni's entire *oeuvre* within the last page of his digressive piece on Monica Vitti:

Because man, the eternal wanderer and truth seeker, is biologically incapable of woman's constancy, he is doomed to appear, at least in Antonioni's films, as a pitiable weakling in terms of a woman's character. This, ultimately, is the cinematic psychology of Michelangelo Antonioni.<sup>146</sup>

Antonioni was never likely to impress Kael for very long. The lethargic guilt-ridden sexuality of the disaffected well-to-do that infuses every minutely composed frame of his films is antithetical to Kael's need for liveliness. By the time of *The Red Desert* (1964), she had all but given up on him. In her eyes, Antonioni had become afflicted with a pseudo-intellectual mannerism right out of *Marienbad*. “Despite its connection with the world around us, I found the movie deadly: a hazy poetic illustration of emotional chaos—which was made peculiarly attractive.”<sup>147</sup> What galled Kael most about this kind of film is that it constitutes a cheap way of inviting critics and audiences to make fools of themselves: “The art-house audience tends to accept lack of clarity as complexity, accept clumsiness and confusion as ambiguity and as style.”<sup>148</sup> Kael, however, reserved her harshest critique of Antonioni for one of his “American” films, *Zabriskie Point* (1970). Not only did the film upset Kael stylistically, she also found Antonioni's intended critique of American consumerism offensive and trite while being blandly flattering to its young core audience:

*Zabriskie Point* is pitched to youth—that is, to the interests and values of the rebellious sons and daughters of the professional and upper middle classes—the way old Hollywood movies used to be pitched to lower middle-

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<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.* p. 72.

<sup>146</sup> *Loc Cit.*

<sup>147</sup> Pauline Kael (1970) *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*. London: Calder & Boyars p. 24.

<sup>148</sup> Pauline Kael (2002[1965]) *I Lost It at the Movies: The Essential Kael Collection '54-65*. London: Marion Boyars p. 15.

class values. The good guys (youth) and the bad guys (older white Americans) are as stiffly stereotyped as in any third-rate melodrama and the evil police have been cast in the same mould as the old Hollywood Nazis. Antonioni has dehumanized them, so that they can be hated as pigs, but since he has failed to humanize the youths, it's dummies against dummies. Antonioni's speciality has always been "exposing" dehumanization in a dehumanized way; he has never before fallen into the trap of trying to show people with energy and vitality, and he simply doesn't have the temperament for it. [...] It's a dumb movie, unconsciously snobbish, as if America should be destroyed because of its vulgarity. [...] What he exposes is not America but the class basis of his own tastes and reactions. He gets an easy laugh out of a family of tourists in the desert—out of their garish clothes and materialistic equipment; he himself is an upper middle-class tourist with aristocratic tastes.<sup>149</sup>

Sarris basically agreed, but here he demonstrates, once again, that for all his cultural audacity, he is a reluctant panner:

Antonioni's relentless aestheticism dilutes his ideological impact at every turn. If he had photographed the Nazi death camps, he would have found the most beautiful compositions available for that sort of material. This absurd dilemma of a *Vogue* photographer with a Marxist overview is Antonioni's curse and glory. It makes me enjoy *Zabriskie Point* more than I really respect it, but I can't help thinking that I belong to a minority of a minority in the pleasure I derive from dynamic visual forms for their own sake. Without pleasing performances, zippy dialogue and an unspoken complicity with the guilt-ridden but oh-so-comfortable affluence of America, Antonioni's Art must carry *Zabriskie Point* single-handedly, and that may not be enough to pay the rent in Culver City. But no one who takes cinema seriously can afford to pass up this latest canvas from the palette of the Michelangelo for our own time and our own medium.<sup>150</sup>

The abiding impression left by Kael's and Sarris's criticism is that they are essentially democratic, populist and open-minded, if not in any way open-ended. Kael did not want to be mistaken for a boob that attacks ambiguity and complexity.<sup>151</sup> She wrote, "Errors of judgement aren't fatal, but too much anxiety about judgement is."<sup>152</sup> This, and I do not hesitate to call it a philosophical insight, may in fact be the reason why Kael ended up as a film critic. This statement requires closer explanation. As I pointed out earlier, Kael, as a matter of taste, appreciated and wanted to maintain the traditional cultural standing of *movies* rather than *cinema*, just as the balance between these two competing attitudes towards film seemed to be shifting toward the latter:

<sup>149</sup> Pauline Kael (1973 [2000]) *Deeper Into Movies: The Essential Kael Collection from '69 to '72*. London: Marion Boyars. p. 114-116.

<sup>150</sup> Andrew Sarris (1978) *Politics and Cinema*. New York Columbia University Press, p. 241.

<sup>151</sup> Pauline Kael (2002[1965]) *I Lost It at the Movies: The Essential Kael Collection from '54 to '65*. London: Marion Boyars. p.19.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.* p 23.

When movies, the only art which everyone felt free to enjoy and have opinions about, lose their connection with song and dance, when they become cinema, which people fear to criticise just as they fear to say what they think of a new piece of music or a new poem or painting, they will become another object of academic study and “appreciation” and will soon be an object of excitement to practitioners of the “art.”<sup>153</sup>

If taste is crucial to criticism, it is still not the whole story. We should note that there is nothing logically unsound in the statement: “I know that *Battleship Potemkin* is a great movie, but I don’t like it.” By the same token, every film fan has guilty pleasures that he or she enjoys inordinately, despite a distinct feeling that they are *not really* (even allowing for the potential absence of camp) good. The not always reliable but eternally fascinating interviewee Orson Welles, about whom both Sarris and Kael wrote extensively, similarly spoke for most of us when he once remarked in an interview: “There are works that I know to be good which I cannot stand.”<sup>154</sup>

No one, however, has gotten so much poetic mileage out of this often troubling realization as Sarris did in his profile of John Ford, arguably the most ideologically problematic of all his pantheon directors. There is a tone of reflective rumination and doubt in this passage, which has no parallel in Kael’s direct, slam-bang approach:

John Ford’s *The Fugitive* is a solidly pre-Catholic picture about a priest, a creeping Jesus. My feelings about the Catholic Church, are, to put it mildly, more mixed than Mister Ford’s; I doubt that Jesus ever crept, and I am sickened when I watch others creep in his name. I dislike allegory and symbolism which are imposed on and denature reality as deeply as I love both when they bloom from and exalt reality; and romantic photography is the kind I care for the least. Over all, I think *The Fugitive* is a bad work of art, tacky, unreal and pretentious. Yet I think almost as highly of it as the films mentioned above, because I have seldom seen in a moving picture such grandeur and sobriety of ambition, such continuous intensity of treatment or such frequent achievement of what was obviously worked for, however misguided or distasteful I think it is.<sup>155</sup>

These examples ought to give credence to Weitz’s position. Note also that the term “bad work of art” in Sarris’s argument expresses praise *and* severe reservations at the same time, bearing out our contention made in the introduction that *art* is to be understood as a normative premise.

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<sup>153</sup> *Loc Cit.*

<sup>154</sup> Juan Cobos, Miguel Rubio & J. A. Pruneda. “A Trip to Don Quixoteland: Conversations with Orson Welles”. *Cahiers Du Cinema* (English) No. 5. (1966) p. 34-47. Reprinted in Ronald Gottesman (ed.) (1971) *Focus On Citizen Kane*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Publishers. p.7-25.

<sup>155</sup> Andrew Sarris (1975) *The John Ford Movie Mystery*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press. p. 120.

Returning to Weitz's argument specifically, the distinction between the critic and the non-critic must be something more than just an ability to pinpoint entirely subjective reactions and express them cogently in verbal terms. Weitz goes on to suggest a different criterion of demarcation, in direct confrontation with Ducasse's view:

It simply is a fact that people, amateurs and critics alike, do distinguish between their preferences and their evaluations. [...] The big difference between the amateur and the critic, lies, therefore, not in the fact that one is disinterested, and the other is not, in the causes of his pleasure or displeasure, but that the critic – provided that he is a real critic, not merely a reporter – tries to seek out *within* the work of art what makes it good [or bad], whereas the amateur is willing to accept his reactions with no such curiosity.<sup>156</sup>

It is particularly noteworthy that Weitz, echoing the point we made in the introduction, makes an analytical distinction between *critic* and *reporter*. It is possible, as the media sociologists William Rivers and Wilbur Schramm have done, to distinguish between two ideal types of communication in this respect: *informational communication* and *entertainment communication*:

The entertainer may be expected to be more concerned with form than is the informational communicator. How he writes [...] is expected to give pleasure. He is usually imaginative rather than utilitarian, prizes rich writing over clear writing, and must expertly turn a phrase or build a scene. In short, although informational communication may be artistic, and although entertainment communication may present a picture of reality, the thrust of informing asks for the skills of the reporter, and the thrust of entertaining asks for the skill of the artist.<sup>157</sup>

It is my contention that belletristic film criticism of the kind practised by Sarris and Kael calls for the skill of the reporter as well as the skill of the artist. It is very difficult to imagine a good *critic* who writes badly, though he may well be a good theorist. Criticism is thus a fusion of the two ideal modes of communication as outlined by Rivers and Schramm. The entertainment element may be called criticism's artistic or poetic aspect, which we saw Kael defend so vigorously at the beginning of this chapter. Sarris's claim that the best criticism, like the best poetry, is that which is richest in associations,<sup>158</sup> gives us a vital clue as to how criticism as a personally expressive and communicative literary mode ought to be understood. To highlight the poetic aspect of criticism is

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<sup>156</sup> Morris Weitz (1950) *Philosophy Of The Arts*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass. p. 194.

<sup>157</sup> William Rivers & Wilbur Schramm (1957) "The Impact of Mass Media" Reprinted in Alan Casty (ed.) *Mass Media And Mass Man* (1973) [1968]. New York: Holt, Rinehart And Winston Inc. pp. 4-12. Second Edition.

<sup>158</sup> Andrew Sarris (1970) *Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema 1955/1969*. New York: Simon and Schuster p. 14.

to insist on a strong element of subjectivity. I now want to focus on criticism as a rhetorical and poetic mode in the broadest sense by detailing the nature of the aesthetic object as the focus of criticism.

With this in mind, I find it pertinent to clear up any potential misunderstandings immediately. I agree with Weitz, who highlights the empirical dimension of criticism in the sense that criticism is always directed at an object which holds the critic's attention. If we are to believe in the possibility of criticism, we must side with the empiricists and moderate philosophical realists and accept the existence of the object. The great art historian and connoisseur Max J. Friedländer once wrote, albeit with a hint of defensiveness: “No philosopher can forbid us to hold true that which we observe. If we do not believe in the object, then we cannot explain how an understanding between artist and spectator becomes possible.”<sup>159</sup> Put a little more prosaically, the object-as-representation/experience is scepticism's final destination. As critics, we must simply accept this. This object is not the “thing in itself” which Immanuel Kant believed to be unknowable. It is, however, a special *kind* of object in a general and purely conceptual sense. Following the lead of philosopher Katarina Elam, we might say that the objects of criticism are *intentional* objects, making them subject to the interpretive motives and intentions of the critic and the consequences of intentional utterance, *regardless* of whether the original intention is relevant to the interpretation of the work. As Elam puts it, “*The aesthetic object is the work of art as experienced.*”<sup>160</sup> Experience has a dominant emotional component, according to Elam: “Emotions seem to be links of great importance between ourselves and the surrounding world. We understand and judge other people through our emotions. And working in the other direction, in the expression of an emotion, we try to say something about ourselves.”<sup>161</sup> This, I think, is what Susan Sontag attempted to make clear in her classic collection of essays “Against Interpretation<sup>162</sup>”, when she made a convincing case for the erotics of art. However, as much as I admire Sontag (she is indeed my favourite writer), she never abandoned her distant and grave intellectual aloofness, and so Kael's criticism is a more consistent—some would no doubt say insistent—example of someone who celebrates the erotics of art.

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<sup>159</sup> Max J. Friedländer (1960) *On Art and Connoisseurship*. Boston: Beacon Press. p. 30.

<sup>160</sup> Katarina Elam (2001) *Emotions as a Mode of Understanding: An Essay in Philosophical Aesthetics*. Uppsala. Ph.D. Diss.: Uppsala University. p. 23. Italics added.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid* .p. 15.

<sup>162</sup> Susan Sontag (1964) *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

The cornerstone of experience, emotional or otherwise, is perception, and a great critic must of course be perceptive. Indeed, Pauline Kael asserts that “we read critics for the perceptions, for what they tell us that we didn’t fully grasp when we saw the work, the judgements we can usually make for ourselves.”<sup>163</sup> Film scholar Frank M. Scheide similarly defines film criticism in relation to the singular film-experience: “Viewers perceive film through their physiological, emotional and intellectual responses to a given motion picture. Criticism is the process by which we assess these perceptions. The value in any communication lies in the experience one accrues from it.”<sup>164</sup>

This is true both of *viewing* films and of *reading* criticism. If criticism is to be considered an artistic activity, there is a need to reaffirm just how critics make themselves central to their writing by fusing two modes of communication which blend more or less seamlessly within the matrix of rhetoric. Elam would probably say that critics draw on a personal reservoir of emotions tied to their personal experience, as well as their qualities as writers and the clarity of their thinking. Stephen Prince has put the matter concisely:

There are two sources of pleasure in good criticism. The first derives from re-experiencing the film through the critic's descriptions; the second derives from the critic's use of language. Many people read criticism not because they necessarily agree with the critic, but because they like the way the critic writes or talks about movies.<sup>165</sup>

Prince's arguments are basically sound, but he fails to mention the enjoyment and the intellectual rewards that often may arise from *disagreeing* with a critic. Such instances may force us to reconsider our reactions, or conversely, devise new arguments that may reinforce our initial reactions. By definition, this dialogical process between reader and text is predicated by value judgements. For a critic/historian like Sarris, a film history as well as a criticism without value judgements is unthinkable. “Film history devoid of value judgements would degenerate into a hobby like bridge or stamp collecting, respectable in its own esoteric way, but not too revelatory.”<sup>166</sup> The revelatory power of value judgements deserves attention in its own right. Referring to value judgements, Virgil C. Aldrich points out that:

In talking about works of art, people will frequently say that they like one better than the other, or that they simply can't stand it. These remarks are plainly about the speakers. They are primarily expressions about

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<sup>163</sup> “Kael Talks” *The New Yorker* 21 March 1994. 133-143.

<sup>164</sup> Frank M. Scheide (1994) *Introductory Film Criticism: A Historical Perspective*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company. p. 7.

<sup>165</sup> Stephen Prince (2004) *Movies and Meaning: An Introduction to Film*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon Third Edition. p. 379.

<sup>166</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996[1968]) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*: Da Capo Press p.

subjective responses, though one may infer something from them if one is acquainted with the speaker, his taste, his expertise in such matters etc.<sup>167</sup>

Aldrich seemingly offers an exact reprise of Ducasse's view, but not quite. By explicitly pointing towards inferential reasoning, Aldrich hints at the rich possibilities of a more systematic meta-criticism. What one is able to infer from the evaluative elements in critical bodies of work along with the descriptive ones, may well be just as interesting and illuminating as a dry summation of empirical facts. In meta-criticism, a study of reasons is perhaps a more pressing concern than the causes, even if an absolute separation of the two serves primarily an analytic function. We should not conceal the fact that Sarris and Kael are interesting not least for their tastes and how they verbalize and dramatize their likes and dislikes.

It is here, I think, that Ducasse is mistaken. Echoing Weitz, philosopher and art critic Jerome Stolnitz has chided Ducasse for not making a distinction between the aesthetic object as the *cause* of our pleasure or displeasure, and our private psychological *reasons* for liking or disliking an aesthetic object.<sup>168</sup> This is a particularly relevant point in terms of Pauline Kael's criticism. Plenty of commentators have found Kael's critical method (lacking as it does Sarris's preconditional contextual superimposition between the auteur and his films) disconcertingly haphazard and purely impressionistic. Writing with qualified admiration, Edward Murray cannot conceal that he is exasperated by Kael's Godardian love of spontaneity and improvisation:

Pauline Kael has won many followers because she writes in a dazzling style, because she has a strong personality which is conveyed in everything she says, because she makes whatever interests her at the moment – even a trashy film – sound important, and because she discusses with intelligence subjects that most readers want to hear discussed.<sup>169</sup>

Kael's slangy style, “straight from the lip,”<sup>170</sup> is an indispensable correlate to her ideas (quite different in feel from Sarris's more deliberate and formal use of alliteration) and was apparently formed during her time at Berkeley. “My vocabulary loosened up during my freshman year at

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<sup>167</sup> Virgil C. Aldrich (1964) *Philosophy of Art. Englewood Cliffs*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Publishers p. 6.

<sup>168</sup> Jerome Stolnitz (1960) *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art Criticism: A Critical Introduction*. Houghton Mifflin Company: The Riverside Press: Cambridge, Mass. p. 415.

<sup>169</sup> Edward Murray (1975) *Nine American Film Critics: A Study of Theory and Practice*. New York: Fredrick Ungar Publishing pp. 110-141.

<sup>170</sup> Tim Bywater and Thomas Sobchack (1989) *An Introduction to Film Criticism: Major Approaches to Narrative Film*. New York: Pearson Longman Inc. p. 13.



Berkeley, and I was quite pleased when my mother remarked that the more educated I got the more I sounded like a truck driver.”<sup>171</sup>

Not least by going for a distinctly colloquial writing style, Kael deliberately blurs the distinction between causes and reasons for liking or disliking a film. Even more importantly in this context, the dominant source of her criticism is always and unapologetically herself.

In a 1991 interview, when the initial auteur controversy had long since faded, Sarris commented on his erstwhile enemy thus, declaring how he felt about being bracketed together with Kael as the premier American film critic. The comparison alone is enough to make him uneasy:

I feel uncomfortable with it because I know how to distinguish myself from Pauline [Kael] as a critic in the sense that she makes herself the centre of the piece. She makes it the job of the filmmaker to astonish her, and if he fails, you know, “Off with his head!” [...] What I do journalistically to this extent is to say, “Well, this is how I see it and you may see it differently, and I have to give it to you so that you can calibrate it and relate it to your own experience.”<sup>172</sup>

Kael did like to be astonished in the darkened theatre, and she liked to respond, provided there was something to respond to. The consistent use of first-person plural in her criticism served to place her in the audience; she was watching the audiences as well as the films. The early film historian Benjamin B. Hampton's observation that “the general astonishment value” had been the chief reason for movies' initial success and appeal has since become conventional wisdom, and has been substantiated by empirical studies of the early “cinema of attractions.”<sup>173</sup> Kael, however, like no other critic of her stature before or since, seems to have been sustained and driven by the need to be astonished and overwhelmed. Like someone reeling (significantly, *Reeling* was the title of her favourite collection of her own work) from having discovered movies for the first time, Kael equates film art with physical excitement. Her prose throbs with a vibrant, participatory relish:

Art is the greatest game, the supreme entertainment, because you discover the game as you play it. There is only one rule, as we learned in *Orphee*: Astonish us! In all art we look and listen for what we have not

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<sup>171</sup> Pauline Kael (2000[1973]) *Deeper Into Movies: The Essential Kael Collection 1969-1973*. London: Marion Boyars. p. 19.

<sup>172</sup> George Hickenlooper (1991) *Reel Conversations: Candid Interviews with Film's Foremost Directors and Critics*. New York: A Citadel Press Book. pp. 3-16.

<sup>173</sup> Benjamin B. Hampton (1970[1931]) *A History of the American Film Industry from Its Beginnings to 1931*. New York: Dover Publications Inc. p. 13.

experienced quite that way before. We want to see, to feel, to understand, to respond in a new way. Why should pedants be allowed to spoil the game?<sup>174</sup>

Though Kael often complained that the ambiguity of modern art films tends to reduce criticism to autobiography, I would be hard pressed to find a more autobiographical film critic. Kael's criticism can be intensely personal. Nowhere is this more evident than in her famous review of Vittorio De Sica's *Shoeshine* (1947) where the opening passage is nakedly and somewhat awkwardly confessional:

When *Shoeshine* opened in 1947, I went to see it alone after one of those terrible lovers' quarrels that leave one in a state of incomprehensible despair. I came out of the theatre, tears streaming, and overheard the petulant voice of a college girl complaining to her boyfriend, "Well, I don't see what is so special about that movie." I walked up the street, crying blindly, no longer certain whether my tears were for the tragedy on the screen, the hopelessness I felt for myself, or the alienation I felt from those who could not experience the radiance of *Shoeshine*. For if people cannot feel *Shoeshine*, what *can* they feel?<sup>175</sup>

This is candid in the extreme, a passage which is the stuff of harrowing, trembling melodrama, that most subversive and feminine of genres. Was Kael ever confessional about her womanhood specifically? Since Kael was a brilliant *female* critic, the thorny question of her professed feminism is bound to present itself sooner or later, but there are no simple answers.

What is beyond question is that Kael's prose does disclose a distinctly feminine voice, and a feminine voice with a sexualized outlook, at that. Like sex, films have the capacity to affect us at so many sensory levels as to make us emotionally accessible, despite our thinking selves:<sup>176</sup>

Movies, which arouse special, private, hidden feelings, have always had an erotic potential that was stronger than that of live theatre. People bred on TV and weaned on movies often feel sensually starved at a play – and they experience that starvation as boredom. When they are used to movies, live theatre no longer works for them on a fantasy level. There aren't enough elements going for them in a play; they miss the constant flow of imagery, the quick shifts of place, the sudden rush of feeling.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Pauline Kael. (2002[1965]) *I Lost It at the Movies: The Essential Kael Collection '54-'65* London: Marion Boyars p. 292.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid* p. 114.

<sup>176</sup> Pauline Kael (1980) *When the Lights Go Down*. Boston: Holt, Rhinehart & Winston. p. 428.

<sup>177</sup> Pauline Kael (1992[1976]) *Reeling: Film Writings 72'-75*. London: Marion Boyars p. xi.

The first time Kael really asserted herself as a sexually alert critic was when she took the moralistic and highly influential *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther to task for a comment he made in an otherwise laudatory review of *Hud* (Martin Ritt, 1964). It is also, in my view, the single most problematic piece of writing in all her criticism. Crowther had denounced the title character (played by Paul Newman) as a dangerous social predator for indulging himself with the neighbour's wife. Kael duly supplied a very personal counterargument derived from her own life. "My father was adulterous and a Republican, who, like Hud, was opposed to any government interference, who was in no sense and in no one's eyes a social predator."<sup>178</sup> Kael then points to an attempted "rape" scene, which was a major talking point of the film:

I suppose we are all supposed to react on cue to movie rape. Alma (the housekeeper) obviously wants to go to bed with Hud, but she has rejected his propositions because she doesn't just want to be another casual dame to him; she wants to be treated differently from the others. If Lon hadn't rushed to protect his idealized view of her, chances are that the next morning Hud would have felt guilty and repentant, and Alma would have been grateful to him for having used the violence necessary to break down her resistance, thus proving she *was* different. They might have been celebrating ritual rape annually at their anniversaries.<sup>179</sup>

Even today, accustomed as we are to art historian and all-purpose intellectual Camille Paglia's ludicrously attention-grabbing "look-at-me-I-am-so-decadent-and-depraved" pronouncements, this is pretty strong stuff. Does it make her an anti-feminist or a feminist? Well, this is an almost impossible question to answer in a satisfactory manner. She of course cannot be classified as an orthodox feminist, though she certainly believed in equal rights for men and women. But what, ultimately is academic feminism today? The aforementioned outrageous provocateur Camille Paglia once declared with her customary hyperbole that Madonna was nothing less than the future of feminism<sup>180</sup> Madonna is nakedly ambitious, loves sex and never lets us forget it. At fifty, that trick is more impressive than at twenty-five; and more subversive. By this standard, Kael could possibly be hailed as an extraordinarily modern feminist for her time. But is this really adequate? Current feminists are obsessed with sexuality, even if gender theories cannot reconcile the contradiction between sex as a biological fact and gender as social construction. Still, there are disagreements over Kael's status as a feminist.

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<sup>178</sup> Pauline Kael (2002[1965]) *I Lost It at the Movies: The Essential Kael Collection '54-'65*. London: Marion Boyars. p. 89

<sup>179</sup> *Loc. Cit.*

<sup>180</sup> Camille Paglia (1992) *Sex, Art And American Culture: Essays*. New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House.p. 5.

Hurt by her anti-austerist fervour, Sarris accused her of misapplied feminist zeal and thought she had made too much of an issue of her womanhood.<sup>181</sup> Predictably, the radicals fault her for being something close to an anti-feminist, if not quite a misogynist. Robin Wood has remarked that Kael's feminist consciousness was so underdeveloped that it could barely be described as embryonic - apparently because she responded to movies in the same way so many men do.<sup>182</sup> What this response consists of exactly, however, is left unresolved in Wood's argument. The very partisan writer Craig Seligman, (who was also a personal friend) calls her a proto-feminist, but I think all this is beside the issue - is beside the issue of the attempted rape scene in *Hud*. I certainly don't think she was making a simple "No means Yes" argument.

Kael had certainly been around the block enough times to recognize that sexual attraction and its inevitable power relationships between men and women (laying same-gender sexual relationships to one side) have little to do with lofty schoolgirl notions about love—or about society's real need for gender equality. Her best argument for this position is to be found in another, later think-piece on Bertrand Blier:

The social comedy in Blier's work is essentially sexual comedy; sex screws us up, we get nicked in the groin and jumped from behind, idiots make out better than we do, and some people are just so twisted that no matter what we try to do for them they wreck everything. And sex between man and woman is insanely mixed up with men's infantile longings and women's maternal passions. Sexually, life is a keystone comedy, and completely amoral—we have no control over who or what excites us.<sup>183</sup>

The view may be cynical, but at least it does seem Kael is making Blier's statement her own. I will not venture into deeper waters and entangle myself completely in Kael's sex life and her views on it, private or public, but simply let that sleeping dog lie from here on out.

Sarris, on the other hand, may not be quite as adept as Kael at what critic and filmmaker Paul Schrader has called the "bully pulpit techniques"<sup>184</sup> demonstrated above, so typical of Kael's style—even if he is no stranger to invective. What I want to stress is that Sarris makes himself just as central to his own writing as Kael does to hers, even if this is perhaps slightly less obvious. Like Kael, Sarris established the links between film and the erotic. His capsule review of the re-release of Georges Franju's *Judex* is at once hilarious and as sexually tinged as anything by written by Kael:

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<sup>181</sup> Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen: Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York: Simon & Schuster. pp. 55-56.

<sup>182</sup> Robin Wood (2003[1986]) *Hollywood From Vietnam To Reagan...and Beyond*. New York: Columbia University Press. Revised and Expanded Edition. p.158.

<sup>183</sup> Pauline Kael (1980) *When the Lights Go Down*: New York: , Holt, Rhinehart & Winston. p. 456.

<sup>184</sup> Kevin Jackson (ed.) (2004) *Schrader on Schrader*. London: Faber & Faber p. 290

For those who are wary of *Batman*, *Captain Marvel*, *Superman* and *Flash Gordon*, but who still are not ready to turn to the revivals of *Potemkin* and *The Bicycle Thief*, I would like to recommend Georges Franju's *Judex* as a lovely bit of business without foolishness. Nothing great, mind you, but not to be missed by retarded types (like this reviewer) who have never quite got over the feeling that pretty ladies in tights contain all the secrets of the universe.<sup>185</sup>

Kael was regrettably precluded from writing about hardcore pornography by her editor William Shawn, who did not want to soil the pages of the *New Yorker* with a review of *Deep Throat*, but Sarris was given the opportunity to offer his reflections on pornography in the seventies, a decade or so before home video made pornography a private affair:

As I sit in the porn palace minute after minute in front of lingering close-ups of gigantic genitalia from another planet on which gynecologists are the only known inhabitants, I note that the predominantly male audience is so deathly quiet that one can hear a penis drop. As my mind strays from the sleazy spectacle, I wonder if we have permanently traded in the kind of movie in which one would say "this is where I came in" for the kind of movie in which one will say "this is where I came." What else are critics talking about when they use the term "turn on" in this context? And should this term be used only for hard-core pornography, where it so often does not apply? Why not apply the term to Bunuel and Bergman and even Bresson for *Belle de Jour* and *The Silence* and *Au Hasard Balthazar*? Why not go *ooh-la-la* over the sex passages in *Last Tango* and *Swept Away* instead of prattling away about alienation, role-playing and the class struggle? Why not fight to return eroticism to the mainstream of cinema instead of segregating it in the swamps of hard-core porn? [...] If we are talking about authentic turn-ons, it is time the critics stopped referring euphemistically to the filthy industrial documentaries posing as fantasies, and thus misleading audiences into paying through the nose for eroticism, and getting engineering instead.<sup>186</sup>

We might detect a slightly off-hand condescending tone towards the European art film in this passage, but who can really contest that the nudity and relatively carefree depiction of sexuality in such aesthetic non-starters (albeit contemporary art house standbys) like *I Am Curious (Yellow)* (1967)—not to mention the more pornographic but educational *Language of Love* (1969) (which, memorably, years later, made possibly the most beguiling character of modern American cinema, Travis Bickle, peek through his fingers in fascination and disgust)—was not the main attraction?

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Andrew Sarris (1970) *Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema – 1955/1969*. New York: Simon and Schuster

p. 67.

<sup>186</sup>

Andrew Sarris (1978) *Politics and Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press p. 129-130.

Few things in life reduce communication to so basic a level as sex, and nothing is as personal. As Kael would stress again and again, “Sex is the great leveller, taste the great divider.”<sup>187</sup> That both Kael and Sarris felt confident enough to draw on their own erotic obsessions and their sexual biographies and preferences, is probably a reflection on the sense of liberation that occurred in the sixties, which set in motion the current shift towards hedonism. Equally importantly, it discloses that Kael and Sarris both wanted to be *personal* in their rapport with readers.

In Sarris’s most influential work, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions*, the mere act of forming opinions and classifying discrete films within the matrix of directorial careers was seen as a tool of empowerment for the critic and reader alike, while its basic rationale was wholly idiosyncratic. Helen Stoddard contends that

“Sarris’s tabling impulse resulted in his construction of a critical “pantheon” of great auteurs within which directors were ranked hierarchically on a sliding scale of the more or less great, the criteria for entry onto which remained entirely personal to Sarris.”<sup>188</sup>

While Sarris attempted to establish guidelines and criteria for film criticism and film scholarship, I think it would be safe to say that he in general agrees with Stoddard's assessment of his outlook. As Sarris would claim in “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962”:

“Since it has not been firmly established that the cinema is an art at all, it requires cultural audacity to establish a pantheon for film directors. Without such audacity I see little point in being a film critic.”<sup>189</sup>

Recent film scholarship has striven towards more clearly intersubjective criteria. One forceful method has been an attempt to bypass the axiological aspect of *film criticism* altogether, opting instead for *film analysis*. Like most of the concepts used to theorize about film—a film criticism attempting to do its work without resorting to value judgements—a criticism seeking to explain films rather than assess them has its precedence in literary theory. The acknowledged forbears of this trend are Russian formalists of the 1920s such as Viktor Shlovsky, but in postulating

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<sup>187</sup> Pauline Kael (2003[1965]) *I Lost It at the Movies: The Essential Kael Collection '54-'65* New York. Marion Boyars p. 47.

<sup>188</sup> Helen Stoddard, Joanne Hollows and Mark Jancovich (eds.)(1995)*Approaches to Popular Film*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. p. 43.

<sup>189</sup> Andrew Sarris Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen: Essays On Film and Related Subjects* New York: Simon and Schuster. p. 41.

a sharp split between criticism and the history of taste, an unacknowledged influence closer to home is Northrop Frye:

The demonstrable value judgement is the donkey's carrot of literary criticism and every new critical fashion [...] has been accompanied by a belief that criticism has finally devised a definitive technique for separating the excellent from the less excellent. But this always turns out to be an illusion of the history of taste. Value judgements are founded on the study of literature, the study of literature can never be founded on value judgements. Shakespeare, we say, was one of a group of English dramatists working around 1600, and also one of the great poets of the world. The first part of this is a statement of fact, the second part a value judgement so generally accepted as to pass for a statement of fact. But it is not a fact. It remains a value judgement, and not a shred of systematic criticism can ever be attached to it.<sup>190</sup>

Here, Frye is claiming that no systematic criticism can be attached to the singular value judgement that places Shakespeare among the world's greatest poets. Even the most superficial glance at the history of criticism will reveal that this claim is absurd, since much, perhaps even most, of what is considered systematic literary criticism has had Shakespeare's pre-eminence among poets as a basic premise. That Shakespeare is one of the world's greatest poets *is* a value judgement. Is it not also *true*? Furthermore, the implication of Frye's argument is that value judgements are invariably so subjective as to epistemologically worthless. Northrop Frye is an extreme case, but it is worth dwelling on his example to illustrate a general point which has a direct bearing on the state of film studies for the past two decades.

As indicated, the outlook that underlies Northrop's extreme objectivism is very much a basic component in the current academic vogue in film studies, which has variously been termed *neoformalism*, *historical poetics* or *cognitive film theory*. One of its chief practitioners, Kristin Thompson, sees neoformalism as an approach that bypasses value judgements and downgrades interpretation in favour of an objective description of how the viewer comprehends film through supposedly universal cognitive processes, which form the spectator's experience of a film's referential meaning and complete it. The term neoformalism points to an essential, but actually quite limited and rudimentary spectator activity, which in effect stops once basic comprehension of what is shown on screen is attained. In adhering to this approach, Thompson writes, "For the neoformalist, interpretation is only one part of the analysis, the main critical activity is analysis."<sup>191</sup>

<sup>190</sup> Northrop Frye (1966 [1957]) *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*- New York: Athenum Books p. 20.

<sup>191</sup> Kristin Thompson (1988) *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. p. 34.

This approach is clearly set apart from criticism as practised by Sarris and Kael because it is not committed to, and indeed distrusts, self-exposure. The basic premise of neoformalism seems to be the universality of narrative as an organizing mental principle common for all film viewers. The neoformalists seem to have fashioned a descriptive and historically informed film aesthetic out of what art historians have always known: the commonplace truism that perception gives form to sensory experience.

Both Sarris and Kael have pointed out the primacy of narrative throughout their criticism without reference to a theory that pretends to reach for something close to a positivistic ideal of objectivity. We may disagree with Thompson's basic theory and the application thereof, but since her tastes are rendered irrelevant, they are effectively perceived as being beyond reproach. While I am not asking for the kind of annual ten-best lists that Sarris still provides in the pages of the *New York Observer*, is it not supposed to matter to us as readers how these scholars feel about specific films? Would these serious scholars feel awkward if put on the spot? Is it an utterly irrelevant question for those concerned with *filmwissenschaft*?

We have seen that Weitz believes in the possibility of theoretically and practically separating our evaluations from our habitual preferences, which is correct, but this in no way means that value judgements are unimportant. Weitz does not argue for an absolute split between interpretation and evaluation; he is merely saying that our evaluations need not be identical with our preferences. The shift from interpretation and evaluation in a critical piece is often so gradual as to be imperceptible. The neoformalists take a semantically fancy way out of this issue by going a long way towards substituting analysis for interpretation, without really coming to grips with the element of subjectivity, which is a necessity because of the fact that the objects of criticism are, as we saw Elam point out, *intentional objects*. This brings us back to the point with which this chapter began, namely that film criticism is indeed a form of rhetoric, where the value judgement is an essential component. While it is possible to minimize our reliance on value judgements and make them less explicit, issues of value are inevitable for anyone who uses language. Timothy Corrigan asks us to bear in mind that

[e]ven those essays that appear to be chiefly descriptive or analytical—biographical or historical writings or essays that aim at an objective analysis of a sequence of shots—involve a certain amount of personal choice and evaluation. In some essays, factual description may be more prominent than evaluative judgements, but the



difference is one of degree, not kind. Most writing about film involves some personal opinions and evaluations.<sup>192</sup>

In the cases of Sarris and Kael, their personal opinions and evaluations constitute something close to intellectual and emotional autobiographies with a lifetime of at once ephemeral and lasting celluloid impressions as the raw materials, at least seen in retrospect. It thus seems fitting to consider the changing nature of American film criticism in the 1950s by way of one of Pauline Kael's earliest polemical pieces, "Movies, the Desperate Art", which details the curious position in which the American critic found him- or herself at that particular time. Out of the same conditions grew Sarris's romantically infused auteur theory, which utilized the youthful, localized reaction of young French filmmakers and turned it into a device to study old American movies in an aesthetically new light.

### Movies, the Desperate Art

Kael begins "Movies, the Desperate Art" by detailing the curious position of film criticism and films proper in the mid-1950s. It is piece written by someone clearly dismayed by the state of contemporary American film.

It is also one of her earliest pieces, and it has an academic feeling of restraint that is absent from most of her later work. In his very perceptive comparative study, *Sontag and Kael: Opposites Attract Me*, Craig Seligman notes the stylistic development of Kael's prose style, while putting it in a proper perspective: "Kael made much of her progress from the semi-formality of her earlier essays to the unbuttoned exuberance of the later ones, but I think this mattered more to herself than it did to her readers, for whom the early writings were already a jolt."<sup>193</sup>

Kael's inclination to castigate other critics is already in evidence in "Movies, the Desperate Art". Her identification with the mass audience is still somewhat underdeveloped, but the characteristic rhetorical ploy of blasting away at both sides of an issue, playing both sides against the middle, is firmly in place. She had not yet, however, established the habit for which she became famous, a rather militant "one viewing, one ruling" policy. A habit, quite frankly, she seemed to form primarily as a conscious act of wilful defiance to all those auteurist cinephiles (like Sarris) who had taken to watching films dozens of times. In "Movies, the Desperate Art", Kael admits,

<sup>192</sup> Timothy Corrigan (2005) *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*. New York: Pearson Longman 5<sup>th</sup> Edition p.13

<sup>193</sup> Craig Seligman (2004) *Sontag and Kael: Opposites Attract Me*. New York. Counterpoint p. 13.

“Renoir’s lovely comedy *The Golden Coach* was described as ‘slow’ (and died at the box office), though after sitting through it twice I still haven’t found time to catch up with everything in it.”<sup>194</sup>

A key concept in her essay is film’s relationship with television—which of course was seen as much less benevolently reciprocal in 1956 than it would be fifty years later.

Not surprisingly, Kael comments extensively and incisively on the ever-increasing scale of the big productions that largely carried the transitional film industry around the time this particular article was written:

Hollywood films have attempted to meet the “challenge” of television by the stunningly simple expedient of expanding its size; in the course of this expansion the worst filmic tendencies of the past thirty years have reached what we may provisionally call their culmination. Like a public building designed to satisfy the widest public’s concept of grandeur, the big production loses the flair, the spontaneity, the rhythm of artist working to satisfy his own conceptions.<sup>195</sup>

Here we plainly see that Kael believes the inflation in size and length of the typical Hollywood product resulted in bland and stodgy films, films that bear no relation with personal vision and artistry. In her eyes, these are *disenchanted* films. These typical Hollywood blockbusters of the late 1950s and early 1960s must be distinguished from the artist-initiated epic where the artist, as Kael would have it, is working to satisfy his own conceptions:

The artist-initiated epic is an obsessive testing of possibilities, and often comes out of an overwhelming desire to express what the artist thinks are the unconscious needs of the public. It comes, too, from a conviction, or a hope, that if you give the popular audience the greatest you have in you they will respond. The moviemaker has an idealistic belief that no matter how corrupted mass taste is, people still retain the capacity to receive a vision. These epics try to vault over the film industry and go directly to the public.<sup>196</sup>

This last quote is taken from Kael’s review of Bernardo Bertolucci’s *1900* (1976). I think she is correct, and her argument could be equally applied to silent films. Indeed, Kael’s point goes a long way towards explaining the pre-eminence of figures like D.W. Griffith, Erich Von Stroheim and Abel Gance. Being a sensationalist, it is not surprising that Kael responded to their films. I have deliberately invoked the names of directors in place of discrete films here, so as to better make the

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<sup>194</sup> Pauline Kael (1956) “Movies, the Desperate Art.” Daniel Talbot (ed.) (1966) *Movies: An Anthology*. Berkeley. University of California Press. “pp. 51-71.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>196</sup> Pauline Kael (1980) *When the Lights Go Down*. New York: Holt, Rhinehart & Winston Inc. p. 325.

point that Kael's argument rests on auteurist underpinnings. (Correlated to directors, the films could be, for instance, *Intolerance*, *Greed* and *Napoleon*.)

It is an argument, moreover, that is actually something of a double-edged sword. Could it not be argued with conviction that the most charismatic Hollywood producers, past and present, from David O. Selznick and Howard Hughes to George Lucas and Jerry Bruckheimer, have seen themselves as "artists" in exactly this way? While I cannot really bring myself to call a single one of these impresarios major artists, they are certainly major *visionaries* integral to audience expectations of epic film spectacles. I know, I am being difficult. But it is worth pointing out that Kael is using an auteurist template to distinguish between artistic and non-artistic epics. In fact, I take her to mean that some sort of artistic vision is necessary to give epics *urgency*. The templates for this sort of epic come from the silent era and remain so to this day: *Intolerance* and *Napoleon*, both of which Kael wrote upon extensively. We might begin with the Kael's assessment of the Griffith film:

No simple framework could contain the richness of what Griffith tried to do in this movie. *Intolerance* is charged with visionary excitement about the power of movies to combine music, dance, narrative, drama, painting and photography—to do alone what all the other arts together had done. And to do what they had failed to. Griffith's dream was not only to reach the vast audience but to express it—to make of the young movie-art a true democratic art. Griffith's movies are not great because he developed the whole range of film techniques—the editing, the moving camera, the close-up, the flexible use of the frame so that it becomes a pin-point of light or a CinemaScope shape at will—but because he invented or pioneered those techniques out of an expressive need for them.<sup>197</sup>

The sensationalism of this passage could quite easily be understood as a frenzied nostalgia for silent films, but I don't think that is what she intended. Rather, *Intolerance* embodies Kael's sense of movies as what in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was referred to as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total intermedial artwork that originated with Richard Wagner but in practice it has been traced back to the baroque epoch of the visual arts in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Unlike its pre-photographic forebears, the filmic *Gesamtkunstwerk* takes its inspiration not primarily from European elitist high art, but rather from popular culture, which above all is American culture. The need to be affected viscerally and simultaneously on several levels never left her. It is here Kael's romanticism comes into play: "In movies, sanity is too neat, too limiting."<sup>198</sup>

At a revival of *Napoleon* in 1981, she still had an appetite for sensations. As readers of Kael's review, we become intensely aware of Kael the critic being energized by the spectacle on

<sup>197</sup> Pauline Kael (1970) *Going Steady*. Boston.:Little, Brown & Company p. 45.

<sup>198</sup> Pauline Kael (1980) *When the Lights Go Down*: New York: Holt, Rhinehart & Winston. p.324

display. Kael's description of Gance as an avant-garde DeMille serves brilliantly to underline this particular filmmaker's strengths and flaws. It is also indicative of Kael's unique conception of film aesthetics:

Gance has a nineteenth century theatrical sensibility, but he is also obsessed with the most avant-garde film techniques, and he uses these advanced methods to overpower you emotionally. When he succeeds, you're conscious of the humor of the situation, you applaud, you cheer, because the exhilaration of his technique freshens the stale, trashy ideas, gives them a grand lunacy.<sup>199</sup>

It would take an Italian-American who re-imagined American gangster myths on enormous canvasses, and a Jewish wunderkind as American as apple pie to make Kael as excited about film epics again. Abel Gance on one side and Francis Ford Coppola and Steven Spielberg on the other are separated by a fifty-year divide in film history. Whereas Gance had used avant-garde techniques and applied them to trashy ideas, the other two would perfect the Hollywood way of doing things, at the same time redefining it. The epic films of the period when "Movies, the Desperate Art" was written, however, were another matter altogether. Their lethargy had become deadening: "Spectacles will cease to be events, people can be more comfortably bored at home."<sup>200</sup> Kael likens the big runaway American productions in foreign settings (when Hollywood studios capitalized on so-called "frozen assets" abroad), so typical of the fifties and early sixties, to travelogues, calling them "commonplace, anachronistic and reassuring."<sup>201</sup> The foreign settings are not integrated, but serve merely to give an air of novelty to shopworn material. Kael especially sees the biblical and historical epics as amplifications of this general tendency: "The split between background and foreground in pictures with foreign settings develops into schizophrenia in historical and Biblical epics."<sup>202</sup>

Kael is correct in arguing that the dubious notion of quality in these films is tied to the most spurious ideas of "realism" and "authenticity". "'Accuracy' (or what passes for accuracy) in background detail becomes enormously important—it gives the shoddy, sexy films the sanction of educational and religious values."<sup>203</sup> What Kael eruditely points out is that the expense lavished on historical surface detail in these films deflects attention from their basically atavistic or archaic

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<sup>199</sup> Pauline Kael (1995[1986]) *Taking It All In: Film Writings 1980-1983*. London: Marion Boyars. p. 142.

<sup>200</sup> Pauline Kael (1956) "Movies, the Desperate Art", Daniel Talbot (ed.) (1966) *Film: An Anthology*. Berkeley. University of California Press. p. 51-71.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*

character. It was no coincidence that the enormously durable and relentlessly wooden vulgarian Cecil B. DeMille's career flowered in the 1950s, long after his contemporary Erich Von Stroheim was a spent force as a filmmaker. "The wide screen has restored film to its second childhood. In the thirties we thought DeMille passè; the American film of 1955 represents his full triumph."<sup>204</sup>

After Kael establishes what she perceives to be the regression of American film in the 1950s, "Movies, the Desperate Art" moves into meta-criticism. Here Kael discusses what she believes to be critical fallacies current at the time, a practice she would return to again and again throughout the sixties, most famously with "Circles and Squares". Decades before reception studies became a systematic discipline in film studies, Kael was a critic who intently studied other critics and the audience. She could not resist attacking the essentialistic or ontological inclinations still argued by many serious critics at the time:

So many film pedants have insisted that one portion "belongs" to the camera and another portion "belongs" to the screen that it has become a mark of culture to discuss film in terms of their cinematic properties and their theatrical deviations.<sup>205</sup>

We may digress that Sarris, who in another context has derided Kael as a lapdog of the literati, agrees with her on this: "It is always literary people who seem most concerned by what is or is not 'cinematic.' Yet excessive technical flourishes very often signal the director's condescension to a genre or to the medium itself."<sup>206</sup>

Kael rejects "the chase" and "tracking shots" as more essentially cinematic (a word she could never utter with a straight face) than theatrical staging. Indeed, Kael is probably correct in arguing that modern dramatists like Strindberg and Ibsen taught film how to behave by reforming stage movement.<sup>207</sup> Just as the mass audience has learned to respect the size and labour that went into these films, to admire what Kael calls their *academic craftsmanship*, the educated audience seemed to her taken in by these films' pious, liberal ideas.

If the colossal spectacle was the financial locomotive of an industry in turmoil in the 1950s and early sixties, the mark of artistic quality and prestige was often claimed to be films which dealt with social problems, i.e. message movies with carefully sign-posted and underlined significance and the safe and familiar values of the American left. The social problem film was pervasive enough

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<sup>204</sup>

*Ibid.*

<sup>205</sup>

*Ibid.*

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Andrew Sarris (1970) *Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema 1955-1969*. New York. Simon & Schuster. p.

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Pauline Kael (1956) "Movies, the Desperate Art", Daniel Talbot (ed.) (1966) *Film: An Anthology*. Berkeley.

University of California Press. p. 51-71.

in Hollywood in the forties for the wittiest writer-director of the era, Preston Sturges, to mock it in his delicious comedy *Sullivan's Travels* (1942.)

In our general chapter on criticism, we saw that Kael sees art as the “supreme entertainment”. At the heart of entertainment is enjoyment, something the “prestige film” seems ready-made to combat:

Our films are stuffed with good intentions. [...] Art, perhaps unfortunately, is not the sphere of good intentions. Work without joy is [perceived to be] respectable; it doesn't raise doubts that it might not be serious. Cocteau, with his enigmas and ambiguities, is he perhaps not trying to put something over? His high style is suspicious; members of the serious audience don't want to go on a limb for something that might turn out to be just chic and fashionable, they still want the fat of visible artistic effort. And there is something they value even higher than “artistic values,” the fat of important ideas and paraphrasable content. While the less educated mass audience may be in awe of the man-hours and banker's dollars that go into a colossal production, the educated audience, uncertain and self-critical, respects the good a movie will do for others.<sup>208</sup>

Then, Kael shows her hand as a uniquely American critic: “Representations of Americans in foreign films always feel wrong to an American audience. It is true that we are shallow, but we are not carefree and irresponsible, we are shallowly *serious*.”<sup>209</sup> In her last collection, *Movie Love* (1991), she points out that scores of moviegoers loved *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990) because the moral issues in the plot had been made so simple. It is not enough for the Indian to be a victim—he must be innocent, pure, and in touch with himself and nature:

This is a nature boy movie, a kid's daydream about being an Indian. When Dunbar has become a Sioux named Dances with Wolves, he writes in his journal that he knows for the first time who he really is. Costner has feathers in his hair and feathers in his head.<sup>210</sup>

Unfortunately for Kevin Costner, Kael's review was quoted by virtually everyone who wrote her obituary a decade later. In hindsight, Kael's judgement of *Dances with Wolves* seems eminently fair. We probably remember less about Costner the filmmaker than marvel at how far the intransigent all-American blandness of his acting carried him, even if his image has faded badly in the past decade or so.

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<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>210</sup> Pauline Kael (1991) *Movie Love: Complete Reviews 1988-1991*. New York: A William Abrahams Book. Dutton. p. 295.

Quality in films such as these—a prevalent mode of filmmaking in the 1950s, and still a major source of self-congratulatory prestige in the Hollywood community—is a rather spurious notion: films are reduced to a socio-aesthetic that feeds on simplistic pathos and sentimental concepts of morality. Kael holds no brief for these films because they substitute one set of supposedly unenlightened cultural stereotypes for another in the name of good intentions, where characters are still made to *represent* their ethnic group because filmmakers distrust the audiences' intelligence. The question of racial stereotypes of course reaches much wider than the conventions of cinematic genres and meta-genres, and in fact permeates culture as a whole. Because art is derived from human experience, Kael contends, don't unenlightened cultural stereotypes sometimes carry a germ of observed truth?

The situation is not simple. Art derives from human experience, and the artist associates certain actions and motivations with certain cultural and vocational groups because that is how he has observed and experienced them. Would Jews be so fearful of the depiction of Jewish characters as ostentatious and vulgar, aggressive and secretive, if they did not recognize that these elements often converge with “Jewishness”? Would negroes be so sensitive to the images of sullen bestiality and economic irresponsibility if they did not feel the impact? It is a germ of observed truth that pressure groups fear – a germ which affects only the individual but which the groups treat as an epidemic.<sup>211</sup>

It is worthwhile to consider this quotation about ethnic stereotypes with a digression about a film Kael reviewed seventeen years later, Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973). This well-known work about lower-level Italian-American *Mafiosi* with Roman Catholic hang-ups is rightly seen as an emblematic work in what is routinely and often uncritically termed the New Hollywood Cinema. This is a film where ethnic stereotypes are neither reproduced uncritically nor dressed up as a moral problem solved in advance, but embedded in the film's theme. What is significant is that Kael (who loved the film, calling it a triumph of personal filmmaking) had not changed her mind about ethnic stereotypes in movies:

The zinger in this movie—and it's this, I think, that begins to come together in one's head when the picture is over—is the way it gets the psychological connections between Italian Catholicism and crime, between sin and crime. Some editorial writers like to pretend this is all a matter of prejudice; they try to tell us there is no basis for popular ethnic stereotypes—as if crime among Italians didn't have a different tone from crime among Irish

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<sup>211</sup> Pauline Kael (1956) “Movies – The Desperate Art”, Daniel Talbot (ed.) (1966) *Film: An Anthology*. Berkeley. University of California Press pp. 51-71.

or Jews or blacks. Editorial writers think they're serving the interests of democracy when they ask us to deny the evidence of our senses.<sup>212</sup>

It is obvious from the review just quoted, and the overall ideas expressed in “Movies, the Desperate Art”, that Kael feels that film artists should deal with stereotypes with more honesty and less facile pseudo-sincerity.

No doubt for the same reasons she loved the vitality of Hollywood's 1930s comedies, Kael was dismayed by the protagonists in American films of the 1950s, even if she greatly appreciated and saw hope in the startling sexual magnetism of young method actors like Marlon Brando—while fearing that he would be cut down to size and remade to fit stodgy movies:

The new heroes of film and television are dismaying [...] because they represent the death of drama as we know it; they are not protagonists in any meaningful sense; they represent the voice of adjustment, the caution against individuality, independence, emotionality, art, ambition, personal vision. They represent the antidrama of American life. Biblical spectacles convey magnitude of character by magnitude of close-up.<sup>213</sup>

At the same time, Kael ends the article by acknowledging what we noted in the last chapter, that the demographics of moviegoing were changing and that there was a new kind of audience: an audience for avant-garde films and foreign art films and the art house audience that came to exist alongside mass audience, serviced by the inflated blockbuster designed as road-show event-movies that would lure them, the infrequent moviegoers who grew and has continued to grow in importance since. Kael was one of the very first commentators to be acutely aware of this situation, and was clearly playing both sides against the middle, declaring her dissatisfaction with this polarisation and finding aesthetic deficiencies with both trends at the at opposite ends of the spectrum:

It is clear now that there is more than one audience, and that the artists must judge their own obligations. [...] The poisonous atmosphere of Hollywood premières is distilled to pure pretension at avant-garde premières. Object to the Hollywood film and you're an intellectual snob, object to the avant-garde film and you're a Philistine. But while in Hollywood, one must often be a snob; in avant-garde circles, one must often be a Philistine.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Pauline Kael (1992[1975]) *Reeling: Film Writings 1972-1975*. London: Marion & Boyars.

<sup>213</sup> Pauline Kael (1956) “Movies – The Desperate Art”, Daniel Talbot (ed.) (1966) *Film: An Anthology*. Berkeley. University of California Press pp. 51-71.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*



It seemed particularly necessary, in Kael's view, to be snobbish and dismissive to the prestigious middlebrow message movies by Stanley Kramer and Fred Zinnemann, which are best described as highly praised but plodding exercises in moral coercion of the audience. Kramer and Zinnemann were congratulated as filmmakers for their noble *intentions*:

Intentions, despite what schoolteachers say, are what we shouldn't have to think about in the arts, and don't think about except when they're not achieved. Kramer asks for congratulations on the size and importance of his unrealized aspirations. In politics a candidate may hope to be judged on what he intends to do, but in art we judge what is done. Stanley Kramer runs for office in the arts.<sup>215</sup>

I am unsure whether to press the issue here of whether or not Kael is a consistently die-hard anti-intentionalist.<sup>216</sup> One thing is certain: she knew, and believed in, Archibald MacLeish's celebrated *bon mot*, "A poem should not mean, but *be*"—to say nothing of D.H. Lawrence's (like Kael, a deeply carnal writer) even more imposing "Never trust the teller, trust the tale." These ideas reappear in Kael's criticism in statements like:

And for the greatest movie artists there is a unity of technique and subject, one doesn't need to talk about technique much because it has been subsumed in the art. One doesn't want to talk about how Tolstoy got his effects, but about the work itself. One doesn't want to talk about how Renoir does it; one wants to talk about what he has done.<sup>217</sup>

This is a problematic position, relegating the separation of form and content to a secondary function of criticism and as a purely scholastic exercise. But anti-intentionalist or not, that matters less than the common-sense realization that good intentions and high aspirations are not the only, or even the most important qualities we should take note of in a work of art, and furthermore that good intentions can be excruciating in a work where they are clumsily underlined. However, in my view, intentions, though never *enough*, are always *present* in our interactions with works of art. I have already quoted Katarina Elam who, you will remember, termed the objects of criticism *intentional objects*.

I feel the need to clarify my position at this juncture. If we disregard the artist's intentions, we are still left with the intentions of the interpreter/critic, from which we can never escape. As

<sup>215</sup> Pauline Kael (1970[1968]) *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*. London: Calder & Boyars p. 214.

<sup>216</sup> For the most famous polemic against intentionalism in the interpretation of art see: W.K. Wimsatt Jr. & Monroe Beardsley "The Intentional Fallacy", W.K. Wimsatt J. R. (1958[1954]) *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. New York: The Noonday Press. pp. 3-18.

<sup>217</sup> Pauline Kael (1970) *Going Steady*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company p. 97.

philosopher Anne Shepard points out, it is no more out of place to take intentions into account when talking about works of art than when dealing with the evidence and sworn statements in a court case. Let me explain further. According to anti-intentionalist thinking, which Kael at the very least courts, intentions are neither available nor desirable in the interpretation of artworks. We can all agree that the meaning in a work need not be the same as authorial meaning, and this is what, in the main, Kael means. Nevertheless, I find Sheppard's analogy apt, at least if we believe that artworks are the physical and material consequences of intentional action:

The intention with which an action has been performed is of the greatest moral and legal importance. Intention means the difference between taking something by mistake and stealing it, between manslaughter and murder. When we make moral judgements and legal decisions, we certainly regard knowledge of an agent's intentions not only desirable but available.<sup>218</sup>

While Kael's professed anti-intentionalism might have enhanced her modernist credentials in her own eyes, she would actually modify and restrain this strand of her thinking in a 1980 conversation with fellow critic Stephen Schiff:

I think very often the way a movie is taken becomes what the director says he intended. Look, for example, at *Apocalypse Now*, which was originally a movie that was supposed to show you the horrors of war and then became a kind of psychedelic turn-on – and then became advertised as a head-movie on the order of *2001*. And that was certainly was not the original intention.<sup>219</sup>

I am willing to say that Kael is correct in this case, but she does refer to an original intention that was not achieved because not visible in the final film. This does not square too well with the idea of intentions as irrelevant or unavailable.

Anyway, this philosophical digression is less important regarding Kael's work as a whole than the purely critical function of Kael's statement on Stanley Kramer, in terms of what kinds of film were getting unjust praise—at the expense of better, livelier and just more sheerly enjoyable films.

Sarris's antagonism towards the social problem movie was quite as deep-seated as Kael's. Here is what Sarris has to say about Zinnemann:

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<sup>218</sup> Anne Sheppard (1987) *Aesthetics: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

p. 103.

<sup>219</sup> Stephen Schiff, "The Critics Talk Shop" *The Boston Phoenix*. 22. April. 1980. pp-16-18.

Zinnemann has finally settled down to being a semi-realist, stepping gingerly around such subgenres as the moralistic melodrama (*Act of Violence*), the anti-populist anti-western, the empty pavement stage adaptation (*Member of the Wedding*, *A Hatful of Rain*), the pig-pen musical, and the painless political allegory (*Behold a Pale Horse*). By draining every subject and every situation of any possible emotional excitement, Fred Zinnemann is now widely considered in academic circles to be the screen's most honest director. [...] his true vocation remains the making of anti-movies for anti-moviegoers.<sup>220</sup>

In this climate, which alternatives did the film critic have? When programming a repertoire house, Kael had established her credentials as a FOOF (Friend of Old Films). Herein lies perhaps a central clue to the breakthrough of auteurism as Sarris practised it. For neither Sarris nor Kael saw the avant-garde cinema as a viable option. In fact, Sarris's marked hostility towards avant-garde films left him feeling somewhat guilty:

My heart and mind were so overwhelmingly committed to the "narrative" film that it seemed to me unconscionably frivolous to flail away at a fringe subject. [...] Live and let live has been my motto, and since most American avant-garde filmmakers have tended to be as poor as church mice, it seemed unduly cruel to heap abuse upon neglect.<sup>221</sup>

So, another course of action was needed. If the American cinema was at its low ebb critically at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, one way to assert the value of American film was to burrow into its past with a new critical lexicon that enabled the critic/historian to see American films in a new light and break away from a moralistic socio-aesthetic way of judging movies.

Sarris's strategy was to borrow a pair of quasi-mystical terms from French critical discourse.

I now want to examine auteurism in general, and make special note of the distinction between the French *La Politique des Auteur* and Sarris's subsequent readjustment and refitting, which became *auteur theory*.

### Auteurism – French and American

We might begin this chapter with an obvious tautology: the auteur theory is a theory of authorship. We must now define what an author is. My definition makes no great claims to originality, and is in fact lifted directly from intentionalist philosopher Paisley Livingston:

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<sup>220</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996[1968]) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. New York: DaCapo Press. p. 169.

<sup>221</sup> Andrew Sarris (1978) *Politics and Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press. p. 196-197.

“author = (def.) an agent who intentionally makes an utterance, where the making of an utterance is an action, an intended function of which is expression or communication.”<sup>222</sup>

Those familiar with postmodern thinkers like Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes may argue that my definition of author is a tad too traditional to be current in academic discourse, but it must be remembered that when Roland Barthes performed his autopsy on the authorial text, he was primarily making a defiant gesture which provided some much-needed room for the reader in our confrontations with texts, or more properly speaking, with mediated material of any kind.

Given the definition postulated by Livingston, which I think both Sarris and Kael would accept, we can quite easily understand Sarris’s confessional admission: “On the whole, I prefer the classical cinema to the modern, but classicism and modernity are terms inseparable from the notion of individual authorship.”<sup>223</sup> Which is to say that ideas of authorship are intimately related to our ideas about art, since author, or *auteur*, stands for *artist* in a wider sense. And here we have a vital clue to understanding both the French *Politique* and the Sarrisian *auteur* theory.

Auteurism of both strands postulates that both classical cinema, or if you will, the entertainment film on the one hand and the art house film on the other, can be evaluated and explained by reference to directorial style and attitude, where the director of course is the metaphorical author. Before the *auteur* theory took hold, it would have been virtually unthinkable to discuss Nicholas Ray and Satyajit Ray more or less on the same level of achievement and with the same terminology. Nicholas Ray became a bone of fierce contention among *auteurists*, largely because his films often had socially conscious ideas and contrived plots while being conspicuously stylish and enlivened with inspired directorial mannerisms that seemed uniquely Ray's own.<sup>224</sup> Andrew Sarris relates:

American films are often discriminated against in America because the ear takes precedence over the eye. By contrast, the French were able to provide a detailed visual analysis of American movies precisely because they were undistracted by the dialogue. To an American ear *Rebel Without a Cause* is still gravely flawed by its undigested clinical dialogue. But one would have to be blind to fail to realize that Ray has transcended the tedious social-worker rhetoric of the film with a succession of striking initiatory ceremonies all filmed with

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<sup>222</sup> Paisley Livingston (2005) *Art and Intention: A Philosophical Study*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. p. 69.

<sup>223</sup> Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen: Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York. Simon & Schuster. p. 70.

<sup>224</sup> The western *Johnny Guitar* (1952) is the one film where Ray discarded all his inhibitions. Alongside Fritz Lang's similarly stylized western *Rancho Notorious*, which was made the same year, it remains one of the most profoundly unusual and unusually profound films in the history of American cinema.

profound splendor. [...] While the New York critics were honoring Stanley Kramer's *The Defiant Ones*, the *Cahiers* critics were cheering Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil*. Obviously their eyes were quicker than our ears.<sup>225</sup>

What redeems the film Sarris holds forth as an example is directorial style, which auteurists generally define as an attitude rather than just mere technique. A director's style and attitude (analytically, at least, the two must be separated) are detectable through a concept vital to all auteur critics: *mise-en-scène*, which may be termed the *how* of a film as opposed to the *what*:

The choice between a long shot and a close-up, for example, may quite often transcend the plot. If the story of Little Red Riding Hood is told with the wolf in close-up and Little Red Riding Hood in long shot, the director is concerned primarily with the emotional problems of a wolf with a compulsion to eat little girls. If Little Red Riding Hood is in close-up and the wolf in long shot, the emphasis is shifted to the emotional problems of vestigial virginity in a wicked world. Thus two different stories are being told with the same basic anecdotal material. What is at stake in the versions of Little Red Riding Hood are two contrasting directorial attitudes toward life. One director identifies more with the wolf—the male, the compulsive, the corrupted, even evil itself. The second director identifies with the little girl—the ideal and hope of the race. *Needless* to say, few critics bother to make any distinction, proving perhaps that direction as creation is still only dimly understood.<sup>226</sup>

There is more to be said about *mise-en-scène* aesthetics, most notably that it privileges the actual shooting of the film on the set and on location and puts primary emphasis on the factors over which the director has direct and immediate control. It is no wonder, then, that the *mise-en-scène*-oriented auteur critics, at least initially, downgraded not only the script, but also the editing process so vital to montage theories of filmmaking (significantly, few directors in the old American studio-system had rights to the final cut), preferring instead the plastic continuity of the framing and a long take aesthetic inherited from their idol (and in the case of the French, practical mentor), the founder and editor of *Cahiers du Cinema* until his death from leukaemia at forty in 1958, André Bazin. Auteurists will frequently find pointed and intensified flourishes of meaning in expressive gestures within the frame, preferably carried over from film to film within the director's *oeuvre*:

<sup>225</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996[1968]) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. New York: DaCapo Press. p. 275.

<sup>226</sup> Andrew Sarris "The Fall and Rise of the Film Director", Andrew Sarris (ed.) (1967) *Interviews with Film Directors*. New York: Bobbs Merrill. Avon Books pp. 9-20.

No director in the history of cinema can match Sternberg's preoccupation with the harmonies of hand signals. This realm is usually restricted to actors only, but Sternberg ignored the taboo at his own peril. To light a cigarette, to grasp a coffee cup, to fondle one's furs, is for Sternberg, equivalent to baring one's soul.<sup>227</sup>

Sarris, however, was not the first in America to think in terms of a long take aesthetic as opposed to montage. As early as 1950, Morris Weitz took stock of the very notion of a mobile long take aesthetic:

[T]he medium of the motion picture is essentially the external projection on the screen of the visual and physical mobility that is afforded by the camera and its film. This is the uniqueness of the motion picture: that it can show physical fluid action of all sorts with a speed that no other art can achieve. [...] The medium remains an ancillary art. [...] To what is the medium ancillary? To dramatic action, I think: to story, plot and character.<sup>228</sup>

I would like to make a point about auteurism which is emphatically evident in the folk-tale parable on *mise-en-scène* provided by Sarris: namely, that auteur criticism was the last outpouring of romantically tinged existentialist philosophy in France, altogether more open and flexible than the semiotics and structuralism that finally supplanted not only existentialism as a philosophical tradition, but indigenous French film criticism and theory as well. In fact, this fateful process was nearly completed by the time Sarris carried the auteur theory across the Atlantic.

The auteur theory, or auteur policy as it was originally called, has been around so long that we tend to take it for granted. However, when young French *Cahiers du Cinema* critics took up this idea in earnest in the mid-fifties, after having emerged from the illuminated darkness of the screening rooms at *La Cinemateque Francais* with a burning desire to make films, it was intended as a rebellious stance against the powers that be in the French film industry at the time.

What Truffaut was rebelling against in his seminal 1954 essay, "A Certain Tendency in French Cinema", was a scenarist's cinema: well-written, well-made films from prestigious literary sources (brimming with the kind of academic craftsmanship we have already seen Kael rebel against in "Movies, the Desperate Art", published only two years after Truffaut's text), where the director's job was merely to illustrate rather than interpret (or write) the script. This is usually called the *Tradition of Quality*, and we should not forget, as modern film history books often condition us to

<sup>227</sup> Andrew Sarris (1998) *You Ain't Heard Nothing Yet: The American Talking Film: History and Memory 1927-1949*. New York: Oxford University Press. pp. 214-215. Company p.47.

<sup>228</sup> Morris Weitz (1950) *The Philosophy of the Arts*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. p. 126.

do, that this mode of filmmaking produced some genuinely great films. Indeed, it would be difficult to think of a more piercing and darkly ironic work from the early fifties than *Forbidden Games* (1952) (a film that had no less than four credited writers, including director René Clément).

However, for a new generation of critics trying to break into films, the problems with this mode of filmmaking were evident. This ingrained tradition had made it difficult to think of the director as the author of a film even in a metaphorical, non-literal sense. David Thomson provides a telling anecdote in this context about the very early meta-movie *Thomas Graal's Best Film* (1917). Its plot is apparently very similar to Fellini's *8 ½* (1963), but the lead character is a scenarist rather than a director.<sup>229</sup> Film scholar Virginia Wright Wexman points out that the term auteur was first used in reference to the film director by artist and avant-garde filmmaker Jean Epstein in 1921.<sup>230</sup> Even if the film auteur was a European notion, the director was not entirely absent from American critical discourse in the silent era. In 1922, Peter Milne's *Motion Picture Directing: Facts and Theories of the Newest Art* was published. Here the author distinguished between 'the great and the less great directors.' The book's first paragraph reads:

“What is the fundamental asset that makes a great motion picture director? The requisite that distinguishes the real artist from the rank and file? It is really the same asset that distinguishes the great artist in any walk of life from the less great. [...] Other requirements are important, vastly so, but first of all and in capital letters EXPERIENCE.<sup>231</sup>”

A long time would pass before ideas about the primacy of the director gained widespread acceptance, even though many critics and scholars were familiar even with Epstein's quite radical use of the term auteur. As late as in 1946, Jean Benoit Levy would write: :

What, then, is the definition of film author? Before going on, let me specify, that the title generally accorded this function (in France, *metteur-en-scène* sic; in Germany, *regisseur*; in America, *director*) actually applies only to one phase of the creative work, namely that which is concerned with actors on the set. The designation film author comprises a far more extensive role, for it denotes the creator of a complete work.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> David Thomson (1980) “Garbo at 75”, David Thomson (1997) *Beneath Mulholland: Thoughts on Hollywood and Its Ghosts*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. pp.32-39.

<sup>230</sup> Wexman, Virginia Wright (ed.) (2003) *Film and Authorship*. New Brunswick, New Jersey. Rutgers University Press. Depth of Field Series. Introduction p. 2.

<sup>231</sup> Peter Milne (1922) *Motion Picture Directing: Facts and Theories of the Newest Art*. New York: Falk Publishing Company Inc. p. 9.

<sup>232</sup> Jean Benoit-Levy (1946) *The Art of the Motion Picture*. New York: Coward-McCann Inc. Translated by Theodore R. Jaeckel. p. 180.

A veritable quantum leap in the development toward *La Politique des auteurs* appeared two years after Benoit-Levy's book, in the shape of Alexandre Astruc's widely read piece, *La Camera Stylo*.

In it, the author postulates the continuity between cinema and the traditional fine arts:

[T]he cinema is quite simply becoming a means of expression, just as all the other arts have before it, and in particular painting and the novel. After having been successively a fairground attraction, an amusement analogous to the boulevard theatre, or a means of preserving images of an era, it is gradually becoming a language. By language I mean a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in a contemporary essay or novel. This is why I would like to call the new age of cinema the age of *camera-stylo*.<sup>233</sup>

The missionary zeal of Astruc's formulation was not lost on the *Cahiers* group, who would fulfil Astruc's dream a decade later. It is impossible to disagree with film scholar James Monaco's assertion that Astruc's text became a declaration of independence for a "New Wave" in film.<sup>234</sup>

So the concept of directorial authorship was not new, but it needed a polemical writer with Truffaut's rare rhetorical powers to break down the traditional resistance towards this romantic notion in a collective art, which was actually more of an ideal than an idea. He did this by enthroning some French directors, like Renoir and Bresson as auteurs, while arguing that filmmakers like Rene Clement and Henri-Georges Clouzot (that darkest of all misanthropists in the history of film) were mere *metteurs-en-scène* who decorated scripts rather than express themselves artistically. What is more, he redirected critical attention by issuing a sly rallying cry of "look to America and American films", which probably had more to do with romance and fascination than any actual insight into how the American film industry worked. For the French, interference from the front office and genre conventions made the considerable achievement of American film seem almost heroic. A few years later, Sarris would concur on this point.

As for Truffaut's resistance to the scenario-driven films of what we might term *cinema de papa*, we can deduce that it was largely a strategic, though heartfelt move, considering he (as a major name in the French and international film industry) would go on to direct *The Story of Adele H.* (1975)—a glorious specimen of the Tradition of Quality if ever there was one. In America, on the other hand, Sarris had no desire to step into the director's chair. What he did have, which the French to some extent lacked, was the desire to be a systematic critic and historian of the American screen,

<sup>233</sup> Alexandre Astruc quoted in James Monaco (1976) *The New Wave: Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol, Rohmer, Rivette*. New York: Oxford University Press p. 5.

<sup>234</sup> *Loc. Cit*



and to redeem many great American film careers since Griffith from undeserved neglect and condescending snorts of derision, by insisting that foreign films were not the only ones with a high quota of artistic glories and aesthetic epiphanies. In fact, the impulse to be an auteur-oriented critic was present with Sarris from the beginning, even if he had yet to experience his Parisian conversion. In 1955, his first year as a professional writer, he would review an adaptation of *The Rose Tattoo* by Tennessee Williams in these terms:

[T]he main problem with *The Rose Tattoo* is the absence of any unifying tone. The line between drama and farce are always very thin in a Williams play. Williams has them separated in his mind, no doubt, but unless he has a director like Kazan to keep the line rigid, his scripts degenerate in the playing. Daniel Mann is still relatively new in the film medium, and although his direction does show some promise, he is still weak in developing a unified conception for his actors.<sup>235</sup>

Note that Sarris places the blame for a lack of unified conception with director Daniel Mann, rather than the screenwriter or the playwright. It would be seven years before Sarris had built up enough courage to elaborate this into a theory of sorts. This must be explored in depth.

### Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962

Now that a firm holding context for the auteur theory has been established, I think we can finally focus on a primary text that underpins all of Sarris's writing, even it is far from his best or most lucid piece. Sarris had first become familiar with developments in France through his friend Eugene Archer, a Fulbright scholar in Paris, who had sent Sarris a few issues of *Cahiers du Cinema*. This was followed by an extended sojourn in Paris.

Before the publication of "Notes On The Auteur Theory in 1962" in the winter issue of *Film Culture*, Sarris had been writing criticism for seven years without attracting much attention: "Criticism is simply a job of work, and if one person doesn't do it, another will, and most of the hostility aroused by a critic's ego-crushing labors can be anticipated in advance."<sup>236</sup> How wrong this would turn out to be! It is ironic but not entirely out of place that Sarris credits Kael's critique of his original article on the auteur theory for "making him."

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<sup>235</sup> Andrew Sarris (1970) *Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema 1955/1969*. New York: Simon & Schuster. p.

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<sup>236</sup> Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen: Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York. Simon & Schuster. p. 11.

I shall now present Sarris's article with my own critical comments, and then subject Kael's rebuttal, "Circles and Squares: Joys and Sarris", to the same rigorous treatment.

Sarris's article, although published as a single piece, is neatly divided into two parts. He begins by presenting Bazin's reservations about the auteur theory. Then he offers his own attempt at providing a definition of the auteur theory. I shall not retrace the arguments of the first part, but merely point out that here Sarris already reveals how he intends to use the basic assumptions of the auteur theory. This also clues us in to the project he would finalize six years later with *The American Cinema*. In fact, Sarris furnishes us with the thesis on which his uniqueness as a scholar as well as a journalist is based:

Where I wish to redirect the argument is toward the relative position of the American cinema. [...] Like most Americans who take films seriously, I have always felt a cultural inferiority complex about Hollywood. [...] After years of tortured reevaluation, I am now prepared to stake my critical reputation, such as it is, on the proposition that Alfred Hitchcock is artistically superior to Robert Bresson by every criterion of excellence, and further that, film for film, director for director, the American cinema has been consistently superior to that of the rest of the world from 1915 through 1962. Consequently, I now regard the auteur theory primarily as a critical device for recording the history of the American cinema, the only cinema in the world worth exploring in depth beneath the frosting of a few great directors at the top.<sup>237</sup>

That the auteur theory for Sarris is intended as a tool for the film historian is expressed most clearly in "Towards a Theory of Film History", which deserves attention in its own right. "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962", however, is chiefly important because for the first time, Sarris postulates what he believes the auteur theory to be. Since the latter half is the main body of the article, consequently, it should be the part most thoroughly analysed.

Sarris begins by conceding Truffaut's assertion that his original article was a polemical weapon at a given place and given time. After all, when Sarris was writing in 1962, the New Wave had long since exploded in France, and national equivalents were springing up elsewhere in Europe, even in politically oppressive regimes east of the Iron Curtain. In any case, *the certain tendency* was no longer operative in a dominant way.

"Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962" is an article where Sarris primarily postulates, with some reservations, the premises for his criticism, instead of illustrating how he uses them in practical criticism. Similarly, I too now want to concentrate on the premises themselves. When

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<sup>237</sup> "Andrew Sarris (1962) "Notes on The Auteur Theory in 1962." *Film Culture* Winter 1962, Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen: Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. Simon & Schuster New York pp.38-54

Sarris looked back on his original article in 1968, he said that he thought it had been written in a modest, tentative, experimental manner.<sup>238</sup> In many ways this is true. There is little in the opening paragraphs that smacks of a manifesto. Sarris begins the main body of text by paying his dues to Truffaut's original article, Bazin's friendly critique, and to the British auteurist and writer in *Movie*, Ian Cameron.

Then Sarris goes on to tentatively describe what he believes Auteur theory to be. One is struck by the reservations that buttress his arguments:

The Auteur theory cannot possibly cover every vagrant charm of the cinema. [...]

First of all, the auteur theory, at least as I understand it and now intend to express it, claims neither the gift of prophecy, nor the option of extra-cinematic perception.

Directors, even auteurs, do not always run true to form and the critic can never assume that a bad director will always make a bad film. No, not always, but almost always, and that is the point. What is a bad director but a director who has made many bad films?<sup>239</sup>

There can be little argument that good directors make more good films than bad ones, even if "good" and "bad" are left undefined; by Sarris's admission, these absolute values are difficult to define abstractly.

Then Sarris ventures into somewhat hotter waters by postulating three criteria that must be fulfilled by the genuine auteur. After insisting that entertaining movies can be made without directors, with Marlon Brando's *One-Eyed Jacks* (1961) as an example, Sarris continues by saying that a badly directed or undirected film has no importance on a scale of values:

The first premise of the auteur theory is technical competence in the director as a criterion of value. [...] By the auteur theory, if a director has no technical competence, no elementary flair for the cinema, he is automatically cast out of the pantheon of directors. A great director has to be at least a good director. This is true in any art.<sup>240</sup>

Sarris predicted there would be less disagreement about the first premise than the other two, something which proved not to be the case. The auteur theory, as advanced by Sarris, is usually

<sup>238</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996[1968]) *The American Cinema: Directors And Directions 1929-1968*. New York: DaCapo Press pp. 25-26.

<sup>239</sup> Andrew Sarris (1962) "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962", Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen – Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York. Simon & Schuster: pp. 38-53.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*

thought of as being romantic, and the reader will notice I have said as much myself in the previous chapter. On the whole, this is true, but it is not quite the long and short of it. The first premise of Sarris's theory is actually more properly classical than romantic. If this first premise were the only one, a great director would find his precise historical analogy in the Renaissance painter as a flawless draughtsman capable of drawing perfect circles (no pun intended) with the free hand.

The second premise of auteur theory, according to Sarris, is the one most commonly accepted by laymen, or for that matter undergraduates in film studies:

The second premise of the auteur theory is the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value. Over a group of films a director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature. The way a film looks and moves should have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels.<sup>241</sup>

Unlike the first premise, the second one is squarely and genuinely romantic, since it envisions a revelation of character on the part of the director, mediated by and expressed through a visual style. Presented by itself, as I have done so far, the premise is arguably entirely uncontroversial. The next paragraph, however, serves to underline why the auteur theory initially scandalised much established criticism, and even more to the point, it underlines why the many who still think that the auteur theory was intended primarily as a tool with which to study immensely and self-consciously premeditative European and Asian film-makers like Carl Theodor Dreyer, Robert Bresson, Ingmar Bergman, or Kenji Mizoguchi are badly mistaken. Indeed, it seems superfluous to belabour the point that someone like Dreyer is an auteur. Here is Kael on *Day of Wrath* (1943): "This psychological masterpiece is the expression of a single personality, built up from Dreyer's script, choice of camera angles, editing, and his control of every nuance of performance."<sup>242</sup>

Sarris, however, insisted on an American perspective on the auteur and *mise-en-scène* as a tool to analyse the auteur, insisting on visual and thematic authorship for directors without script credit:

Because so much of the American cinema is commissioned, a director is forced to express his personality through the visual treatment of the material, rather than through the literal content of the material. A Cukor, who works with all sorts of projects, has a more developed abstract style than Bergman, who is free to develop his own scripts. Not that Bergman lacks personality, but his work has declined with the depletion of his ideas

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<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>242</sup> Pauline Kael (1970) *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*. London. Calder & Boyars. p. 254.

largely because his technique never equalled his sensibility. Joseph L. Mankiewicz and Billy Wilder are other examples of writer-directors without adequate technical mastery. By contrast, Douglas Sirk and Otto Preminger have moved up the scale because their miscellaneous projects reveal a stylistic consistency.<sup>243</sup>

The basic assumption expressed in this paragraph is not only that American entertainment films may be vehicles for artistic expression, but also that American directors more or less set within the studio system, making entertainment films from miscellaneous scripts written by others, are somehow more likely to express themselves more fully and more cogently as artists than directors working in a supposedly freer environment in Europe. We should also note that writer-directors, represented by figures as diverse as Bergman, Wilder and Mankiewicz, are downgraded as auteurs. It should be noted, in extension of this, that the most conspicuous casualty of Sarris's historical approach to the auteur theory when it was put into practice as a roadmap to American film history in his *American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*, was John Huston. Huston had ironically been the subject of a proto-auteur article by James Agee in *Time Magazine* in 1950.<sup>244</sup> When Sarris wrote in 1962, he claimed that Huston was virtually "a forgotten man with a few actors' classics behind him."<sup>245</sup> Regarding the relative stature of Billy Wilder, however, it must be pointed out that this particular very barbed and ironic writer-director was welcomed into the fold when Sarris reversed his position in the article "Billy Wilder Reconsidered" in 1975—after having seen Wilder's later film, *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*<sup>246</sup> (1969).

The third premise of Sarris's auteur theory ventures, in a sense, into the province of mysticism, where Sarris concerns himself with a concept he designates *interior meaning*. This premise grows out of and deepens the second premise:

The third and ultimate premise of the auteur theory is concerned with interior meaning, the ultimate glory of cinema as an art. Interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension between a director's personality and his material.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Andrew Sarris (1962) "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962", Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen – Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York. Simon & Schuster: pp. 38-53.

<sup>244</sup> James Agee "Undirectable Director", (2000 [1958]) *Agee on Film: Criticism and Comment on the Movies*. New York: Modern Library Edition. pp. 415-427.

<sup>245</sup> Andrew Sarris (1962) "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962", Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen – Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York. Simon & Schuster: pp. 38-53.

<sup>246</sup> Andrew Sarris "Billy Wilder Reconsidered" (1975), Philip Lopate (2006) *American Movie Critics: An Anthology From the Silents Until Now*. New York: Library of America. pp.307-311.

<sup>247</sup> Andrew Sarris (1962) "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962", Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen – Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York. Simon & Schuster: pp. 38-53.

One might easily infer that interior meaning is simply a shorthand for the patterns of style and theme that emerge in the director's *oeuvre*, but surprisingly, it is not quite that straightforward. Sarris says that interior meaning is close to concept of *mise-en-scène*, but not quite. Neither is it quite the vision of the world a director projects, nor quite his attitude towards life, but in fact, as Sarris presents it, one easily gets the impression that it is all of those things. At any rate, Sarris admits the enormous ambiguities of the concept *interior meaning*: "It is ambiguous, in any literary sense, because part of it is imbedded in the stuff of cinema and cannot be rendered in non-cinematic terms."<sup>248</sup> It is tempting to translate *interior meaning* into what film analyst Stephan Scharff has termed the cine-aesthetic elements of film.<sup>249</sup> But this is arguably to empirical a notion for Sarris's liking. I rather think he saw interior meaning as an ineffable quality that defies precise definition.

What clearly emerges from this is that Sarris's concept of style could be said to be somewhat shaky if submitted to purely empirical inspection. Sarris certainly never treats cinematic style as empirically as the statistical *mise-en-scène* critics of later years, as typified by Barry Salt. I shall have more to say on this matter later, but the deeper reasoning behind this is not obscure. After all, any cinematic style may be mechanically duplicated, something which does not befit a genuinely romantic conception of cinematic art. For Sarris, any style must ideally have a corresponding personal theme that cuts across the barriers of genre, time, censorship and other impediments.

After groping slightly for a clarification by referring to Truffaut's idea of interior meaning as the temperature of a director on the set, Sarris takes the plunge by calling interior meaning the *élan of the soul*, the soul being that intangible difference between one person and another when all other things are equal.

This assertion paves the way for last part of the article, where Sarris asks the reader to visualize the three premises of the auteur theory as three concentric circles:

The three premises of the auteur theory may be visualized as three concentric circles: The outer circle as technique; the middle circle, personal style; and the inner circle, interior meaning. The corresponding roles of the director may be designated as those of technician, a stylist and an auteur. [...] After a given number of films, a pattern is established.<sup>250</sup>

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*Ibid*

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Stefan Scharff (1982) *The Elements of Cinema: Toward a Theory of Cinesthetic Impact*. New York: Columbia University Press.

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Andrew Sarris (1962) "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962", *Andrew Sarris (1973) The Primal Screen – Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York. Simon & Schuster: pp. 38-53.

After that, Sarris's definition of the auteur theory begins to wind down, after four pages. Sarris points to two anthology films that were all the rage in the early sixties, but are largely forgotten today: *Boccacio 70* and *The Seven Deadly Sins*, with Sarris claiming that these films unwittingly reinforced and vindicated the auteur theory by confirming the relative standing of its directors:

The point is that even in these frothy, ultracommercial servings of entertainment, the contribution of each director had less in common stylistically with the work of other directors on the project than with their own previous work.<sup>251</sup>

This, I think, for good or ill, is the constant variable of the auteur theory, or is perhaps the auteur theory in a nutshell. Sarris would later elucidate the implications of this when he put the auteur theory into practice as a way, so to speak, of making a path out of the forest of American movies and into the trees, which proved to be a rewarding avenue to explore.

“Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962” ends with a highly controversial coda. It is the most vulnerable part of the text, on which Kael would pounce hungrily. Since the concluding passage of Sarris's article is also quoted in full near the beginning of Kael's rebuttal, it will be reproduced in the next chapter.

### “Circles and Squares: Joys and Sarris” – Kael's Rebuttal

At the outset, one thing I would like to point out is that Kael's dismantling of the auteur theory was originally printed not in a general interest magazine like the *New Yorker*, but in the academically very well respected *Film Quarterly*. For this reason alone, I think “Circles and Squares” is better known among film scholars than her almost book-length study of *Citizen Kane*. Nowhere in Kael's writing is her background in philosophy more evident than in the former article. “Circles and Squares” is a companion piece to “Is There a Cure for Film Criticism?”, published in 1962, where Kael had rejected the film theories of Siegfried Kracauer. These two pieces disclose an analytical side to Kael that her detractors almost universally refuse to recognize.

It is almost impossible not to point out the parallels between Kael's systematic attack on the assumptions about the auteur theory held by Sarris as well as the more extreme auteurist group

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*Ibid.*

centred around the periodical *Movie* in Britain, on the one hand, and philosopher Noël Carroll's similarly thorough rejection of psychoanalytic film theory almost a generation later on the other.<sup>252</sup>

In marked contrast to “Trash, Art and the Movies”, which highlights Kael as a sensationalist, “Circles and Squares” finds Kael casting herself in the role of a “square.” “Circles and Squares” perhaps finds Kael in a more analytical mood than usual, but is nevertheless a characteristic article because it highlights one of her strongest, not to mention most entertaining, assets as a writer—something which the more reserved Sarris lacks in his polemics and theoretical formulations, but which are often amply evident in his reviews—the ability to dramatize one's hostility into a tremulously emotional and slightly daunting performance.

I will now retrace “Circles and Squares” step by step. I should also point out that I will give more extensive coverage to Kael's digressions about the relative merits and demerits of Alfred Hitchcock and John Huston than is usual when this article is discussed. In the original text, Kael uses these directors to illustrate her general points. These comments are like asides to the text as a whole, but help illustrate her perceptiveness and the advantages of not being committed to a theoretical credo. What it perhaps also will demonstrate are the inconsistencies in her own criticism as a whole, besides those concerning the tensions between trash and art, which we have already noted.

After having presented Sarris's three premises of the auteur theory and quoted the entire last paragraph of his original auteur article, Kael launches her rebuttal:

Sometimes a great deal of corn must be husked to yield a few kernels of internal meaning. I recently saw *Every Night at Eight*, one of those maddeningly routine films Raoul Walsh has directed in his long career. This 1935 effort featured George Raft, Alice Fay, Frances Langford and Patsy Kelly in one of those familiar plots about radio shows of the period. The film keeps moving along in the pleasantly unpretentious manner one would expect of Walsh until one incongruously intense scene with George Raft thrashing about in his sleep, revealing his inner fears in mumbling dream-talk. The girl he loves comes into a room in the midst of these unconscious avowals of feeling and listens sympathetically. This unusual scene was later amplified in *High Sierra* with Humphrey Bogart and Ida Lupino. The point is that one of the screen's most virile directors employed an essentially feminine narrative device to dramatize the emotional vulnerability of his heroes. If I had not been aware of Walsh in *Every Night at Eight*, the crucial link to *High Sierra* would have passed unnoticed. Such are the joys of the auteur theory.<sup>253</sup>

<sup>252</sup> Noël Carroll (1988) *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press. pp.9-88.

<sup>253</sup> Andrew Sarris (1962) “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962”, Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen – Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York. Simon & Schuster: pp. 38-53.



This last paragraph of Sarris's article compounds the slightly confused character of his text as a whole, and leaves it wide open to attacks. Not surprisingly, Kael, with a philosopher's acute analytical ear, or more properly eye for language, begins her retort by dismantling the paragraph sentence by sentence:

Perhaps a little more corn should be husked; perhaps, for example, we can husk away the word "internal." (Is internal meaning any different from meaning?) We might ask why the link is "crucial." Is it because the device was "incongruously intense" in *Every Night at Eight* and so demonstrated a try for something *deeper* on Walsh's part? But if his merit is his "pleasantly unpretentious manner" (which is to say, I suppose, that recognizing the limitations of the script, he wasn't trying to do very much, then the incongruous device was probably a misconceived attempt that disturbed the manner – like a bad playwright interrupting the comedy scenes because he can't resist the opportunity to tug at your heartstrings. We might also ask why this narrative device is essentially feminine: is it more feminine than masculine to be asleep, or to talk in one's sleep or to reveal feelings? Or, possibly, does Sarris regard the device as feminine because the listening woman becomes a sympathetic figure, and emotional understanding is, in this "virile" context, assumed to be essentially feminine?<sup>254</sup>

From a logical standpoint, Kael discredits Sarris even before she has taken stock of the ideas which Sarris, perhaps somewhat clumsily, had attempted to express. She then returns to the more colloquial style for which she is known:

Sarris has noted that in *High Sierra* (not a very good movie), Raoul Walsh repeated an uninteresting and obvious device that he had earlier used in a worse movie, and for some inexplicable reason, Sarris concludes that he would not have had this joy of discovery without the *auteur* theory.<sup>255</sup>

This, of course, cuts right to the heart of whether it is valid to call the *auteur* theory a theory at all. It does so by raising the question of whether simple observations necessitate a theory. Kael's reasoning is spelled out as follows:

In every art form, critics traditionally notice and point out how the artist has borrowed from himself (as well as from others) and how the same devices, techniques and themes reappear in their work. [...] We take it for granted that this is how we perceive the development or the decline of an artist.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Pauline Kael (1963) "Circles and Squares: Joys and Sarris", Pauline Kael (2002 [1965] *I Lost It At The Movies: The Essential Kael Collection '54-'65*. London: Marion Boyars. pp. 292-319.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*

Kael is right in arguing that this has been self-evident in older and traditionally more venerated arts without any particular need to add “theory” as a suffix to this critical process. Sarris was of course equally aware that this had been a standard procedure for describing and evaluating artworks. True to the term *auteur*, he thought in terms of the novelist and his work. The roots of this idea are actually older than the novel, and go as far back as 1550, when the mannerist court painter Giorgio Vasari presented the first real narrative on the visual arts, and one of the first modern historical narratives of any kind. Vasari established painting, sculpture and architecture as the basic disciplines of art history in his vastly influential *Lives of the Artists*.<sup>257</sup> Here, Vasari combined biography (micro-history) with acute stylistic analysis of the works, using the concept *Disegno* (drawing) as a common denominator for all visual arts.

For Sarris, as well as the earlier French *auteurists*, this time-honoured tradition was exactly the point. Films, especially Hollywood films, had not previously been evaluated systematically in this way, even if the moviegoing audience had built-in expectations when going to see an Alfred Hitchcock movie as early as the end of his British period in the late thirties. This part of Kael’s critique of the *auteur* theory would probably be even more damaging to Sarris’s case if she could conclusively offer evidence to indicate that clustering films together by directors, as well as studying these clusters critically as a whole body of work, did not represent any significant modifications of abiding critical conventions.

What is irrefutable about Kael’s argument is that Sarris’s first article on the *auteur* theory actually begs the question of theory instead of providing one. Kael then poses two rhetorical questions that sum up her first objection and introduce a new element, which is possibly even more damaging to the way Sarris poses the *auteur* theory:

Would Sarris not notice the repetition in the Walsh films without the *auteur* theory? Or shall we take the more cynical view that without some commitment to Walsh as an *auteur*, he probably wouldn’t be spending his time looking at these movies?<sup>258</sup>

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*Ibid.*

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Giorgio Vasari (2005 [1550]) *Vasari's Lives of the Artists: Giotto, Masaccio, Fra Filippo Lippi, Botticelli, Leonardo, Rafael, Michelangelo, Tizian*. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications Inc. Translated by Mrs. Jonathan Foster.

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Pauline Kael (1963) “*Circles and Squares: Joys and Sarris*”, *Pauline Kael (2002 [1965] I Lost It At The Movies: The Essential Kael Collection '54-'65*. London: Marion Boyars. pp. 292-319.

The latter question is certainly a valid objection on Kael's part. Sarris concedes that the first example of his Walsh anecdote, *Dinner at Eight* (1935) despite one incongruously intense scene, is a *maddeningly routine* film. More than that: it is *one of many* such films in Walsh's career. A commitment to a particular auteur can thus under some circumstances be said to have certain biases built in *a priori* which may have precious little to do with the singular whole of concrete films. We are now approaching the main body of Kael's critique, where the three concentric circles that constitute the premises of Sarris's theory are put under the microscope.

Sarris's outer circle of meaning posits, as we have seen, technical competence on the director's part as the first criterion of value. Kael is the first to admit that this premise appears to be both basic and reasonable. But only apparently so. Here is perhaps a clear indication that Kael's views on art are of a more modern shading than Sarris's.

Sometimes the greatest artists in a medium bypass or violate the simple technical competence so necessary for hacks. [...] An artist who is not a good technician can indeed create new standards, because standards of technical competence are based on comparisons with work already done.<sup>259</sup>

On this score, Kael seems to be on the same page as the irrepressible Oscar Wilde in a way that is, if anything, more swooningly romantic than Sarris's formulation of the auteur theory:

Technique [in an artistic sense] is really personality. That is the reason why the artist cannot teach it, why the pupil cannot learn it, why the artist cannot teach it.. To the great poet, there is only one method of music – his own. To the great painter there is only one manner of painting – that which he himself employs. The aesthetic critic, and the aesthetic critic alone can appreciate all forms and modes. It is to him that Art makes her appeal.<sup>260</sup>

I shall not go into Kael's examples, which concern Antonioni and Cocteau, but instead point to a very obvious example: the early films of the French New Wave. The chief aesthetic quality of those films, their reckless vitality (exemplified by the startling jump cuts in *Breathless* [Godard, 1959]), is absolutely inseparable from their stylistic sloppiness. These were films that very purposefully and purposively violated the conventions of the highly polished and competent Tradition of Quality. In the early films of Godard, with their skewed reformulation of Hollywood style, or *Americana* (not the shallowly serious kind, but the spirited, irresponsible, trashy kind), Kael found a worthy subject:

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>260</sup> Oscar Wilde, "The Critic As Artist". G.F. Maine (ed.) (1948) *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. London & Glasgow. Collins pp. 948-998.

*Breathless* [...] is a frightening little chase comedy with no big speeches and no pretensions. [...] Part of the peculiarity of the work – its art – is that while you’re watching it, it’s light and playful, off-the-cuff, even a little silly. It seems accidental that it embodies more of the modern world than other movies.<sup>261</sup>

Godard appealed more to Kael than to Sarris, but I can think of no film that so vividly illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of auteur criticism as *Breathless*. The film was, of course, directed by someone who was an auteur critic himself at that point in time. The dotting pastiche of American genre films is revealed most clearly in Jean-Paul Belmondo’s performance. The riff on Bogart is not based in the best performances of Bogart the *actor* (snapping in homicidal psychosis in *The Treasure of Sierra Madre* and *In a Lonely Place*), but in Bogart the romantic-cynic *star persona* of *Casablanca*. As such, *Breathless* is both the apotheosis of the auteur theory and its negation, for its sly suggestions are that the medium is stronger than its directors, and that the audience sees neither directors nor screenwriters on the screen, but actors indulging us with make-believe and allowing us to see them as captains of their own destinies. But of course, Sarris knew all this, as he had never claimed that the auteur theory is sufficient to encompass everything the cinema has to offer. Indirectly, Sarris provides support for my Bogart/Belmondo example in his summary of Michael Curtiz's career. The director's one enduring masterpiece, is of course, *Casablanca*, the happiest of happy accidents and the most decisive exception of the auteur theory.<sup>262</sup> Sarris did not question the fact that the commercial filmmaker's job is less solitary and more collaborative than that of the novelist or painter:

Movies have never been particularly free. Censorship is but one of their problems. The high cost of production (compared to other art forms), the restrictions of distribution, and the barbarities of exhibition have been additional handicaps. But the medium is endowed with an inherent facility for rendering lifelike illusions with dreamlike intensity. And it doesn't take genius or even talent to ignite the moviegoer's imagination, if only for an instant, with the most exquisite imagery. Some of the most hauntingly beautiful moments in the movies are sheer accidents, and it seems unfair somehow to the toilers in the other arts.<sup>263</sup>

Going back to Kael's argument in “Circles and Squares,” one problem remains. I don’t think Kael makes this clear in her own line of argument: that there is a difference between merely being

<sup>261</sup> Pauline Kael (2002[1965]) *I Lost it at the Movies: The Essential Kael Collection '54-'65*. London: Marion Boyars. p. 127.

<sup>262</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996 [1968]) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968* New York. Da Capo Press p. 176.

<sup>263</sup> Andrew Sarris (1978) *Politics and Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press. pp. 145-146.

incompetent on the one hand, and deliberately overturning conventions which by force of habit are deemed competent on the other. The viewer of a film will generally perceive when cuts between camera setups are mismatched deliberately and when they are unintentional. This judgement can only be made on the basis of the concrete, total viewing experience. While not always easy to ascertain, our familiarity with earlier films will usually give us an indication as to whether a director subverts conventions or merely fails to master them adequately.

This means, I think, that Sarris's first premise is debatable, at the very least. In fact, Kael is too caught up in the flow of her relentless rhetoric to admit that she actually, by and large, agrees with Sarris in substance while disagreeing in words. As she would claim a few years later in her review of Michael Cacoyannis's *The Trojan Women* (1971):

I question whether a director with so little feeling for the most basic elements of movie-making can ever be a good movie director. A director with a "film sense" knows where to put the camera so you don't question the shot; for others, every set-up looks arbitrary.<sup>264</sup>

Isn't technical competence roughly the same as film sense? Kael's argument here seems to point to precisely what Sarris had described as an elementary flair for the cinema. If Kael thinks Sarris is advocating the kind of slick academic craftsmanship that we have seen her criticise in "Movies, the Desperate Art", she is obviously attributing attitudes to Sarris in an *ad hominem* way that is somewhat unfair.

Kael certainly did not think technique unimportant, even if she rarely discussed it explicitly. "Art is the expressive use of technique, [but] technique is hardly worth talking about unless it is used for something worth doing."<sup>265</sup> What exactly, then, is technique in general? Philosopher Arnold Isenberg offers the following general and actually quite prosaic description of the term:

Technique is an ability acquired by practice, assuring dependable performance. This suggests the idea of a standard quality in the result, attainable at will—some general feature of style common to an entire profession or school and to all the works of an individual; and it follows that a technical achievement is eminently communicable, teachable, imitable.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Pauline Kael (1973) *Deeper Into Movies: The Essential Kael Collection from '69 to '72*. London: Marion Boyars. p. 304.

<sup>265</sup> Pauline Kael, (1970) *Going Steady*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company. p. 95.

<sup>266</sup> Arnold Isenberg "The Technical Factor in Art", William Calaghan et. al. (eds.) (1973) *Aesthetics and the Theory of Criticism: Selected Essays of Arnold Isenberg*. Chicago & London. Chicago University Press. pp.53-61.

Given this description, which I think Sarris and Kael in fact shared, we can probably understand Sarris's desire to partially separate style (the creation of meaning through execution) from "mere" technique in his formulation of the auteur theory.

The second premise, or "the middle circle" in Sarris's formulation, is according to Kael even more problematic in all its romanticism. This premise posits the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value. This, Kael believes, is a romantic fallacy that collapses the entire edifice of civilized taste:

Traditionally, in any art, the personalities of all those involved in a production have been a factor in judgement, but that the distinguishability of personality should in itself be a criterion of value completely confuses normal judgement. The smell of a skunk is more distinguishable than the perfume or a rose. Does that make it better?<sup>267</sup>

Even more interesting is the rejoinder of this argument:

Often the works in which we are most aware of the personality of the director are his worst films – when he falls back on the devices he has already done to death. When a famous director makes a good movie, we look at the movie; we don't think about his personality; when he makes a stinker we notice his familiar touches because there is not much else to watch.<sup>268</sup>

It follows, then, that for a film to be truly successful, a director's personality or signature should not be a criterion in itself, and if such a signature exists, it should be embedded in the totality of the work rather than as extraneous touches to dull material.

To reinforce this already pretty strong argument, Kael makes a reference to the career of Alfred Hitchcock, who of course was the original test case of *La Politique* in France, ever since I Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol wrote a book-length auteur study on him.<sup>269</sup> It must be noted that despite being an eminently commercial entertainer, Hitchcock's career followed a very different pattern from most Hollywood filmmakers, mostly because Hitchcock found his commercial and artistic core very early and was able, for all intents and purposes, to invent and continually reinvent his own genre. What Kael has to say about Hitchcock is as follows:

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<sup>267</sup> Pauline Kael (1963) "Circles and Squares: Joys and Sarris," Pauline Kael (2002[1965]) *I Lost it at the Movies: The Essential Kael Collection* 54'-65. London: Marion Boyars p.292-319.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>269</sup> Erich Rohmer & Claude Chabrol (1996 [1957]) *Hitchcock*. Paris: Editions Ramsay.

It could even be argued, I think, that Hitchcock's uniformity, his mastery of tricks, and his cleverness at getting audiences to respond according to his calculations – the feedback he wants and gets from them – reveal not so much a personal style as a personal theory of audience psychology, that his methods and approach are not those of an artist but a prestidigitator. The *auteur* critics respond as Hitchcock expects the gullible to respond.<sup>270</sup>

Hitchcock did nothing to deny such an interpretation himself. On the contrary, his sly, aphoristic sense of humour rather seemed to support it—and not just because he was a teasing trickster who poked fun at earnest questions. What he told screenwriter Ernest Lehmann during the shooting of *North by Northwest* (1959) seems to be a full and blunt justification of Kael's view:

The audience is like a giant organ that you and I are playing. At one moment we play *this* note on them and get *this* reaction, and then we play *that* cord and they react *that* way. And some day we won't even have to make a movie – there'll be electrodes implanted in their brains, and we'll just press different buttons and they'll go "oooh" and "aaaah" and we'll frighten them and make them laugh. Won't that be wonderful?<sup>271</sup>

This gives a very different picture of Hitchcock than that of a metaphysician which pervades the first *auteur* study on him, which emphasises the biographical fact of his Jesuit training and how its views on guilt shaped his films. Kael's is probably the more correct assessment of Hitchcock's great achievement within a very narrow format. Seen in this light, Sarris's preference for Hitchcock over Bresson "by every criterion of excellence" does seem somewhat strange. Certainly, it seems strange to contemplate Hitchcock as a Catholic filmmaker in the explicit sense that Bresson is one. Kael still thinks of Hitchcock as an artist, however

Not only do movies combine many of the tricks of the other media, but there are many genres in which the operator's tricks seem perfectly legitimate. In a Hitchcock thriller, it's fun to be in the position of the mouse nibbling at the cheese, to experience danger vicariously. We know we're being teased and played with, and that's just what we wanted. An artist has to win our consent to his vision so we can see as he does.<sup>272</sup>

Being an expert manipulator, then, does not exactly disqualify Hitchcock's achievements *as an artist*. I happen to think Kael is correct in arguing that Hitchcock's filmmaking career, to a large

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<sup>270</sup> Pauline Kael (1963) "Circles and Squares: Joys and Sarris," Pauline Kael (2002[1965] *I Lost it at the Movies: The Essential Kael Collection* 54'-65. London: Marion Boyars p.292-319.

<sup>271</sup> Alfred Hitchcock quoted in David A. Cook (1990) [1981] *A History of Narrative Film*. New York. W.W. Norton & Company. pp. 349-350 .Second Edition.

<sup>272</sup> Pauline Kael (1970) *Going Steady*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company p. 60.

extent, was determined by a theory of audience psychology. But how would he achieve that end without a style that is calculated for such an effect?

After digressing about Hitchcock, possibly the one director most firmly established in the auteurist pantheon, Kael moves on to a director left conspicuously out of it: John Huston. Kael asks us to consider whether or not the auteur theory is a hindrance to clear judgement regarding Huston's movies and his career:

Disregarding the theory, we see some fine film achievements and we perceive a remarkably distinctive directorial talent; we also see intervals of weak, half-hearted assignments. [...] This kind of career seems more characteristic of film history, especially in the United States, than the ripening development and final mastery envisaged by the auteur theory. [...] How is it that Huston's early good – almost great – work must be rejected along with his mediocre recent work, but Fritz Lang, being sanctified as an auteur, has had his recent bad work praised along with his good? [...] It is an insult to an artist to praise his bad work along with the good: it indicates that you are incapable of judging either.<sup>273</sup>

Few careers throw the weaknesses and limitations of the auteur theory into so clear a relief as that of John Huston. His career as director began very conspicuously (even if was soon eclipsed by another debut director, Orson Welles) with *The Maltese Falcon* and went through ups and downs for nearly fifty years with a string of literate and often ambitious films which reflect Huston's background as a screenwriter. It is no wonder that Kael, a connoisseur of performances (performers are usually the first thing we respond to going to the movies as kids) would rate Huston more favourably than Sarris. Film historians Wheeler Winston Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster have summed up Huston's career quite adequately: "Huston established an individual style that favored actors over camera movement and evinced a strong instinct for narrative drama."<sup>274</sup> Still, there is something to be said for Sarris's argument that Huston failed his acid test: "The turning point of Huston's career was probably *Moby Dick* (1956). In retrospect, he should have acted Ahab himself and let Orson Welles direct."<sup>275</sup> Counterfactual history is a risky business, but what a film it would have been! John Huston was such a commanding actor, whereas Gregory Peck could never quite shake his image as a goody-two-shoes. While Huston's films in the seventies like *Fat City* (1972) and *Wise Blood* (1979) are clearly the works of the kind of mature and expressively aging filmmaker that the

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<sup>273</sup> Pauline Kael (1963) "Circles and Squares: Joys and Sarris," Pauline Kael (2002[1965]) *I Lost it at the Movies: The Essential Kael Collection* 54'-65. London: Marion Boyars p.292-319.

<sup>274</sup> Wheeler Winston Dixon & Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (2008) *A Short History of Film*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press. p. 121.

<sup>275</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996 [1969]) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions – 1929-1968*. New York: DaCapo Press. p. 157



auteurists envisioned, his greatest gift to the screen is his performance as Noah Cross in Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1973). As Huston played him, he is the most frightening villain in American film, believable because grounded in an everyday domestic reality.

Even if Huston could be disqualified as an auteur (which is doubtful, to say the least, and ultimately, uninteresting), his career poses the question as to whether it is more important to display a surface consistency or signature than to make good films, or to actually attempt to make good films. In the case of Otto Preminger, one of the more controversial filmmakers to be bestowed with auteur status, Kael argues that this director's alleged consistency in wildly diverse material is a function of his limitations rather than his virtues. Still, I think Sarris's evaluation of Preminger is essentially correct. He would elaborate his critical position and Preminger's problematic standing in *The American Cinema*:

To read all sorts of poignant profundities in Preminger's inscrutable urbanity would seem to be the last word in idiocy, and yet there are moments in his films when the evidence on the screen is inconsistent with one's deepest instincts about the director as a man. It is at these moments the serenity of his style seems to transcend the limitations of his sensibility. [...] *Bonjour Tristesse*, far from being a merry Gaelic romp, is transformed by Preminger's color/black-and-white duality into a tragedy of time and illusion.<sup>276</sup>

If I may be permitted a purely personal opinion, *Bonjour Tristesse* (1960) is the most exemplary melodrama in American film, with a subdued sense of cool objectivity which is diametrically opposed to the currently more fashionable Sirkian excess. David Niven is perfectly cast as an ageing playboy, and Jean Seberg, fresh from her breakout success with Godard, is not only supremely photogenic but utterly believable as the sullen and precocious yet dangerously childish teenager.

Disagreements over Preminger notwithstanding, Kael's Huston example is very difficult to argue against if we agree that discrimination between works is what a critic should be concerned with. She claims that auteur criticism closely resembles buying clothes by the label,<sup>277</sup> something which ultimately makes viewing the work on which a judgement is based and rendered superfluous. In fairness, Sarris had always been aware of this danger, and he made this awareness explicit when

<sup>276</sup> Andrew Sarris (1986) [1968] *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. New York. Dacapo Press. pp. 104-105.

<sup>277</sup> Pauline Kael (1963) "Circles and Squares: Joys and Sarris", Pauline Kael (2002[1965]) *I Lost It at the Movies: The Essential Kael Collection '54-'65*. London. Marion Boyars. pp. 292-319.

he warned that the auteur theory could potentially become a snobbish racket like that associated with the merchandising of paintings.<sup>278</sup>

Kael holds no brief for the auteur theory in large part because, not without some justification, she believes that the ranking of directors is arbitrary in a way that reduces criticism to mystical insight. If the unfortunate formulation *elàn of the soul* (which, word for word, is actually more nonsensical than barbarous) is to be taken as the constant factor of the auteur theory, it becomes difficult to deny Kael's assertion that the auteur theory is fundamentally based on a cult of personality, even if we allow for the exceptions and qualifications that Sarris uses to buttress his theory. Kael proposes a different and less mystical conception of *elàn*: "May I suggest that a more meaningful description of *elàn* is what a man [sic] feels when he's at the top of his powers—and what we respond to in works of art [...] a response to his joy in creativity."<sup>279</sup>

The third premise of the auteur theory as Sarris poses it is the most controversial aspect of the entire article, since *interior meaning* is held to be "the ultimate glory of cinema as an art." If we take the metaphor of concentric circles seriously, we might say that *interior meaning* constitutes the essential core of his theory. But what is it? Supposedly, it is "extrapolated from the tension between the director and his material." According to Kael, this formulation is at odds with what has always been taken for granted in the arts, that the artist expresses himself through the unity of form and content, a unity which is most likely to be found, according to Kael, in writer-directors like Bergman and Huston rather than the typical contract director:

What Sarris believes to be the "ultimate glory of the cinema as an art" is what has generally been considered the frustrations of a man [sic] working against the given material. [...] What is all this nonsense about extrapolating interior meaning from the tension between the director and his material? A competent commercial director generally does the best he can with what he's got to work with. Where is the tension? And if you can locate some, what kind of meaning could you draw out of it except that the director is having a bad time with lousy material or material he doesn't like? Or maybe he his trying to speed up the production so he can move on to something he has some *hopes* for? Are these critics honestly (and futilely) looking for interior meanings or is this just some form of intellectual dibbling that helps to sustain their pride while they are viewing silly movies?<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> Andrew Sarris, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962", *The Primal Screen: Essays on on Film and Related Subjects*. New York: Simon & Schuster pp. 38-53.

<sup>279</sup> Pauline Kael (1963) "Circles and Squares: Joys and Sarris." Pauline Kael (1965) [2002] *I Lost It at the Movies: The Essential Kael Collection '54-'65*. London: Marion Boyars. pp. 292-319.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*

The concept of interior meaning is ill-defined in Sarris's article, and too ambiguous to be tenable as an approach to film aesthetics:

*Interior Meaning* seems to be what those in the know know. It's a mystique and a mistake. The auteur critics never tell us by which divining rods they have discovered the èlan of a Minnelli or a Nicholas Ray or a Leo McCarey. They are not critics – they are inside dopesters. There must be another circle which Sarris forgot to get to – the one where secrets are kept.<sup>281</sup>

With this, Sarris's original article is unceremoniously discarded, but Kael's article still has two more chapters, which help throw additional light on her own critical practice, as well as further deepening the reader's understanding as to why she is so adamant that the auteur theory is a critical fallacy. This might be called, as Kael states in the chapter's heading, "moving outside the circle."

These chapters of "Circles and Squares" read like a *post scriptum* to the main body of the text, and find Kael reflecting on criticism in general. They begin with something like a warning about the dangers of narrow-minded cinemania among the new auteurist breed of film critics; I daresay that this warning is directed not so much at Sarris as at the *Movie*-critics in Britain. The intense cinema-worshippers like V.F. Perkins, Rudi Franchi and Mark Shivas were, according to Kael, in danger of forgetting that art (cinematic or otherwise) is an expression of human experience:

[I]f they don't have interests outside film, how can they evaluate what goes on in films? Film aesthetics as a distinct, specialized field is a bad joke; the *Movie*-group is like an intellectual club for the intellectually handicapped.<sup>282</sup>

This observation ties in as much to the practice of criticism itself as to the works that are subjected to criticism. For Kael as well as Sarris, the example of Bazin looms large, despite the fact that he was more essentialist than either of them. Kael lists the traditional virtues of criticism that she associates above all with Bazin and Agee, who brought their entire range of experience and taste to bear when watching and offering critiques on movies. Kael then lists a range of qualities usually attributed to great critics: Intelligence, knowledge, experience, sensitivity, perceptiveness, fervour, imagination, dedication and lucidity.<sup>283</sup> Kael reiterates her anti-theoretical and pluralistic stance, while at the same time maintaining that standards for art and criticism exist:

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281 *Ibid.*

282 *Ibid.*

283 *Ibid.*

I believe that we respond most and best to work in any art form (and to other experiences as well) if we are pluralistic, flexible, relative in our judgements, if we are eclectic. But this does not mean a scrambling and confusion of systems. [...] The critic is expendable if categories replace experience; a critic with a single theory is like a gardener who uses a lawn mower on everything that grows.<sup>284</sup>

Kael seems to think that a pluralistic approach is especially rewarding when discussing movies:

“[...] criticism is exciting because there is no formula to apply [...] and film criticism is particularly exciting because of the multiplicity of elements in film art.”<sup>285</sup>

The question of whether Sarris actually was the chief culprit against which the blast of almost militant good sense that constitutes “Circles and Squares” was directed, is a question worth asking, and I do not think it particularly forward or daring to indicate an answer. To utilize a device with which Kael excels, the rhetorical question, we might ask: was Sarris’s approach to criticism, if we look outside of the strict confines of “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962”, really all that non-pluralistic? As Sarris would write in 1968, in a way that echoes the pluralistic impurity of the movies so dear to Kael, even if Sarris laments this as a slightly unfortunate predicament:

Unfortunately, the screen is too prolific a medium to sum up in a handful of Aristotelian axioms. The trouble is that the cinema, unlike painting and sculpture, is only partly visual. Like music, cinema exists in time, but only partly. Like literature, it is locked in language, but only partly. It is like photography, but only partly. Truly, the cinema requires no less than a renaissance man to encompass all its aspects.<sup>286</sup>

The most widely-read American general interest film critic of the post Sarris/Kael generation, Roger Ebert, has made an interesting, albeit puzzling point about the heated controversy that their disagreement spawned: “If there was a fight between Kael and Sarris I’m not sure what it was about, because if you read Kael’s criticism it is very director-oriented.”<sup>287</sup> Indeed, her criticism was director-oriented, despite making ample room for the written script as the starting point for films. Later in her career, she would famously champion screenwriters like Herman Mankiewicz and Samson Raphaelson,<sup>288</sup> which must be construed as an explicit awareness of the scripted subject matter that precedes and determines the *mise-en-scène*. The latter was where auteur critics

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<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>286</sup> Andrew Sarris (1969) “Film Criticism from Blurbs to Belles Lettres”. *The Film* Andrew Sarris. (ed.) (1969) New York: The Bobbs Merrill Series in Composition and Rhetoric pp. 5-9.

<sup>287</sup> Roger Ebert quoted in George Hickenlooper (1991) *Reel Conversations: Candid Interviews with Film’s Foremost Directors and Critics*. New York. A Citadel Press Book p. 235.

<sup>288</sup> Sampson Raphaelson & Pauline Kael (1983) *Three Screen Comedies By Sampson Raphaelson*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

discovered virtually all expressive meaning as well as style. Kael is also much more actor-oriented than most auteur critics, who sometimes treat actors as neutral instruments that the director uses to express their visions. She did not, however, seriously question the primary importance of either the director or the presence of an authorial voice:

A director with something like magical gifts *can* make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, but if he has it in him to make more than silk purses, the triumph is minor – even if the purse is lined with gold. Only by the use of the auteur theory, does this little victory become “the ultimate glory.”<sup>289</sup>

Kael's disagreement with Sarris is a disagreement about the extent of theory, about its necessity and validity, but it is equally a perceived disagreement not about individual tastes, but about the exercise of taste:

How can these critics, sensible enough to deflate our overblown message movies, reject the total content of the work and concentrate on signs of a director's personality and interior meaning? It is understandable that they're trying to find movie art in the loopholes of commercial production – it's a harmless hobby and we all play it from time to time. What is incomprehensible is that they actually prefer their loopholes to unified expression.<sup>290</sup>

In a way, this argument brings us back to the second premise as Sarris formulated it, and the alleged cult of personality that this premise entails, because the concept of artistic unity is transferred from discrete films to directorial careers. In the very first paragraph of “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962”, one finds the following sentence: “Like the alchemists of old, auteur critics are notorious for rationalizing leaden clinkers into golden nuggets.”<sup>291</sup> The operative and relevant question here is whether or not Sarris has ever fallen into the trap he warns against. Roger Ebert seems to think not: “You could never catch Sarris praising a film because the director was in the pantheon, or disliking it because the director's previous work had not passed muster. You felt that Sarris went to every movie hoping to be delighted.”<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> Pauline Kael (1963) “Circles and Squares: Joys and Sarris”, Pauline Kael (2002[1965]) *I Lost It At The Movies: The Essential Kael Collection* pp. 292-319

<sup>290</sup> Ibid. p. 315-316.

<sup>291</sup> Andrew Sarris (1962) “Notes on the Auteur Theory 1962”, Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Scream: Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York: Simon & Schuster pp. 37-53.

<sup>292</sup> Roger Ebert “The Original, or Maybe the Third Guy to Have Seen Every Movie of any Consequence”. Emanuel Levy (ed.) (2001) *Citizen Sarris – American Film Critic: Essays in Honor of Andrew Sarris*. Lanham, Maryland. Scarecrow Press. pp. 31-36.

The second sentence of Ebert's quote is undoubtedly correct: the infectious delight and enormous scope of Sarris's cinematic references are what distinguish him from virtually every other critic, past or present. There is however, one glaring instance where Sarris praises a film he clearly thinks is bad, due to a prior commitment to this particular auteur. The film? Nicholas Ray's *Party Girl*. The review is worth quoting in full:

On its own terms, *Party Girl* is a garish blend of the Hollywood musical and the gangster melodrama. Cyd Charisse's flashing sequins and Corey Allen's checkered suits are swept together into a memorable riot of color, and Ray's flair for cinematic movement lingers in the mind long after the trivial plot details and atrocious acting have been forgotten. Far being a collection of  $x$  images, *Party Girl* is a flow of  $x^3$  movements, and nothing is more vitally cubistic or visually dynamic than Cyd Charisse going into her dance. It is possible to dismiss the film as the limited triumph of form over content, but in Ray's wild exaggerations of decor and action, there arises an anarchic spirit which infects the entertainment and preserves the interior continuity of the director's work. One may chose to confront or to ignore the disturbing implications of *Party Girl*, but the choice involves more than one film and one director. It involves the entire cinema, past, present, and future.<sup>293</sup>

The quasi-scientific turn of introducing totally undefined unknowns into the veritable equation is absurd, and in fairness, an anomaly in Sarris's criticism. But what does this amount to exactly? Is it a case of grotesquely misplaced loyalty to a supposed auteur, or simply a regrettable but forgivable overflow of enthusiasm? Kael would probably insist on the former, but I am not entirely convinced. It may be that the problems run deeper than that. The reason for what might be called the auteurist fallacy, for lack of a better term, lies more in enthusiasm than a cynically strategic underplaying of weaknesses. The auteurist fallacy, as I see it, crystallises a problem which may arise for any writer working within the humanities generally. I think film scholars Thomas Sobchack and Tim Bywater have come to the very heart of this problem. Writing from the perspective of 1989, they noted: "[T]he auteurist approach to film is still popular and as widely used as any other. Like most humans, film critics enjoy seeing traces of human individuality and creativity, even when the manufacture of those objects most often appears mechanical and anonymous."<sup>294</sup>

I really cannot feel too aggrieved about Sarris's review of *Party Girl*, which for him represents a desire to find something worthwhile in the film.

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<sup>293</sup> Andrew Sarris quoted in Raymond J. Haberski Jr. (2001) *It's Only a Movie: Films and Critics in American Culture*. Kentucky: Kentucky University Press. p. 126-127..

<sup>294</sup> Tim Bywater and Thomas Sobchack (1989) *Film Criticism: Major Critical Approaches to Narrative Film*. New York: Pearson Longman Inc. p. 55.

In fact, Kael's criticism of the auteur theory would be more consistent if she hadn't committed the sin of over-praising and practiced the obscure cult of personality criticism herself. In the seventies, Kael began to praise promiscuously. Perhaps heady with her own power, it seemed that her favourite directors could do no wrong. Her loyalties seemed to lie with the new breed of American directors she knew personally, like Brian De Palma and Sam Peckinpah. Kael's dedication to De Palma reached absurd heights with her extremely panegyric review of the decidedly average Vietnam movie (a latecomer in that particular category), *Casualties of War* (1989). Her most obscure piece of writing ever, and the one most damaging to her credibility as the world's foremost anti-auteurist, was a review of Sam Peckinpah's *The Killer Elite* (1975). Ironically, and ominously for Kael's integrity as an anti-auteurist, she called the review "Notes on the Nihilist Poetry of Sam Peckinpah". This review is full of feeble attempts to commend a private, closed-off mess of a film that does nothing so much as underline Peckinpah's drug-induced paranoia that gravely affected the quality of his work at the time, and worse still, is clearly the work of a filmmaker who radiates unmitigated contempt for his audience.

It a wonder Kael's praise is so glowing, considering she correctly identifies the film as a *private* rather than *personal* film:

There are so many elisions in *The Killer Elite* that it hardly exists on a narrative level, but its poetic vision is all of a piece. [...] The film is airless—an involuted corkscrew vision of a tight modern world. In its obsessiveness, with the questions of sequences a matter of irrational poetic connections, *The Killer Elite* is closer to *The Blood of a Poet* than it is to a conventional thriller made on the C.I.A. assassins subject, such as *Three Days of the Condor*. And, despite the script by Marc Norman and Stirling Silliphant that United Artists paid for, the film isn't about C.I.A.-sponsored assassinations—it's about the blood of a poet. [...] There is no way to make sense of what has been going on in Peckinpah's recent films if one looks only at their surface stories. Whether consciously, or as I think, part unconsciously, he's been destroying the surface content.<sup>295</sup>

To rephrase her own argument from "Circles and Squares" on Sarris's idea of interior meaning: Is surface content any different from content? And if the film is all subtext, how can we fashion any reasonably precise interpretation from the experience of having seen the film?

It is almost embarrassing to point out how completely Kael made a fool of herself here. Few critics have been as defensive about their own intellectual *ad hoc* rationalizations, but it is obvious what happened here, though I can hear Kael snarling at the suggestion I am about to make.

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<sup>295</sup> Pauline Kael (1980) *When the Lights Go Down*. New York: Holt, Rhinehart & Winston. . pp. 112-118.

Kael is clearly using the criterion of tension between the director and his material here as a strategy to import praise, which was of course exactly what she had accused Sarris of doing with his vague and ill-explained concept of interior meaning. The title of Kael's review is a surefire giveaway for the unfortunate sort of auteur-rationalization of a movie that simply does not work which she had so warned against.

“Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962” and “Circles and Squares” are the centrepieces of the Sarris-Kael feud; by comparison, later polemics about the pros and cons of the auteur theory are actually quite weak rejoinders. Sarris's direct reply, “The Perils of Pauline”, cobbled together earlier articles on the auteur theory and made no reference to Kael except in its title. Sarris would revisit the auteur theory in several later articles, but the fervour of Kael's rebuttal hurt him. I think it would be fair to say that Kael's main criticism of the auteur theory is less about directorial or literary authorship, than about the classic and modern ideas of totality in unified form and content. She also felt strongly that the auteur theory had been misappropriated in America and Britain simply because it originally performed a very different function in France. This is the subject of the last chapter in “Circles and Squares”, and it demonstrates that even in the pieces that most polarize Sarris and Kael, there is at least one very fundamental point of consensus:

The French auteur critics, rejecting the socially conscious problem pictures so dear to the older generation of American critics, became connoisseurs of values in American pictures that Americans took for granted, and if they were educated Americans, often held in contempt. The French adored the American gangsters, and the vitality, the strength of our action pictures. In one sense, the French were perfectly right – these were often much more skilfully made, and far more interesting visually than the movies with a message that the Americans were so proud of, considered so *adult*. Vulgar melodrama with a fast pace can be much more exciting – and more honest too – than feeble, pretentious attempts at drama, which usually just meant putting ideas into melodrama anyway. Where the French went off was finding elaborate intellectual and psychological meanings in these simple action films.<sup>296</sup>

The abiding impression left by this is that Kael saw the original impetus behind the auteur theory as a valuable corrective, maybe even a necessary one. As we have seen, Kael believes that crude vitality, cultivated especially in American movies, is one of the chief pleasures of the movies, but she still wants more from the medium. The auteur theory came about in France because the French cinephiles saw something in American films that their own films lacked. The gist of this, as Kael

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<sup>296</sup> Pauline Kael (1963) *Circles and Squares: Joys and Sarris*.” Pauline Kael (2002[1965]) *I Lost It At The Movies: The Essential Kael Collection '54-'65* London: Marion Boyars pp-292-319.



sees it, is that the auteur theory in its original form was a function of French needs, not necessarily only as a polemical weapon, as Truffaut claimed, but also because American movies (significantly released almost in bulk with the end of the German occupation of France, after being held up in distribution) gave these young men aesthetically pleasurable experiences that they could not find elsewhere.

In America, Kael argued, writing from the perspective of 1963, the situation was different. Different not in the sense that socially conscious film critics were beginning to lose sway vis-a-vis the cinephiles, but rather in the sense that Kael felt a need for a different kind of American film that was more responsive to the current American experience. Kael's bold contention, that Anglo-American auteurism in the early sixties played an anti-intellectual, anti-art role, in contrast to being a primer for an outburst of creativity in France, must be read against this background.<sup>297</sup>

There was no special need for the French critics preoccupied with *their* needs to become sensitive to *ours*. [...] What has happened to the judgement of the English and New York critics who have taken over the auteur theory use to erect a film aesthetics based on those commercial movies that answered the needs of French, but which are not merely ludicrously inadequate to our needs, but the result of system which places a hammerlock on American directors.<sup>298</sup>

It is evident from this that Kael wanted a new kind of American film, one that retains and cultivates its trademark vitality while expanding its scope. The way she responded to what has been routinely labelled “New Hollywood Cinema” supports this.

It must be admitted that Kael's rejection of the auteur theory is very difficult to argue against—that is, the rejection of the auteur theory as a theoretical approach to film aesthetics. We shall return to the implications of the auteur theory as an approach to aesthetic film history, where it has played a much more prominent role. In film studies at large, the auteur theory soon faced competition from other approaches. While its influence on the practice of film history from the sixties onward proved immense, it was soon challenged and supplemented by other approaches. In a reformulation of her anti-auteurist polemic, Kael would offer just such a challenge. With a text that aspired to film history rather than simply criticism, she fixed her attentions on Orson Welles and the most studied film in history: *Citizen Kane*. “Raising Kane” was to prove her only foray into explicitly historical writing, and it turned out to be her most controversial work.

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<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*

### Raising Kane: Kael as Film Historian

When Andrew Sarris lauded Richard Lester's emblematic film of the swinging sixties, *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) in a review, he did so by declaring that this movie was the *Citizen Kane* of the jukebox musicals.<sup>299</sup> The most dotting compliment in that statement is thus to *Kane* and its director, Orson Welles. That *Citizen Kane* did not win the Oscar for Best Picture in 1941 has been taken as irrefutable proof that the Academy voters are unreliable or even incompetent judges in matters of an artistic nature. Despite its losing out on the two most prestigious awards (Best Picture and Best Director to John Ford's *How Green Was My Valley*), it is almost universally considered the apogee of cinematic art:

When in 1952 the British film magazine *Sight & Sound* published the results of an international poll to discover “the ten best films of all time”, Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* fell just short of the magic number, tying with Jean Renoir's *La Grande Illusion* and John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* for the eleventh position. In a similar poll ten years later, sent to substantially the same group of film critics and historians, *Citizen Kane* was the clear-cut victor – the best film of all time, if one were to read such listings literally.<sup>300</sup>

Astonishingly, the film's position has remained practically unchallenged ever since. It was with full knowledge of this situation that Kael launched her only real attempt at film historical writing on a major scale: “Raising Kane” (1971), which originally ran as an article in two parts in the *New Yorker*. In fact, the status of *Kane* as *sui generis* was vital to Kael's line of argument. The stature of “Raising Kane” as an important work in film historical scholarship was enhanced considerably when it was published in book form as *The Citizen Kane Book*, where it accompanied the film's shooting script, later that same year.

I have already indicated that Kael's perspective in “Raising Kane” is a reformulation of many of her anti-auteurist arguments in “Circles and Squares”, but it is also, in another way, a kind of practical application of the aesthetic she had developed in “Trash, Art, and the Movies” and elsewhere in her writing. I will now proceed by offering a thorough analysis of Kael's article, but I will also deliver the counterpoint to our findings here with what Sarris has written about the same film, both prior to and later in response to “Raising Kane”.

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<sup>299</sup> Andrew Sarris (1970) *Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema 1955/69*. New York. Simon and Schuster. p.161.

<sup>300</sup> Arthur Knight (1969) “Citizen Kane Revisited”, Ronald Gottesman (ed.) (1971) *Focus on Citizen Kane*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. Prentice Hall. A Spectrum Book pp. 120-124.

On one count, Kael is entirely in unison with everyone else who has written about *Kane*, in that it was made with an unusual degree of artistic freedom and control for a studio-financed film of the era. Moreover, this freedom manifested itself on two different levels: “*Citizen Kane* [...] was not an ordinary assignment. It is one of the few films ever made inside a major studio in the United States in *freedom*—not merely freedom from interference but in freedom from the routine methods of experienced directors.”<sup>301</sup> The many bits of technique that were perfected, if not actually introduced in Welles' debut film, bear out that the young inexperienced director had an eagerness to try out new ideas which influenced the entire technical crew and inspired them to reach new heights.

Kael starts off her narrative on the making and reception of *Citizen Kane* with an analysis and judgement of the film's quality of experience (i.e. its aesthetic), which was just as controversial as the purely empirical or factual information she would present later in the piece. The one pronouncement many found particularly troubling was Kael's insistence that *Kane* was a (gasp) shallow work. There is no doubt, however, that she loved the film; she called it, after all, “a shallow masterpiece”.<sup>302</sup> Moreover, it apparently looked all the better for it from the perspective of 1971:

*Citizen Kane* is perhaps the one talking picture that seems as fresh now as when it opened. It may seem even fresher. A great deal in the movie that was conventional and almost banal in 1941 is so far in the past as to have been forgotten and become new. The Pop characterizations look modern, and rather better than they did at the time. New audiences may enjoy Orson Welles' theatrical flamboyance even more than earlier generations did, because they are so unfamiliar with the traditions it came out of.<sup>303</sup>

I will answer the implicit question contained in the passage quoted above, but first I think it expedient and pedagogical to first examine what tradition Kael thinks Welles's theatrical flamboyance and *Citizen Kane* as a whole do *not* belong to. She certainly does not think the film's artifice and self-reflexivity, designed to keep the audience alert of a mysterious yet transparent movieness, is out of the same tradition as the modern novel (though Welles would eventually direct *The Trial* in 1960). I will now answer the question of Kael's view on the film's roots positively, but in a roundabout way. Here is what a young Andrew Sarris had to say about *Kane*, a few years before he became an auteurist and before Kael attacked him in print:

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<sup>301</sup> Pauline Kael (1984) [1971] *The Citizen Kane Book*. New York. Limelight Editions. p .3.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.* p. 7.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.* p. 3

Within the maze of its own aesthetic, *Kane* develops two interesting themes: the debasement of the public figure, and the crushing weight of materialism. Taken together, these two themes comprise the bitter irony of an American success story which ends in futile nostalgia, loneliness and death. The fact that the personal theme is developed verbally, while the materialistic theme is developed visually, creates a distinctive stylistic counterpoint. Against this counterpoint the themes unfold within the structure of a mystery story.<sup>304</sup>

Despite the sombre overall tone of this passage by Sarris, he notes that the film uses a popular form, the mystery story, to make its points and work out its themes. (Mystery, you will remember, falls under the *sensational*, one of the five elementary qualities of the popular outlined by Bong-Park.) Kael would expand on this notion of popular forms, to move violently away (as Sarris does not) from a modern or modernistic interpretation. Referring to the film's central enigma or mystery, *Rosebud*, Kael writes damningly:

The mystery in *Kane* is largely fake, and the gothic thriller atmosphere and the *Rosebud* gimmickry (though fun) are such obvious penny-dreadful theatrics that they're not so very different from the fake mysteries that Hearst's *American Weekly* used to whip up—the haunted castles and the curses fulfilled.<sup>305</sup>

Kael goes on to elaborate:

[T]here are articles on *Citizen Kane* that call it a tragedy in fugal form and articles that explain that the real hero of *Citizen Kane* is time – time being the proper sort of modern hero for an important picture. But to use the conventional schoolbook explanations for greatness and pretend that it's profound is to miss what makes it such an American triumph - that it manages to create something aesthetically exciting and durable out of the playfulness of American muckraking satire. *Kane* is closer to comedy than to tragedy, though so overwrought in style as to be almost a gothic comedy. What might possibly be considered tragic in it has such a Daddy Warbucks quality that if it's tragic at all, it's comic-strip tragic.<sup>306</sup>

So, Kael informs us, *Kane* is actually a comedy conceived in a gothic style, a muckraking satire with its roots in quintessentially American forms of the 1930s, for screen and stage. This tradition is today most visibly present in the screwball comedies of the thirties—films that still sparkle with wit, wisecracks and innuendo so as to remind us how simple and ordinary most movies are. The artifice and self-consciousness of the genre are every bit as intent on commenting on their own contrivances and improbabilities as the European art films of later years, even if they're played for laughs. As she reinforces this argument, we are allowed to witness Kael the anti-auteur critic in full swing:

<sup>304</sup> Andrew Sarris, "Citizen Kane: The American Baroque". Ronald Gottesmann (ed.) (1971) *Focus on Citizen Kane*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. Prentice Hall. A Spectrum Book. pp. 102-108.

<sup>305</sup> Pauline Kael (1984[1971]) *The Citizen Kane Book*. New York: Limelight Editions p. 5.

<sup>306</sup> Loc Cit. p. 5.

It's easy to see why Europeans, who couldn't follow the slang and the jokes and didn't understand the whole satirical frame of reference, should prefer our action films and westerns. But it's a bad joke on our good jokes that film enthusiasts here often take their cues of the American movie past from Europe, and so they ignore the tradition of comic irreverence and become connoisseurs of the “visuals” and “mises-en-scene” which are too silly even to be called reactionary. They are sub-reactionary – the antique melodramas of silent days with noise added – a mass art better suited, one might think, to Fascism, or even feudalism, than to democracy.<sup>307</sup>

Kael's putdown of action films seems a little strange when considering other aspects of her criticism, for not only did she fight for the aesthetic values of films notorious for their violence, like *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Taxi Driver* (which she would actually help get into wide release), she would also, some years after “Raising Kane” was written, become the most eloquent defender action director Walter Hill<sup>308</sup> has ever had. She did believe, however, that democracy somehow influenced American films aesthetically. “She [Kael] sees American film as unique not only because it's accessible to and seductive of mass audience, but because Hollywood grew up in and produces for a democratic society.”<sup>309</sup> In terms of film content, *Kane* as a study of power is arguably a perfect example of such a film. The argument made within the context of a study of *Citizen Kane* is worth noting—and I believe, substantially correct. Central to democracy is the concept of the Fourth Estate, and this has a bearing on Kael's interpretation of *Kane*.

You may remember that Charles Foster Kane's meteoric rise as a public figure begins when he hits on the notion that it would be fun to run a newspaper. My point is that Kael sees the film as the culmination and transcendence of the fast-paced newspaper comedies of the era, like *The Front Page* (Lewis Milestone, 1931) and *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940), both of which were adapted by Charles MacArthur and Ben Hecht from their smash Broadway play, *The Front Page* (1928).

In a sense, this undermines *Kane's* status as something wholly unique in the history of American film. Jonathan Rosenbaum has found Kael's interpretation not only incorrect, but distressing:

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid. pp.15-16.

<sup>308</sup> Walter Hill could reasonably be regarded as the world's leading director of action films in the period 1975-1985. Despite the challenges of Clint Eastwood, I would also argue that Hill directed the last masterpiece of the Western genre: *The Long Riders* (1980), a laconic summation of the Jesse James legend that feels both mythic and authentic.

<sup>309</sup> Pat Aufderheide, “Pauline Kael on the New Hollywood”, *In These Times* 7-13 May 1980 12, 23, Reprinted in Will Brantley (ed.) (1996) *Conversations with Pauline Kael*. Jackson. University Press of Mississippi. pp. 41-49.

[Kael views *Kane*] as the apotheosis of the Hollywood newspaper comedy, [and thus] we wind up with a mainstream domestication of Welles' first feature. For roughly three decades after it was made, *Kane* remained a troubling anomaly in American film history, an unclassifiable object that was neither fish nor fowl.<sup>310</sup>

While it is certainly true that *Kane* cannot be classified simply as a genre film, Rosenbaum's assertion, that it was an unclassifiable object in American film history for thirty years until Kael's interpretation domesticated it, does seem somewhat puzzling. Its links with the long-standing and critically venerated "biopic" tradition strikes me as obvious. As far as domestication of the film through critical interpretation goes, there is a core of truth to his argument. However, Rosenbaum fails to mention that most of *Kane's* stylistic innovations were domesticated by other filmmakers long before 1971. I am thinking here of the film's influence on the extraordinarily fruitful *noir* cycle in the forties and fifties, which proved to be immense—something that has been thoroughly documented and analyzed by, among others, film historian Thomas Schatz.<sup>311</sup> This being the case, there was clearly sufficient continuity between *Kane* and the film mainstream at the time for Welles's stylistic and structural innovations to be rapidly assimilated into the Hollywood idiom.

I argued in the introduction that the analytical separation between criticism and history strikes me as an artificial distinction which cannot, and indeed should not, be maintained without severe qualifications. For the sake of argument, however, I now want to stress the distinction rather than nullify it. Though "Raising Kane" is a striking attempt at film history, the issues in the article we have dealt with thus far are issues of interpretation that typically lay within the province of practical criticism as such. Other aspects of the article are historical in a more obvious and direct sense, in that they illuminate a piece of the past through sources presently available to the writer/historian. As an essay in film history, it attacks the underlying premise of a film history written from an auteurist perspective—and even more importantly, the article relies heavily on non-filmic evidence to make several of its key points.

What Kael attempts is to elucidate the historical *context* that is relevant for *Kane's* qualities of experience as a projected film. As such, it is a text in aesthetic film history. But, as we shall see, it is also a film historical narrative that in many ways was ahead of its time, because it illuminates another context: the filmmakers' thorny relationship with William Randolph Hearst. This is highly

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<sup>310</sup> Jonathan Rosenbaum (2000) *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Limit What Movies We Can See*. Chicago. A Capella Books pp. 179-180.

<sup>311</sup> Thomas Schatz (1981) *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System*. New York. McGraw-Hill. pp.116-122.

relevant, because *Citizen Kane* must be interpreted partly as a conscious and deliberate comment on contemporary American history and current affairs. We shall deal with “Raising Kane” from the point of view of aesthetic history first.

The impulse behind “Raising Kane” lies in the only recorded instance where Kael actually systematically reversed an original opinion rather than simply contradict herself. While her feelings about the film had not changed by the time of “Raising Kane”, her understanding of the film's genesis had:

In 1941 the most controversial one-man show in film history was staged by a twenty-five year old writer-director-star Orson Welles when he dramatized the life of William Randolph Hearst, who had quite a reputation for his own one-man show, i.e. the Spanish-American War.<sup>312</sup>

The idea of Welles as a misunderstood solitary genius (in the same vein as Erich Von Stroheim), an awesome unequalled talent who was destroyed by unfeeling money-men in a creative industry more focused on the bottom line than on Art, is still very much alive in film history today. The most recent example is probably Clinton Heylin's monograph *Despite the System: Orson Welles Versus the Hollywood Studios*.<sup>313</sup>

The major critical point and key thesis of “Raising Kane”, contrary to Heylin's perspective, and indeed contrary to Kael's own earlier review, is to stress that the film was *not* a one-man show. Specifically, Kael would proceed to resurrect the screenwriter Herman J. Mankiewicz, and in so doing, she stressed the collaborative nature of commercial filmmaking, and furthermore elaborated in narrative form the common-sense idea that the script is something more than just a sketch to be transcended by the director's *mise-en-scène*. I will return to Mankiewicz shortly, but I first want to detail Kael's perspective on *Kane*'s striking visuals, which, she argued, were also a matter of collaboration. Intimately connected to *mise-en-scène* is cinematography, and Kael directed a lot of praise for *Kane*'s distinctive look towards cinematographer Gregg Toland and his four-man camera crew—more, in fact, than had been usual up to that point.

Kael could not bring herself to believe Welles's curious boast that the only real preparation he had had before directing *Kane* was having watched John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) forty times. Kael asked herself: “Why should Orson Welles have studied *Stagecoach* and come up with a film that looked more like *The Cabinet of Caligari*?” Like any proper historian and (dare I say it) like an inverted, archivally oriented auteurist with an appetite for trivia and a compulsion to sniff out vital

<sup>312</sup> Pauline Kael (1970) *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*. London. Calder & Boyars p. 247.

<sup>313</sup> Clinton Heylin (2005) *Despite the System: Orson Welles Versus the Hollywood Studios*. Chicago. Chicago Review Press. An A Capella Book.

clues, Kael went to work sifting through Toland's earlier work as cinematographer and camera operator. She found what she was looking for in the shape of an obscure horror film, *Mad Love* (Karl Freund, 1935). Freund had been a leading cameraman at UFA in Germany, and was as directly responsible for the look of German Expressionism as John Alton and Nick Musuraca were directly responsible for the distinctive look of American film noir. *Mad Love* even featured a heavily made-up Peter Lorre, who bore a striking resemblance to the aged Charles Foster Kane as played by Orson Welles.

If “Raising Kane” actually falls short of obscuring or minimizing the contribution of Orson Welles, Kael in any event redirects much of the attention and praise to others involved in the creative work: Welles's collaborators in general, and Joseph Mankiewicz in particular. Kael saw Mankiewicz as a forgotten protagonist in getting the movie done. A man hidden for a generation under Welles' enormous, indeed overwhelming shadow:

[Welles] has never again worked with a subject with the immediacy and impact of *Kane*. [...] This particular kind of journalist's sense of what would be a scandal as well as a great subject, and the ability to write it, belonged not to Welles but to his now almost forgotten associate Herman J. Mankiewicz, who wrote the script, and inadvertently destroyed the picture's changes. There is a theme that is submerged in much of *Citizen Kane* but that comes to the surface now and then, and it's the linking of Hearst and Mankiewicz and of Welles—the story of how brilliantly gifted men who seem to have everything it takes to do what they want to do are defeated. It's the story of how heroes become comedians and con artists.<sup>314</sup>

Narratives with fateful premises and themes such as these are common in the literature about Orson Welles, but they also occupy an even greater tradition with respect to historical narratives in general. Welles is the ideal figure for this kind of historical writing, since he started at the top with the full backing of the best studio resources and ended up as something close to a guerrilla filmmaker, scrambling to get his many aborted projects off the ground. All because, according to Kael, that without his collaborators through which he could harness his and others' creativity, behind and in front of the camera, he flew apart and became disorderly.<sup>315</sup> There is a kind of arch fatalism in Kael's passage here which embodies the entire text's function as a historical narrative and sums up where Kael would find herself in this context—by which I mean the context in which historians typically find themselves while pursuing their profession.

Kael conducted interviews with a host of figures involved in the making of *Citizen Kane*, but like any historian, she (perhaps a bit unscrupulously in this case) marshalled the evidence to fit

<sup>314</sup> Pauline Kael (1984) [1971] *The Citizen Kane Book*. New York. Limelight Editions. p. 8.

<sup>315</sup> Pauline Kael (1984) [1971] *The Citizen Kane Book*. New York. Limelight Editions p.84.



her conception of what kind of narrative she was writing. What French biographer André Maurois noted in connection with his particular profession is equally true for every other kind of historian: “It must not be forgotten that the marshalling and grouping of facts is itself an interpretation.”<sup>316</sup>

Kael did not interview Orson Welles during her almost two-year long period of preparation for her article. She argued that Welles had been interviewed about *Kane* so many times, that it was easy to infer what he would have said *had* Kael consulted him. “I talked to everyone I thought could help me. [...] But I was very selective about whom I interviewed. Mainly, I guarded against people I felt might be too emotionally involved.”<sup>317</sup> For that reason, Joseph Mankiewicz (Herman's younger and more successful brother) was omitted from the list of interviewees along with Welles. One person Kael did interview, however, was Herman Mankiewicz's secretary, Mrs. Rita Alexander. It was apparently Alexander who provided Kael with the juiciest bit of information in “Raising Kane”: that Herman J. Mankiewicz had dictated the entire shooting script to her, without the assistance of Welles in the actual writing process.<sup>318</sup> Welles, of course, shared the Academy Award for best screenplay with Mankiewicz, but ironically, lost out as lead actor and director.

The claim concerning Mankiewicz as the sole writer of the shooting script, though sensational, has turned out to be the Achilles heel of “Raising Kane” as a work in film historical scholarship. Robert Carringer's book, *The Making of Citizen Kane* (1985), would conclusively disprove Kael's finding that Herman Mankiewicz was the sole person responsible for *Kane*'s literary authorship.<sup>319</sup> Carringer, however, wholeheartedly endorsed Kael's controversial re-contextualization and revisionist interpretation of *Citizen Kane* as a film continuous with the American mainstream of its era. With Carringer's subsequent aid, Kael's interpretation of *Kane* has entered our common understanding of the film, and that is probably the highest honour any film historian should allow themselves to hope for—and the ultimate compliment.

Kael's canonisation of Herman Mankiewicz can only be understood against the backdrop of the auteur theory and its impact on the practice of film historical writing, and the implicit downgrading of the script this entails. In particular, “Raising Kane” can be seen as an attack on a particular tradition within auteurist film scholarship. I am speaking, of course, of the *auteur interview*:

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<sup>316</sup> André Maurois (1943) “The Ethics of Biography”, Stanley Weintraub (ed.) (1967) *Biography and Truth*. New York. The Bobbs Merrill Series in Composition And Rhetoric. pp. 44-50.

<sup>317</sup> Holis Alpert (1971) “Raising Kael”, Will Brantley (ed.) (2001) *Conversations with Pauline Kael*. Jackson. University Press of Mississippi. pp.9-15.

<sup>318</sup> Pauline Kael (1984) [1971] *The Citizen Kane Book*. New York. Limelight Editions. p. 29

<sup>319</sup> Robert Carringer (1985) *The Making of Citizen Kane*. Berkeley. University of California Press.

The new generation of film historians have their own version of “Look, no hands”; they tape-record interviews. Young interviewers particularly, don't bother to check the statements of their subjects – they seem to regard that as outside their province – and thus leave the impression that the self-aggrandizing stories they record are history. [...] This worship of the director is cyclical – Welles or Fellini are probably adored no more than Von Stroheim or DeMille was in his heyday – but such worship generally doesn't help sorting out what went into the making good pictures or bad pictures.<sup>320</sup>

While most of us may readily admit that interviews with film directors more often than not have a kind of chatty and somewhat inconsequential air about them, and are often made up of little more than charming and superficial anecdotes, I still feel the need to ask a nagging question: Has Sarris been a film historian or critic of the kind that Kael criticises here? Sarris's compatriot from *Film Culture*, Peter Bogdanovich, would certainly have to be considered the foremost representative of this kind of film historian in America.<sup>321</sup> Sarris's case is far from clear-cut, and although he has edited two anthologies of director interviews, *Interviews with Film Directors* (1967) and *Hollywood Voices* (1971), he has never considered the interview an indispensable weapon in the critic's arsenal. I want to stress this aspect of Sarris's thinking here because Sarris's biographically tinged approach to film history, dependent as it is to some extent on a kind of aesthetic intentionalism, is more thoroughly thought through than Kael's half-baked and confused flirtations with anti-intentionalism, which we discussed in our general chapter on axiological criticism. Nowhere is Sarris's sensible position more emphatically evident than in his digressions on the epistemological problem of the auteur interview as a mode of historical enquiry. Sarris had interviewed American film's foremost satirist, Preston Sturges, as early as 1957. He recalled the meeting thus:

My deepest critical instincts urge me to minimize the fact that I interviewed Preston Sturges in the summer of 1957. Why? Because, I suppose, I believe less than ever in the truth of direct personal confrontations between the artist and the critic. All directors, even the great ones, are human beings, but they are also something more or something less, or perhaps even something else. The link between artistry and psychology is still tenuous to me, and the traits of character, common to millions of otherwise miscellaneous individuals, consequently seem as relevant as the sign of the zodiac. [...] I must admit that Preston Sturges looked every inch a director. His eyes retained a thoughtful glitter and the greyness of his fifty-nine years was more imperial grey than sparrow

<sup>320</sup> Pauline Kael (1984) *The Citizen Kane Book*. New York: Limelight Editions pp. 47-48.

<sup>321</sup> All things considered, film scholarship in America would be a lot poorer without Peter Bogdanovich's collected interviews with Hollywood veterans. Bogdanovich's outlook may be at times somewhat starstruck and naive, but his knowledge of the period is encyclopedic and his enthusiasm for his subjects deeply affecting. See for example: Peter Bogdanovich (1997) *Who the Devil Made it*. New York. Alfred A. Knopf. A similar book by the same author which profiles acting personalities from Stella Adler to John Wayne followed seven years later: *Who The Hell's in it: Profiles and Conversations of Hollywood's Legendary Actors* (2004) New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

grey. However, I already knew he was a director, so how could I truthfully read the tea-leaves of character analysis? It is hardly a secret that an experienced interviewer can usually mould a personality to specifications by asking the right questions. [...] Of course there is a grain of truth even in the lies inevitably elicited by inquisitors who know the answers before they ask the questions.<sup>322</sup>

Precisely. Though Kael is of course correct in the particular case of Orson Welles, and in the general assumption that the auteur interview, when left to stand alone, is a most dubious form of film scholarship, it is nevertheless legitimate as one approach of several as long as we remember that the directors interviewed usually offer a *retrospective interpretation of their intentions* rather than a simple *statement of intentions*. Much less still are they indicators of *the fulfilment of their intentions*. This, I think, is the implicit reservation in Sarris's statement. The total communicative statement, such as it is, is preserved in the film (or rather, *is* the film), but a director's interpretation of his intentions and how they were achieved, or if indeed what became preserved in the film were someone else's intentions, can only be checked by turning to other relevant filmic and non-filmic evidence. And so, the auteur interview marks another point where Sarris and Kael apparently disagree in words but agree in substance.

I have argued during the course of this chapter that "Raising Kane" as a text in film history was ahead of its time. One reason for this is of course the re-casting of *Kane* itself as a sort of popular genre exercise that transcended its origins. Another reason, as already noted, is Kael's analysis of both the film as a comment on contemporary America and the relationship between Welles, Mankiewicz, and William Randolph Hearst. "Raising Kane" thus predates the current vogue for "contextual" film history by about twenty years.

Kael details the facts and the gossip about William Randolph Hearst and his wife Marion Davies (Susan Alexander in the film), including the revelation that Mankiewicz knew Hearst socially, along with several other writers of the *New Yorker* at that time and the magazine's editor and founder, Harold Ross.

What remains most fascinating, however, from the point of view of American popular democracy, which Kael stressed in connection with *Citizen Kane*, is that Hearst represented a new type of power—the power of the media. This is a kind of power Hollywood people understand better than most. "Though Hearst made some direct attempts to interfere with the film, it wasn't so much what he did that hurt the film commercially as what others feared he might do, to them and to

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<sup>322</sup> Andrew Sarris (1962) "Preston Sturges – Recalled By Andrew Sarris 1962", Andrew Sarris (ed.) (1971) *Hollywood Voices*. London: Secker & Warburg. pp. 85-94.

the movie industry. They knew he was contemplating action, so they did the picture in for him.”<sup>323</sup> The studio head at RKO, George J. Schaefer, was apparently called to New York by Nicholas Schenck, chairman of the board of Loew's International, who made a cash offer of \$842,000 from the MGM head of production Louis B. Mayer to destroy all the negatives before the film had opened.<sup>324</sup>

Had Schaefer accepted, film history as past, and as subject, would have been very different. As it turned out, hostility from the Hearst-controlled press and the fear of media power, probably coupled with the film's daring inventiveness, prevented it from being a commercial success. In the 1950s, RKO would eventually (as the only “major”) succumb to chronic financial difficulties, because it could not meet the challenges of television and a dwindling cinema audience.

So where, exactly, does “Raising Kane” stand? There is certainly little doubt about who wrote it. It remains arguably the most cogent aesthetic statement and stylistic document of Kael's career, mixing as it does biography, criticism, history and even autobiography (Kael relates an episode from 1938, when she actually encountered Hearst on a dance floor and was mightily impressed by his imperial appearance). Even Sarris was reluctantly impressed by Kael's article:

“Raising Kane” bears the byline of Pauline Kael and of Pauline Kael alone. [...] Miss Kael deserves credit because she has shaped her material, much of it unoriginal, into an article with a polemical thrust all her own. Her selection and arrangement of material constitutes a very significant portion of her personal style.<sup>325</sup>

Summing up, there are two main lines of argument in “Raising Kane”. One of them is that filmmaking is a collaborative art. This in itself is not particularly original today, nor was it so in 1971. Ernest Lindgren, author of the much-read *The Art of the Film* (1948) had in fact devoted his entire first chapter to “The Division of Talent”.<sup>326</sup> Kael's work was, however, a timely reminder to all the auteurists in creation at university campuses across America.

Film scholar Howard Suber has recently restated the strong collaborative strand in Kael's text on the genesis of *Citizen Kane*, and in fact adds a twist of his own by including composer Bernard Herrmann in the film's key collaborative nucleus:

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<sup>323</sup> Pauline Kael (1984) [1971] *The Citizen Kane Book*. New York. Limelight Editions p. 5.

<sup>324</sup> Loc. Cit.

<sup>325</sup> Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen: Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York: Simon & Schuster. p. 113.

<sup>326</sup> Ernest Lindgren (1963) [1948] *The Art of the Film*. London. George Allen & Unwin Ltd. pp.17-30.

Orson Welles had passion, inventiveness, brilliance and courage, but he was only twenty-five and had never made a feature film before. Herman Mankiewicz, the screenwriter who wrote almost all the dialogue and scenes, was a middle-aged cynic who had long since given up finding a vessel into which to pour his considerable wisdom, and he needed to have his creative prowess harnessed to a worthwhile end. Gregg Toland, the middle-aged cinematographer, was one of the great technological innovators in motion picture photography. [...] Bernard Herrmann was a temperamental young guy who turned out to be one of the most inventive geniuses in movie music. Two younger men collaborated with two older and experienced artists. The young ones had no sense of the limits of the medium, but the older men knew how to go beyond them. Together, these four collaborators produced something that was beyond anything each had produced before or would ever produce again.<sup>327</sup>

Here we can see to what extent Pauline Kael's perspective on the film has shaped current scholarship on Welles. Suber arguably takes Kael's collaborative perspective on *Kane* too far. Can Bernard Herrmann's work on *Kane* really hold a candle to his best scores for Alfred Hitchcock?

Where “Raising Kane” really excels as a text is in joining the sense of filmmaking as a collaborative art with her recasting of the film as the crowning achievement of American popular genres usually completely overlooked by Academy voters, unless, as in the case of *Kane*, it is laced with tragedy, despair, or pathos. Kael's summary of the vivid trashiness that vitalizes *Kane* as a movie, I find practically impossible to argue with:

It is both a limitation and *in the nature of the appeal* of popular art that it constructs false, easy patterns. [...] *Kane* has a primitive appeal that is implicit in the conception. It tells the audience that fate or destiny or God or childhood has already taken revenge on the wicked – that if the rich man had a good time he has suffered remorse, or, better still, hasn't really enjoyed himself at all. [...] In popular art, riches and power destroy people, and so the secret of *Kane* is that he longs for the simple pleasures of his childhood before wealth tore him away from his mother – he longs for what is available to the mass audience.<sup>328</sup>

As this stands, *Citizen Kane* is arguably the prime example of kitsch redeemed—kitsch transformed into art. Did Kael think it was the best film ever made? It is probably more correct and relevant to say that she saw the qualities of *Kane* as being characteristic of great movies—that it has the elements that make most great movies exactly that. There is, however, one instance where she

<sup>327</sup> Howard Suber (2006) *The Power of Film*. Studio City, California. Michael Wiese Productions. p. 80

<sup>328</sup> Pauline Kael (1984) [1971] *The Citizen Kane Book*. New York. Limelight Editions p. 72-73.

indicated that there exists another kind of film art which is even greater. Kael ended a 1961 broadcast review of *La Grande Illusion* (Jean Renoir, 1937) thus:

In cinema there is artistry that brings the medium alive with self-conscious excitement (Eisenstein's *Potemkin*, Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*) and there is the artistry that makes the medium disappear [Renoir's] *La Grande Illusion*, De Sica's *Shoeshine*). *La Grande Illusion* is a triumph of clarity and lucidity, every detail fits simply, easily, intelligibly. There is no unnecessary camera virtuosity: the compositions seem to emerge from the material. It's as if beauty just happens (is it necessary to state that this unobtrusive artistry is perhaps the most difficult to achieve?).<sup>329</sup>

I will not be forced into choosing between Welles or Renoir by Kael's review, but I have included it here to once again demonstrate the constant duality of Kael's thinking.

A heated debate arose in the wake of "Raising Kane's" initial publication. Peter Bogdanovich, in particular, who was preparing a book on Welles at the time, took the whole idea of shallow masterpieces very badly. When he quoted Welles, he also issued a warning to other critics and scholars: "Cleaning up after Miss Kael is going to take a lot of scrubbing."<sup>330</sup>

The reactions of another auteurist, Andrew Sarris, are more interesting for our purposes, and are also, it would seem, a lot more nuanced:

Of course, the tactical point of [Kael's] hyperbole is to suggest that the later decline of Welles could be attributed to his loss of the story sense provided by Mankiewicz for *Kane*. In the end, however, Kael succeeded only in adding another layer of mythology to Welles as the man who "stole" *Citizen Kane* from Herman J. Mankiewicz. Earlier and later myths serve to entomb Welles as a burned out prodigy, a wastrel, an unappreciated visionary, a trickster, a Renaissance Man for all media – cinema, theater, radio, television; an egomaniac, a compulsive storyteller right out of the ancient Mariner, a persecuted liberal and New Dealer without portfolio, a failed newspaper columnist, a huckster, a public clown, a martyr to Hollywood philistinism, a raging sexist, a baroque mannerist, a man who scared a nation, a twentieth century incarnation of Sigmund Freud's Leonardo Da Vinci, and an Oedipally crippled artist congenitally inhibited from finishing

<sup>329</sup> Pauline Kael (2002) [1965] *I Lost It At The Movies: The Essential Kael Collection '54-'65*. London. Marion Boyars, p. 110.

<sup>330</sup> Peter Bogdanovich quoted in Craig Seligman (2004) *Kael and Sontag: Opposites Attract Me*. New York. Counterpoint. p. 126.

his projects. The problem was that Welles was all these things and more. No single tag line was adequate. His “genius”, if it existed, was in recognizing his own complex personality and expressing it artistically.<sup>331</sup>

Regarding Welles, it could be argued, despite the personal humiliation “Raising Kane” entailed, that Kael's text also served as a catalyst for creativity. I don't think it is far-fetched to see the sparkingly exuberant cinematic essay *F for Fake* (1972) in this light. Exposed as an egomaniac and a credit-grabber, Welles could finally let his flamboyance rip in the most joyous and life-affirming film of his career.

“Raising Kane” did not facilitate a uniform or even very significant shift from *politique des auteurs* to *politique des écrivains*, and conspicuously little has been written about writers within the classical Hollywood system—a fact which makes the volume *The Hollywood Screenwriters*, edited by Richard Corliss<sup>332</sup>, and above all Richard Fine's book, *Hollywood and the Profession of Authorship 1928-1940*,<sup>333</sup> all the more valuable. But creative importance need not be the same as creative power and control, and the one who *should* be in control during the actual shooting, so Sarris and Kael agreed, is the director. It was, after all, through such control that Orson Welles brought forth a miracle.<sup>334</sup>

I will now proceed with the final primary text treated in this thesis: *The American Cinema—Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. I shall deal with the main body of Sarris's text first, then analyze his method as presented in the essay that accompanies the book, “Toward a Theory of Film History.” In so doing, I shall also contrast this method with the less evaluative and critical and more empirical and contextual approach outlined by a new breed of film historians grounded in conventional historical scholarship.

### Sarris as Film Historian: Directors and Directions Part One – The Rankings

We have now reached the very pinnacle of Sarris's writing, and one of the most discussed, classic texts of film historical scholarship—even if it has been more influential in spirit than in actual form: *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. I shall deal with the actual ranking of directors which constitutes the main body of the book first, before, in the next chapter, inspecting

<sup>331</sup> Andrew Sarris (1998) *You Ain't Heard Nothing Yet: The American Talking Picture in History and Memory*. New York: Oxford University Press. pp. 287-288.

<sup>332</sup> Richard Corliss (ed.) (1973) *The Hollywood Screenwriters*. New York: Discus / Avon Books.

<sup>333</sup> Richard Fine (1985) *Hollywood and the Profession of Authorship 1928-1940*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press.

<sup>334</sup> Pauline Kael (1984) [1971] *The Citizen Kane Book*. New York: Limelight Editions. p. 5.

Sarris's historical/critical method as outlined in "Toward a Theory of Film History". There, I shall also consider the validity of Sarris's method, measured against the new breed of so-called contextual film historians, who consciously distance themselves from Sarris's personal and idiosyncratic approach. However, I should first like to outline briefly the background of Sarris's most important book.

Like most of the textual material treated in this thesis, Sarris's *magnum opus* can actually, with some reservation, be said to have originated from the first Sarris/Kael debate, which we have seen climax so violently with "Circles and Squares". The book's origins can be traced back to the early sixties, when Sarris first ranked directors in the pages of a special issue of *Film Culture* (Spring 1963, No. 28) in an article that was, like the subsequent book, entitled *The American Cinema*. There are other half-baked journalistic attempts from Sarris to counter and incorporate Kael's critique, but *The American Cinema*, particularly in its incarnation as a book, is Sarris's true vindication of the auteur theory as a wholly distinct critical and historical approach, which, as we have seen, he had already announced as forthcoming in "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962".

In the original article, the number of directors ranked was 113, seven of which were foreign, and the directorial chronologies (i.e. the directors' names) were placed in esoterically titled categories. Sarris began at the top with "Pantheon Directors" and worked his way down to the lowest rung on the auteurist ladder with the category "Oddities and One-Shots".

By 1968, the *ad hoc* usefulness of the basic premise of directorial authorship was evidenced in the way the new programmes in film studies at American universities were organized, but a systematic, if wholly idiosyncratic, auteurist examination of the American cinema in the broadest possible terms did not exist before the publication of Sarris's book. Motivated by his life- and career-changing spell in Paris, Sarris no doubt felt that the French had thrown down the gauntlet: "The critics of each country must fight their own battles within their own cultures, and no self-respecting American film historian should ever accept Paris as the final authority on the American cinema."<sup>335</sup> In the book, vastly expanded from the original article, there are 198 directors arranged in eleven categories, ranging from "Pantheon Directors" all the way down to a new, dreaded category, "Miscellany", which could only be described as a critical scrapheap.

The fourteen directors included in "The Pantheon" are all actually quite uncontroversial in terms of the overall, collective critical opinion of their work, but there are two facts of note about this category which merit close and extensive comments.

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<sup>335</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996[1968]) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions*. New York: DaCapo Press. p. 28.



While the careers and critical standings of Fritz Lang, Josef Von Sternberg, Max Ophüls, Ernst Lubitsch, and even Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau (because of *Sunrise* [1927]) are probably as much shaped by their American films as their European ones, and are mandatory inclusions in any American pantheon, Jean Renoir is also included despite having made only five American movies—all of which, relatively speaking, are minor works in a career which spans almost forty films.

This is a clear indication that Sarris quite consciously defined “American” as loosely as possible, in that the only minimal criterion for inclusion in his history of “the American Cinema” was that the filmmaker had to have directed at least one English-language film. How was this conspicuous choice motivated? Well, it must be remembered that the Andrew Sarris of 1968 was still a polemicist, championing commercial American films as a personal rather than social medium of expression.

Greg Taylor, one of the sharpest current observers of the American critical scene, sums up the justification for this loose definition of “American” in Sarris’s lexicon as a critic/historian:

Long denigrated as nonartistic and homogeneous, American cinema was certainly being redeemed. If the auteur theory’s emphasis on personality had allowed Sarris to assert that even despite middlebrow encroachment, this cinema was as rich and subtle as the directors working within it, the loose definition of “American” enabled him to claim that it was actually remarkably diverse, too.<sup>336</sup>

Sarris would elucidate his reasoning in a way that actually seems quite fair by qualifying and modifying the term “American” in another, more prosaic and more plainly geographic sense:

Since the criteria of selection for this historical survey are aesthetic rather than social or industrial, “American” will embrace many undubbed English-language films produced abroad. As much as this encroachment on British and international cinema may smack of imperialist presumption, the doctrine of directorial continuity within the cultural marketplace of the English language takes precedence here over ethnographic considerations. This point of view is perhaps more representative of New York, a distribution centre, than of Hollywood, a production centre.<sup>337</sup>

In sharp contrast to Kael and her foray into historical writing, “Raising Kane”, Sarris thus de-emphasised the *Americana* of American films, leaving ample room in his narratives of American

<sup>336</sup> Greg Taylor (1999) *Artists in the Audience: Cults, Camp and American Film Criticism*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. pp. 91-92.

<sup>337</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996[1968]) [*The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*]. New York: DaCapo Press.

film since the sound era (though D. W. Griffith is included in the pantheon as an all-important shadowy figure of American sound film, vital as its precondition and its all-defining prehistory) for exotic and refined continentals like Max Ophüls, Josef Von Sternberg and Erich Von Stroheim (who is actually placed in the second-level category, hovering just below the pantheon).

This perspective also enabled Sarris to include a sideways look at foreign directors, like Michelangelo Antonioni, Claude Chabrol and Roman Polanski, in his fourth-level category, “Fringe Benefits”. These were figures who had played a marginal role in American cinema (in Polanski's case, this was already changing) from the point of view of Hollywood productions, but who were being widely distributed and much discussed among intellectuals in a metropolis like New York City, even if their films barely made a commercial ripple outside the major metropolitan areas.

I have, as announced, one more major point to make about Sarris’s ranking of top-level auteurs, and that is the inclusion of a documentary filmmaker in a book otherwise exclusively concerned with the fiction film. Edward Murray, the thoroughly pedantic scholar with whom we have already been acquainted during the course of this thesis, finds the inclusion of Robert Flaherty puzzling, and claims that he does not belong in a book concerned with fiction film directors.<sup>338</sup>

Maybe so, but this is merely superficially true. For anyone who is intimately familiar with Sarris, the critic-as- historian, Flaherty's inclusion in the pantheon of American filmmakers really makes perfect sense. In fact, knowing Sarris’s criticism up to that point, it would certainly be a lot more puzzling had he *not* included Flaherty.

Sarris himself points out specifically that Flaherty is included for a very special reason: “The vast realms of documentary, animated, and experimental filmmaking are pointedly excluded. Flaherty is mentioned arbitrarily for the sake of an aesthetic principle.”<sup>339</sup>

What, we must ask, is this principle exactly? It of course has to do with what is generally considered the mainstream of the non-fiction film, and Flaherty's place relative to it as a genuine auteur rather than as a social engineer:

Robert Flaherty was not merely the “father” of the documentary but also one of its few justifications. Actually, his films slip so easily into the stream of fictional cinema that they hardly seem like documentaries at all. [...]

What Flaherty understood so well was the potential degeneration of the documentary into voyeurism when the

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<sup>338</sup> Edward Murray (1975) *Nine American Film Critics: A Study of Theory and Practice*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing. p.52.

<sup>339</sup> *Op. Cit.* p. 16.

images of the camera are not reprocessed in the mind of the artist. [...] Flaherty's cinema is one of the last testaments to the "cult of nature", and, as such, is infinitely precious.<sup>340</sup>

Even film historians who have written more extensively on nonfiction film, and are more sympathetic to the Griersonian tradition, cannot, by and large, seriously question Sarris's trenchant and defiant analysis of Flaherty's career. The one commentator, however, who has been most in sync with Sarris on this score, is Robert Flaherty's widow, who became an eloquent defender of her husband's work after he had passed away:

A Flaherty film is not a documentary, because a documentary film is preconceived. The great documentary movement fathered by John Grierson is all preconceived for educational and social purposes. The Russians preconceived their films for political purposes. Hollywood preconceives for the box-office. None of these is simply and purely, freely and spontaneously the thing in itself for its own sake. In other words, he had no axe to grind.<sup>341</sup>

The persistent grinding of political axes and the propaganda of left-wing causes has always had a tendency to provoke Sarris, the centrist liberal, because it subordinates the human individual to fervently held ideas and political views, and in the Marxist understanding of the matter, huge dialectical forces. Predictably, Sarris's antipathy for the mainstream of the documentary tradition went quite a bit beyond the Griersonian school of social engineering. The one piece where Sarris really showed his hand as a consciously liberal critic concerned *The Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966). This much discussed semi-documentary about colonial warfare and terrorism/resistance in Algeria was at the time of its release hailed as great art, and enjoyed as great entertainment. Sarris was sceptical. Most of all, he felt uneasy with the audience reaction at a screening he attended:

Some years ago a Lincoln Centre black tie stuffed-shirt audience cheered the demolition of a café full of unbilled French men, women and children by a revolutionary bomb squad in *The Battle of Algiers*. Somewhere behind my own stuffed shirt, I found the audience reaction hatefully obscene. They were cheering the deaths of allegorical unpersons, the same kind of unpersons who died in Buchenwald and Bangladesh, though under somewhat different auspices. An unperson is a creature whose murder causes exultation without any complicating feelings of pain, loss or waste. The whole point of Pontecorvo's staging is that the bombing is mercilessly indiscriminate because the revolution must be ruthless. And how often have we been fed that line

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<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 42-43.

<sup>341</sup> Frances Flaherty quoted in Jack C. Ellis (1989) *The Documentary Idea: A Critical History of English-Language Documentary Film and Video*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. Prentice Hall Publishers. p. 73.

before? All right, you say you believe in indiscriminate violence. Then squeeze Robert Redford, Paul Newman, Jane Fonda, Jeanne Moreau, Cathrine Deneuve, Marcello Mastroianni, Laurence Olivier, Vanessa Redgrave, Jean-Paul Belmondo, Peter Finch, George C. Scott and Diana Rigg into a crowded café in Algiers. Then let the bomb go off five minutes after the picture starts and show all our cameo stars as shattered corpses. It's not the same thing? Well then, close your eyes, and imagine that your wife or your husband, your parents and children, your friends and relations [...] are in that crowded café ready to be blown up. Is it still the same scene? Is it still an occasion for cheering? I think not.<sup>342</sup>

I have quoted Sarris's review at length here, because even if the film discussed is not a documentary, it nonetheless burrows into the stylistic lexicon and utilizes the surface mannerisms of the typical documentary to make its key political points—points which, when all is said and done, are all more common in documentary than in fiction. In any event, Sarris's personal tastes and distastes are in evidence here in a way that illustrates both the inclusion of Flaherty and the exclusion of other documentary filmmakers, not only from the pantheon, but from his canonical historical text as a whole.

At this point, it might be expedient to consider the ultimate consequences of an idea of film history as made up of canonical works endowed with artistic value. Sarris has repeatedly stressed the apt analogy between films and architecture:

If medieval architects and African sculptors are anonymous today, it is not because they deserve to be. When Ingmar Bergman bemoans the alienation of the modern artist from the collective spirit which rebuilt the cathedral at Chartres, he is only dramatizing his own individuality for an age which has rewarded him handsomely for the travail of his alienation<sup>343</sup>

British architectural historian Ian Sutton has written the following on the idea of a canon:

“The canon [...] is based on the simple idea that architecture is an art, that certain buildings excel in that art, and that such excellence is to be (among other things) enjoyed.<sup>344</sup>” Substitute film for architecture, and we can see the the basic outline of what Sarris attempted with *The American Cinema*.

[There is not really all that much more to say about Sarris's pantheon of directors. What the directors in the pantheon share is, in Sarris's formulation:

<sup>342</sup> Andrew Sarris (1978) *Politics and Cinema*. New York. Columbia University Press. pp, 121-122.

<sup>343</sup> Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen: Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York: Simon & Schuster. p. 48.

<sup>344</sup> Ian Sutton (1999) *Western Architecture: A Survey From Ancient Greece to the Present*. London: Thames & Hudson. p. 8.

These are the directors who have transcended their technical problems with a personal vision of the world. To speak any of their names is to evoke a self-contained world with its own laws and landscapes. They were also fortunate enough to find the proper conditions for the full expression of their talent.<sup>345</sup>

That Orson Welles's inclusion among the gods of cinema strikes us as obvious, speaks volumes of the high plateau of technical resources as well as talent from which he began. But auteurs in general know, as Sarris certainly does, that most worthwhile movies or filmmakers do not reach such awesome standards, though they still can be great entertainment, and uneven filmmakers may occasionally make great works of art. This is the main reason why the most interesting films in every director's filmography are presented in italics in order to distinguish them from those Sarris felt were less interesting.

A misunderstanding frequently attached to auteur critics, closely related to the idea of canon that we have just outlined, and one which has proved almost impossible to eradicate, is that they were exclusively concerned with master filmmakers and their masterpieces. On the contrary. In fact, I would go as far as to say that auteur criticism as a systematic historical approach was the first real subversion of the masterpiece-tradition in film scholarship, simply because it extended the field of study so drastically. It was above all when moving outside the established pantheon of directors (Hawks<sup>346</sup> and Hitchcock were actually the only figures to enter the pantheon *because* they were championed by auteur critics) to discover lesser but vastly significant stylists, like Douglas Sirk<sup>347</sup> and Anthony Mann (the former for his baroque melodramas, the latter primarily for his violent, genuinely neurotic, and extraordinarily powerful westerns) that auteurism in general and Sarris in particular have been most useful to the study of American cinema.

I will spare the reader an extensive run-through of all eleven categories, but the second- and third-line categories, along with the very special fifth category, warrant special mention, not least because auteurism as practiced by Sarris, as I have just indicated, celebrated its greatest triumphs

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<sup>345</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996 [1968]) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. New York. DaCapo Press. p. 39.

<sup>346</sup> Amazingly, the first essay in which Howard Hawks was evaluated as a major film artist was published in the May 1953 issue of *Cahiers du Cinema* and written by Jacques Rivette. The piece was entitled "The Genius of Howard Hawks." Rivette's own films, unusually long in playing time and profusely talkative, are far removed from Hawks's customary laconic pragmatism and ritualistic emphasis on male bonding and brassy, self-confident dames. The strong Hawksian woman who appears time and time again in the Hawksian universe is partly attributable to Hawk's frequent collaborator, the brilliant (female) screenwriter Leigh Brackett.

<sup>347</sup> Douglas Sirk's stylistically striking films, which magnify the emotional content of melodramatic conventions, was a massive (and acknowledged) influence on the extremely prolific European auteur Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Fassbinder was probably the finest filmmaker to emerge from *Das Neue Kino* movement, as well as the most obsessive chronicler of the newly affluent West-Germany in the Cold War era.

when evaluating and explicating directors of considerable merit who were not considered among the greatest of filmmakers.

Sarris's second-line category bears the moniker "The Far Side of Paradise". Included here are twenty directors from Robert Aldrich to Raoul Walsh—the latter, you will remember, being the direct cause of Sarris's drawing severe criticism from Kael as the epiphany of joy that concludes his "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962."

By 1968, Sarris was able to place Raoul Walsh in a more dispassionate and measured perspective than he initially had done six years earlier: "His best films are genuinely exciting, though neither profound nor pretentious. If there is no place in the cinema for the virtues and limitations of Raoul Walsh, there is even less place for an honestly pluralistic film criticism."<sup>348</sup>

It is exactly pluralism that is the prime virtue of *The American Cinema* as a book, though it might be argued that this was achieved at a cost. Sarris does not burrow particularly deep into single films, and the ranking of directors left entirely up to the critic's discretion has been accused of reducing film criticism and film history to an intellectual parlour-game. Such criticisms tend to miss the point, by failing to consider the journalistic aspect that characterizes *The American Cinema*, a feature it shares with David Thomson's later, somewhat different but equally opinionated *The Biographical Dictionary of Film*.<sup>349</sup> While most professional academic historians' ultimate aim is often simply to facilitate the writing of more history, Sarris (who, like Kael, succeeded better than most on that score) also wanted to provide the general reader with a rough guide to an uncharted cultural territory.

Once you accept Sarris's subjective point of view, and a conception of film history that is episodic rather than simply chronological, *The American Cinema* becomes a fantastic book to argue with. Sarris's historical approach, as Greg Taylor points out, and indeed, his entire critical strategy, at least in this specific book, was a broad cultism—a kind of vanguard oppositional fandom. "Participation in this new cultism was easy, in that it was now largely a matter of absorbing a large neglected body of cultural material (American film directors, whether notables or non-entities) and engaging with the critic's ranking of the material."<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996 [1968]) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. New York. DaCapo Press. p. 121.

<sup>349</sup> This book has gone through several editions since its original publication in 1975, most recently as *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film* (2003). New York. Alfred A. Knopf

<sup>350</sup> Greg Taylor (1999) *Artists in the Audience: Cults, Camp and American Film Criticism*. Princeton, New Jersey. Princeton University Press. p. 92.

We may certainly argue that Preston Sturges deserves a place in the pantheon rather than lingering in “The Far Side of Paradise”, as we may also argue with justification that Billy Wilder and John Huston ought not have been relegated to the less than flattering fifth category, “Less than Meets the Eye.”, where most directors of prestigious “problem pictures” reside. Judging by what he wrote under the entry on Billy Wilder, it is hard to believe that Sarris really thought that Wilder belonged in a bracket of directors whose “personal signatures are written with invisible ink”: “If Billy Wilder’s stock has risen slightly in recent years with the escalation of savage satire in *Kiss Me Stupid* and *The Fortune Cookie*, it is not so much because of the films themselves, but rather because Wilder has chosen to remain himself while almost everyone else has been straining to go mod.”<sup>351</sup> Is this not an auteur credo if ever there was one? These inconsistencies in Sarris’s text were part of the whole shake-up. He knew there would be reactions. If anything, Sarris welcomed relative disagreements such as the ones we have outlined, both in fun and as part of an epistemological broadening of the field. He inspired readers to make their own discoveries and perhaps elevate a hitherto unheralded and neglected filmmaker to the rich and exciting third tier of auteurs, aptly titled “Expressive Esoterica.” Here Sarris ranked, among others, quintessential auteurs of the American action genres like Budd Boetticher, Phil Karlson and Don Siegel. I will now simply mention the other categories included in the book that I have not touched upon, in descending order: “Lightly Likable”, “Strained Seriousness”, “Oddities, One-shots and Newcomers”, “Subjects for Further Research”, “Make Way for the Clowns” (about dominant comic personalities rather than directors—the piece on Jerry Lewis is one of the book’s highlights) and finally, “Miscellany”. I daresay that these rankings have guided more impressionable young people to careers as film scholars, at least in America, than any other single book about film.

Before we conclude our analysis of the actual rankings, something also has to be said to indicate how authoritative and insightful Sarris’s broad and provocative gestures can be. The best examples are when he discusses directors just outside the hallowed pantheon. My examples are two directors who are very dissimilar in temperament, and who both dwell on Sarris’s “Far Side of Paradise,” King Vidor and Vincente Minnelli.

“King Vidor is a director for anthologies. He has created more great moments and fewer great films than any director of his rank.”<sup>352</sup> Sarris goes on to elucidate this somewhat cryptic and provocative

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<sup>351</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996 [1968]) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. New York. DaCapo Press, p, 167

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 117-119.

assertion with a cross reference in *mise-en-scène* between Vidor's *The Big Parade* (1925) and Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930):

In the Vidor, an outraged American soldier pursues a German into a shell hole. When the American sees that the German is wounded, he is unable to finish the job but gives his enemy a cigarette instead. In the Milestone, a German soldier bayonets a Frenchman and then asks his victim's forgiveness. Both scenes are contrived to express human brotherhood and thereby attack the idea of War. Both scenes involve two figures in a depressed and isolated enclosure. The two-shot is almost mandatory here for both directors because cross-cutting would destroy the meaning of the scene. If two figures are shown in the same frame, a bond is established between them. Cross-cutting would establish separateness as the point-of-view changed back and forth. Both Vidor and Milestone understood this much, and thus the issue of montage never arises. Yet, though these scenes are identical in meaning and broadly equivalent in technical execution, the Vidor is both more moving and aesthetically superior to the Milestone. Why? Well, not because the Vidor came first. Most critics under fifty probably saw the Milestone before they saw the Vidor. Not because Vidor has arbitrarily designated a better director than Milestone. [...] Ultimately [...] the issue between the two scenes is resolved by the oldest criterion of the cinema, good old camera placement, an aesthetic factor that was as decisive in 1895 as it is today. Vidor moves much closer to his characters, thus achieves greater dramatic intensity. By staying farther back, Milestone emphasizes the pictorialism of the scene. The frame in which the spectacle unfolds rather than the spectacle itself. Vidor's treatment is more forceful than Milestone's, hence more emotionally satisfying. Thus, in one sequence, two careers fall into place. [...] An auteur versus a technician. The auteur theory can only record the evidence on the screen. It can never prejudge it. Vidor is superior to Milestone.<sup>353</sup>

Having seen the films, it is hard to withstand the sweeping force of Sarris's argument, which has some of the dead-certain qualities of Moses laying down the law in stone tablets.<sup>354</sup> As usual, Edward Murray picks out a flaw in Sarris's argument. Murray is of course correct when he points out that it is, and indeed must be, the *auteur theorist* (rather than the theory itself) who records the evidence on the screen.<sup>355</sup>

Murray's second argument is that Sarris has indeed prejudged the evidence, despite his protestations to the contrary. This is actually an argument with less force than it seems. It is indeed difficult to see how any factual bit of evidence could not be, at least in some minimal sense,

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<sup>353</sup> *Loc. Cit.*

<sup>354</sup> Current film critic Kent Jones has noted: "*The American Cinema* has the authority of an ordinary text – it does not appear to have been written as much as handed down from above and received by mankind." Kent Jones "Hail the Conquering Hero." *Film Comment* May/June 2005. World Wide Web: [www.nyfilmfestival.net/fcm/5-6-2005/Sarris.htm](http://www.nyfilmfestival.net/fcm/5-6-2005/Sarris.htm). Retrieved May 1, 2009.

<sup>355</sup> Edward Murray (1975) *Nine American Film Critics: A Study in Theory and Practice*. New York. Frederick Ungar Publishing p. 54,



prejudged. I have claimed earlier in this thesis that the auteur theory actually begs the question of a theory rather than providing one. Kael thought it was all simply a matter of discrimination, and I tend to agree. The auteur theory in Sarris's formulation could, however, pass the minimum requirement for a theory if we were to follow Mieke Bal's lead: "A theory is a systematic set of generalized statements about a certain segment of reality."<sup>356</sup> If this is a true definition of theory, Sarris is a theorist in name and deed. In that case, is it also true, as the philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend claims, that any theory, be it in the humanities or natural sciences, generates its own data, from which we draw our conclusions?<sup>357</sup>

The hidden premise upon which Sarris operates here is actually not very well hidden at all, since it consists simply of his innate preference for the long-take aesthetic which he and other auteur critics filled with personal and subjective meaning, rather than the objective meaning it had had previously under André Bazin's aesthetic realism in the 1940s.

I shall now move on to my second and last example, Vincente Minnelli. I have chosen him because his films are indicative of stylish and hitherto downgraded genres and filmmakers who were discovered by Sarris. These were actually particularly feminine genres, something which goes against the popular complaint made by Kael and repeated by others, namely that auteurs were all emotionally regressive and developmentally stunted schoolboys masquerading as red-blooded men who preferred what we with a very Kaelian phrase might call the "Bang Bang" genres. I am talking about the melodrama and the musical, where Minnelli excelled.

Before the advent of auteur theory, both critics and the Hollywood establishment had long since discriminated against the female weepie in favour of the male weepies from home and abroad, the clearest indication of which perhaps being the sentimental humanistic dramas that are characteristic of Italian neorealism.

Minnelli, on the other hand, made his name as an extraordinary director of actresses, even as his very tastefulness and tact prevented him from entering the pantheon. Sarris's piece on him is also an indirect response to the charge that auteurism necessarily entails a split between form and content, which had been one Kael's main criticisms in "Circles and Squares." I know of no analysis of a filmmaker that so neatly summarizes the strengths and weaknesses not only of a director but also of the genres in which he preferred to work:

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<sup>356</sup> Mieke Bal (1997) *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. p. 4. Translation of *De Theorie Van Vertellen and Verhalen*. Second Edition.

<sup>357</sup> Paul Feyerabend (1981) *The Philosophical Papers Volume I*. New York: The Free Press. p. x.

Minnelli has always required relatively luxurious projects on which to lavish his taste. If he has a fatal flaw as an artist, it is his naive belief that style can invariably transcend substance and that our way of looking at the world is more important than the world itself. Critic-filmmakers like Godard and Truffaut pay lip-service to these doctrines but they don't believe in them. Only Minnelli believes implicitly in the power of the camera to transform trash into art, and corn into caviar. Minnelli believes more in beauty than in art.<sup>358</sup>

## Directors and Directions Part Two: Toward a Theory of Film History

I hope the selective analysis of Sarris's rankings in the previous chapter serves to convey my deep respect for a book that can still yield surprising insights with respect to Sarris's relationship with his material, even when it is opened at random by someone who has never heard of Sarris or is just beginning his discovery of classic American sound films. Sarris may have predicted that his method was too idiosyncratic not to be contested. Later film scholars grounded in the methods of conventional historical research have attempted to discredit Sarris as an ahistorical romantic whose methods must be swept aside for a more nearsighted empiricism and a more conscious and conscientious approach to economic, social and technological contexts.<sup>359</sup> *Context* seems to be the catchword among the new breed of film scholars of a historical bent. This is just a guess, but knowing their persuasion, "Raising Kane" would almost certainly be closer to their idea of "proper" contextual film history than *The American Cinema*.

I will not offer an extended analysis of this trend in contemporary film scholarship, but I must nevertheless acknowledge its existence and point out that Sarris belongs to a different category, one which is more obviously personal and openly rhetorical. The critique against evaluative film history as by and large a form of paradoxically ahistorical film history is outlined with regards to a specifically auteurist orientation by film scholar Christopher Faulkner, who speaks of the non-political practice of *mise-en-scène* criticism and the ahistorical nature of auteurism in reference to the French discourse on cinema in the 1950s.<sup>360</sup>

I do not want to dismiss the accusation that could be levelled against Sarris that he is an ahistorical film historian outright. I shall examine this further. Those who want discredit Sarris as an

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<sup>358</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996)[1968] *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. New York. DaCapo Press. p. 102.

<sup>359</sup> In the standard reference work on film historical method, authors Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery operate with three perspectives on film history in addition to the critical/aesthetic: the *social*, the *economic* and the *technological*. Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery (1985) *Film History: Theory and Practice*. New York. Alfred A Knopf. p. v.

<sup>360</sup> Christopher Faulkner "Debates 1830-1960: Critical Debates and the Construction of Society", Michael Temple & Michael Witt (ed.) (2004) *The French Cinema Book*. London. BFI Publishing pp. 172-180.

ahistorical writer tend to focus on a polemical formulation from “Notes on the Auteur Theory 1962.”

Even if the artist does not spring from the idealized head of Zeus, free of the embryonic stains of history, history itself is profoundly affected by his arrival. If we cannot imagine Griffith's *October* or Eisenstein's *Birth of a Nation* because we find it difficult to transpose one artist's unified conceptions of Lee and Lincoln from the other's dialectical conceptions of Lenin and Kerensky, we are nevertheless compelled to recognize other differences in the personalities of these two pioneers beyond their respective cultural complexes. It is with these latter differences that the auteur theory is most deeply concerned. If directors and other artists cannot be wrenched from their historical environments, aesthetics is reduced to a subordinate branch of ethnography.<sup>361</sup>

Taken at face value, there can be little doubt that the auteur theory as a critical approach devalues context. In other words; this approach limits the historical context to a correlation between surrogate author and text if practiced strictly. Still, the words of Swedish philosopher Claes Entzenberg are worth noting: *every context is the result on contextualization*<sup>362</sup> If it is the historian's duty to supply the context, we might say equally with at least some justification, that it is also his privilege.

The critique of Sarris's theory and approach must be taken seriously, but feel I must also point out that Christopher Faulkner has himself been accused of being ahistorical. This requires further explanation. Faulkner is an Althusserian Marxist grounded in the British cultural studies tradition, and his work as a film scholar and historian is completely informed by this. In his book *The Social Cinema of Jean Renoir*, Faulkner delivers a blast against the romantic underpinnings of the auteur theory. His argument is that the auteur theory's focus on individual artistry and its tendency to play down historical circumstance is but a form of [repressive] bourgeois ideology.<sup>363</sup> For anyone grounded in *art* history it is not difficult to expose Faulkner own position as ahistorical.<sup>364</sup> I agree with the excellent Cuban film critic Gilberto Perez on this count:

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<sup>361</sup> Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen: Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York: Simon & Schuster p. 46.

<sup>362</sup> Claes Entzenberg in a lecture delivered at Uppsala University March. 5<sup>th</sup> 2009.

<sup>363</sup> Christopher Faulkner (1986) *The Social Cinema of Jean Renoir*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. pp. 3-16.

<sup>364</sup> Perhaps we should take this as an indication that it is rather more meaningful to speak of *histories* than *History*? In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when that most eminently empirical historian Leopold Von Ranke invented the footnote and professional historical scholarship was established, there was a widely circulated and variously attributed saying among those who began to see themselves as historians, distinctly different from other scholars: *Die Geschichte sind ein Spiegel*. This is untranslatable. Ignore the implication of the past mirroring the present and note the plural form. In English it would read: *History [actually histories or stories] are a mirror*. I am indebted to historian Mats Persson for pointing out the existence of this proverb and explaining its untranslatable meaning.

[I]t must also be recognized that, no less than an emphasis on individual creation, an emphasis on historical circumstance is a bourgeois way of thinking. Faulkner appears to believe that the idea of wrenching the artist from history has reigned unbrokenly since the Renaissance, but Sarris (Following the American New Critics in this respect) was reacting against a historicism that had long been the dominant critical approach. Faulkner's charge of ahistoricism is itself unhistorical.<sup>365</sup>

The riddle of ahistorical history runs deep in any kind of historical writing that has its core tangible entities or works. When film historian Kenneth M. Cameron pondered the question whether or not films and history are antithetical, what he had in mind was the factual fidelity of historical fiction films.<sup>366</sup> I believe this exact same question is at once more interesting and more pressing when posed in connection with the practice of film historical scholarship. The historian's field of study in the widest, yet most basic sense of the term, is *the human past*. The one feature which defines the past is, quite obviously, that it is *not available* in the present. What is available to the historian are *sources* in the *historian's* present, physical traces of the past from which the historian can illuminate fragments of the past and fashion a *historical interpretation* that detail why and how things happened as they did. I argue that the history of art; film and literature are, in one respect, fundamentally different from conventional history. The painting, the novel or the film; what, we for want of better generic term, may designate as the *text* - is a different *kind* of source compared to those of the conventional historian, in the sense that the film is *not simply* a

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<sup>365</sup> Gilberto Perez (2000[1998]) *The Material Ghost: Films and Their Medium*. Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press. p. 5.

Faulkner's perspective is indicative of the fact that most film scholars are virtually ignorant about the visual arts and their history. To be snide, the composite of the great artist for most film scholars is not far away from the wildly anachronistic mental image of Michelangelo standing at his easel, painting seascapes and wearing a b ret. It is a curious fact that many of the scholars who reject auteurism outright also have very romantic views on the traditional arts that are not in any way empirically founded. A common complaint is that film production is a business, implying perhaps that the traditional arts are somehow devoid of economic conditions and considerations. For the novelist, such a view may have some validity because paper and ink are cheap, but the artists of earlier eras invariably depended on wealthy patrons.

By the same token, German art historian Klaus Honnef points out that the contemporary artist finds himself locked in a commercial triangle consisting of artist, museums and private collectors. "[Since the mid-fifties] the decision whether artists will find international renown, or must content themselves with a lesser reputation, has been made in the galleries and museums of Manhattan." Klaus Honnef (2006) *Pop Art*. K ln: Taschen Verlag p. 6.

It is noteworthy that Honnef leaves the art critic out of the equation. Although art critic Lawrence Alloway defended pop art, the practical power of the art critic has been on the wane ever since Greenberg's militant elitism was rendered obsolete. It could be argued that film criticism replaced it and was thrust to the forefront of aesthetic debates. For a concise analysis of the declining relevance of art criticism, see for example: James Elkins (2003) *What Happened to Art Criticism?* Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.

<sup>366</sup> Kenneth M. Cameron (1997) *America on Film: Hollywood and American History*. New York: Continuum Press. p. 7.

residue of other social actions in bygone days that speak to us about happened in past and serve as raw material for an interpretation of what took place in the past. On the contrary, the work or text typically exists as a coherent meaningful entity that may, perhaps even must, be experienced directly in the *present*. Still, this is not in any way a sufficient reason to claim that contextual film history is unnecessary. There is, no doubt a strong argument for the position that the contextual focus of most film historians has been unnecessarily narrow and that film historians have made far too little use of relevant non-filmic evidence compared to other “non-hyphenated” historians.

If Sarris must be classified as a historian, as he has indeed always perceived himself, we might designate him a *critical historian*. This description underlines the ultimate goals of his research—to *evaluate* films within the matrix of directorial careers, rather than simply describe production processes of singular films or draw extensively on sociological reception theory, for example. One must therefore stress that Sarris's outlook on the movie past is that of a film critic rather than that of a historian who simply happens to write about film. Sarris's ideas of context, in contrast to those of the more empirically-minded historian, are squarely centred around the relationship between himself and the films he sees. This relationship, however narrow, *is* viewed historically by Sarris, or perhaps we can limit the idea of history somewhat and rather say that it is viewed biographically or even *autobiographically*—the biography of course being that most personal and subjective of all micro-historical genres:

Why then, do I persist in perceiving both myself and the film medium in the Hericlitian flux of history? I suppose because I am a revisionist in the most restless sense of constantly revising myself. Consequently, every movie I have ever seen keeps swirling and shifting in ever-changing contexts. On the whole, movies tend to be more complex than profound, but that makes them all the more difficult to pin down, describe and categorize for all time. What is particularly fascinating is how the same movie can keep changing its ideological coloration over the years. In our time, for example, many movies once dismissed as shopgirl fantasies have been rediscovered as feminist parables.<sup>367</sup>

It could be argued that this view is too limited to be called genuine film history, focusing as it does on the relationship between critic and film. But it is also very fluid and relativistic, emphasising as it does a belief in criticism as a restless, continuous activity. By current standards of film history, it is arguably true that Sarris places too little emphasis on the last semantic joint of the term *film history*, understood as the temporal situations that the films grow out of—too much on

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<sup>367</sup> Andrew Sarris (1978) *Politics and Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press. p. 3-4.

the films in their projected present tense. This is, and shall remain, the principle dilemma of film history vis-a-vis film criticism. While films as projected aesthetic objects in the metaphorical present, in the most basic, purely sensory rather than artistic meaning of the term, admittedly at the very least must claim a *primus inter pares* position among the film historian's sources, and lay great claims to a status as his primary concern, it is also, on the other hand, quite legitimately the *sole* focus of a historian-as-retrospective critic like Sarris, and I cannot see any need for him to apologize for this.

Now that Sarris's relationship with newer academic trends in film history has been presented, we are ready to deal with Sarris's theoretical justification for his method:

The ranking of directors is based on total rather than occasional achievement. But why rank directors at all? Why all the categories and lists and assorted drudgeries? One reason is to establish a system of priorities for the film student. Another is the absence of the most elementary academic tradition in the cinema. The drudgeries in the other older arts are performed by professional drudges. Film scholarship remains largely an amateur undertaking. In America, especially, the film historian must double as a drudge. The rankings, categories and lists establish first of all the existence of my subject and my attitude towards it.<sup>368</sup>

Sarris conceived of his rankings as an inverted pyramid, because he wanted to get away from what he calls the pyramid fallacy of older film historians:

The chronological division of the cinema as one entity tends to perpetuate what may be called the pyramid fallacy of many film historians. This fallacy consists of viewing the history of cinema as a process by which approved artisans have deposited their slabs of celluloid on a single pyramid rising ultimately to a single apex, be it realism, Humanism, Marxism, Journalism, Abstractionism, or even Eroticism. Directors are valued primarily for their contributions to the evolution of a Utopian cinema efficiently adjusted to a Utopian Society. Once a formal contribution has been made, subsequent refinements are downgraded. In this system, stylists are the drones of the cinema.<sup>369</sup>

Note here that Sarris's conception of critical or aesthetic film history depends on what he has termed "a pleasurable response to the very act of moviegoing"<sup>370</sup> as a minimum condition for its motivation. This is characteristic of the critic-as-historian, because it points to an inevitable dual role in aesthetic film history. So it must be, because the field of aesthetics and the aesthetic

<sup>368</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996 [1968]) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. New York: DaCapo Press. p. 27.

<sup>369</sup> Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen: Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York: Simon & Schuster p. 25.

<sup>370</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996[1968]) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions* New York: DaCapo Press pp. 19-20.

experience both deal directly with sensory data and sensory experience. This has been the case ever since Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten introduced the philosophical term in the 1750s with his book, *Aesthetica*. As of today, no English translation has been made available. It is a work that, in the words of Norwegian art historian and aesthetician Magne Malmanger, “is as widely known as it is rarely read.”<sup>371</sup> Using Baumgarten's universally accepted definition of the aesthetic in a literal and slightly pedantic way, we might say that for Sarris, the strictly artistic aspect of his rankings grows out of and is predetermined by the aesthetic aspect—this being, quite simply, his direct process of actually watching the many singular films as they unfold in the illuminated darkness. In a 1991 interview, Sarris commented:

Look, I'm a historian. I am not a prophet. And I am not an activist or a revolutionary. I don't want to change movies. In fact, if I wanted to change movies, I'd go out and make them. But I have never had the slightest desire to make movies, or even to write them or write stories for them, so I just sit in my bemused way and look.<sup>372</sup>

*Looking* is the first principle of any aesthetic criticism apart from literature or music, whether historically inflected or not. Sarris's great achievement in this context was introducing concepts of style and sequence, the typical concerns of classical art history, to film studies. Thanks to the concept of *mise-en-scène*, he was able to do this on the specific terms dictated by the film medium.<sup>373</sup>

Watching a large body of films organized according to directors thus eventually leads Sarris to a critical, artistically weighted evaluation of a larger totality which opened the door to the widest possible practice of cross-referencing, not only of directors, but collaborators—technicians and performers from film to film. Here is where Sarris's text, despite not really venturing outside the confines of personal critique, was a big advance on earlier works in film history. It constituted a revision of the masterpiece approach which was quite radical for its time, even if it was not an actual rejection of it:

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<sup>371</sup> Magne Malmanger (2000) *Kunsten og Det Skjønne: Vesterlandsk Estetikk og Kunstteori Fra Homer Til Hegel*. Oslo: Aschehoug. p. 7.

<sup>372</sup> Andrew Sarris quoted in George Hickenlooper (1991) *Reel Conversations: Candid Interviews with Film's Foremost Directors and Critics*. New York: A Citadel Press Book. pp. 3-16.

<sup>373</sup> It must be pointed out that when ideas of film style began emerging in the 1950's and 1960's, art history (quite ironically) more or less abandoned the questions of style and sequence, turning instead to iconographic studies, semiotics and other applications of high theory. Today the field of art history is extremely diverse in terms of theories and methods ( more so than film studies), but the tide has not yet turned.

Even though most movies are only marginally concerned with the art of the cinema, the notion of quality is difficult to grasp apart from the context of quantity. Comprehension becomes a function of comprehensiveness. As more movies are seen, more cross-references are assembled. Fractional responsibilities are more precisely defined; personal signatures more clearly discerned.<sup>374</sup>

It is clear that Sarris thought that earlier film scholars had neglected this most basic of critical acts because of undue *a priori* prejudices: “To put it bluntly, many alleged authorities on film disguise their ignorance of American cinema as a form of intellectual superiority.”<sup>375</sup> These writers had written, according to Sarris, “self-proclaimed film histories in which old newspaper clippings are bound together with sociological glue”.<sup>376</sup>

To the extent that the cinema is a creature of scientific spirit, it has inherited expectations of infinite development and improvement. It is as if this machine art were designed to transcend the vagaries of human inspiration. A Shakespeare may appear once in a millennium, but the express train of the twentieth century cannot wait a century or even a decade for the world to be remade from the moonbeams of a movie projector. Too much was expected of the medium and too little was demanded of its scholars. The extravagant rhetoric of disillusionment obscured the incredibly perfunctory attention given to thousands upon thousands of movies. Therefore, the first task of a theory of film history is to establish the existence of these thousands of movies as a meaningful condition of the medium.<sup>377</sup>

But who were these previous scholars against whom Sarris reacts—those of whom he felt too little was demanded? It is of course all those sociologically inclined critics he takes to the cleaners, once again. Sarris mentions Lewis Jacobs, John Grierson, Siegfried Kracauer, Paul Rotha, Richard Griffith, Jay Leyda, Georges Sadoul *et. al.* as belonging to an older, sociological tradition of film scholarship.

Sarris subsumes them collectively under the heading “forest critics”. For Sarris, these writers usually hailed the “big subject” and the foreign film, and clustered the defining majority, the collective idea of movies, around an idea of film as a social mode of communication and a mass medium rather than individual films as artworks and their directors as artists:

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<sup>374</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996 [1968]) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions*. New York: DaCapo Press p. 15.

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.* p. 17.

<sup>376</sup> Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen: Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York: Simon & Schuster p. 64.

<sup>377</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996 [1968.]) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. New York: DaCapo Press. p. 19.



The trouble up to now has not been seeing the trees for the forest. But why should anyone look at thousands of trees if the forest itself is deemed aesthetically objectionable? Of course, the forest to which I refer is called Hollywood, a pejorative catchword for vulgar illusionism. Hollywood is a foresty world rather than a treesy world. It connotes conformity rather than diversity, repetition rather than variation. The condescending forest critic confirms his preconceptions by identifying those elements Hollywood movies have in common. [...] Hence the incessant carping on Hollywood “clichés”: *Boy Meets Girl*, *The Happy Ending*, *The Noble Sacrifice*, *The Sanctity of Marriage*, *The Gangster Gets His Just Deserts*, *The Cowboy Outdraws The Villain*, *Boy And Girl Feel Song Coming On*.<sup>378</sup>

Sarris’s point is not to ignore that Hollywood films have been and are shaped by front-office interventions, censorship and formal conventions, above all those pertaining to genres. But Sarris wants to redirect attention to the individual beauties that, after all, emerged through the maze of conventions in the old Hollywood movies, because, he insists, the forest critics never championed individuality for its own sake, but on the contrary celebrated another, different ideal for films to conform to:

Every movie would deal Realistically with a Problem in Adult Terms or Employ the Materials of The Medium in a Creative Manner. Thus the goals of forest criticism are ultimately impersonal. [...] The principle of the forest has been upheld at the expense of the topmost trees, and this is indeed the supreme irony of forest criticism. Far from welcoming diversity, the forest critic seeks a new uniformity.<sup>379</sup>

Genres are of course an important factor in the conformity that the forest critics wanted to replace. Significantly in this context, the United States has never been the land of film movements. In Sarris’s formulation, genres are something to work against and employ, conditions for creation rather than slavish ideal forms for the filmmaker to adhere to. Genres took care of audience expectations of a more functional cinema than the post-classical period from the 1960s onwards, while the auteur, in Sarris’s formulation of his theory, provided something extra. Once again, *mise-en-scène* is the key identifying factor. Since he also knew that art-house films have their own conventions, Sarris would frequently insist on the continuities between the popular and the artistically prestigious, often preferring the latter. As he said elsewhere:

Genres and *mise-en-scène*. Are these the clues to my deepest concerns? It would seem that my strongest instincts are Christian rather than Marxist and that I believe more in personal redemption than social revolution and therefore I am more moved more by the majestic camera-movements my Mizoguchi and Ophüls than the

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<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.* p. 21

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.* p. 22

meteoric montage of Eisenstein and Resnais. The ascending and descending staircases of Hitchcock are more meaningful than all the Odessa Steps.<sup>380</sup>

It could be said with justification that Sarris's historical and critical approach to American film pays too little attention to genres, even if, for instance, it had been vital to resurrect the Western in order to redefine the critical stature of John Ford and place him in his rightful place in the pantheon. Sarris still proved important in establishing a new and more positive perspective on genre, however. Unquestionably influenced by Sarris's unabashedly aesthetic and evaluative approach, but subtly reversing it, genre theorist Stanley J. Solomon would claim less than a decade after the publication of *The American Cinema*:

The theory I advocate in this Introduction and will be developing throughout the following chapters starts with the view that the truly typical elements of genre, both visual and dramatic, are not necessarily the most obvious props and devices shared by bad films and television parodies. Secondly, and basic to the apprehension of qualitative variations – whatever these typical elements may be, they are not trite, repetitive patterns stored in film studio libraries or file cabinets, but artistic insights stored in the minds of such filmmakers as Alfred Hitchcock and John Ford.<sup>381</sup>

In Solomon's text, there remains a personal and idiosyncratic evaluative orientation and an auteurist bias which is offset by a discursive shift towards the interlocking textual systems that shape genre movies rather than the individual filmmaker. Such a proposition, postulating the aesthetic value of genres, must be counted as a marked advance in film scholarship, and would have been almost unthinkable without Sarris's example. Sarris had not rescued the genre *per se* from aesthetic oblivion, but the *genre directors* and the films they made.

This takes us quite close to an alternative, non-auteurist history of the classic Hollywood system championed by Thomas Schatz. Borrowing a phrase from André Bazin, Schatz wants to celebrate not the individual, heroic directors of Sarris's book, but rather *The Genius of the System*. Schatz has no high regard for auteur theory, and he quotes the vulnerable conclusion of Sarris's introduction in *The American Cinema* to vindicate his rejection of it:

Sarris developed a simplistic theory of his own, celebrating the director as the sole purveyor of Film Art in an industry overrun by hacks and profitmongers. The closing words of his introduction said it all: "He [the

<sup>380</sup> Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen: Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York: Simon And Schuster. p. 61.

<sup>381</sup> Stanley J. Solomon (1976) *Beyond Formula: American Film Genres*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. pp. 1-2.

director] would not be worth bothering with if he were not capable now and then of sublimity of expression almost miraculously extracted from his money-oriented environment.<sup>382</sup>

Schatz continues: “Auteurism itself would not be worth bothering with had it not been so influential, effectively stalling film criticism and film history in a prolonged stage of adolescent romanticism.”<sup>383</sup> True, Sarris’s theory is reductive, but such is the nature of all theories, and Schatz clearly has some romantic heroes of his own—production executives like Louis B. Mayer, David O. Selznick and Irving Thalberg. Schatz is reasonable when arguing a case for creative control which belonged not with the director, but with the producers who oversaw their most consistent films. Such allowances as script control, script development and final say in casting within the studio system afforded to auteurs like Hitchcock and Hawks were, as Schatz quite rightly claims, a function of their roles as producers rather than directors. But there is no evidence in the cases of Hawks, Hitchcock, or even the later Robert Aldrich (who purchased his own studio, Aldrich Studios [1967-1973] ) of a conflict between the films they made for other producers and the kind of films they *wanted* to make. They became producers for commercial rather than artistic reasons. It is probably just as telling that someone like screenwriter Billy Wilder chose to become a director only to protect his scripts.<sup>384</sup>

There are cases to be made for the creative roles of producers, but what, after all, is Selznick's greatest triumph? I am sure he himself thought that it was that epitome of middlebrow kitsch, *Gone with the Wind* (1939, Victor Fleming) but by far his greatest achievement is not even so much the movie *Rebecca* (1940) itself, but the very contract that brought Hitchcock to Hollywood and bolstered the latter's personal style and technique with the greater resources afforded by the American film industry. A very distant second for Selznick was the agonizing and ecstatic effort to make a star out of his muse, lover and finally wife, the ravishingly beautiful Jennifer Jones. Thus Selznick proved, despite the hard-nosed reputations that executives cultivate about themselves, that auteur critics are apparently not the only romantics involved with film.

If Sarris has ever written, or even inferred, what Schatz claims of him, that the director is the sole purveyor of film art, I have yet to find it in any of his writings. What Sarris has written is this:

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<sup>382</sup> Thomas Schatz (1996) [1989] *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*. New York: An Owl Book. New York: Henry Holt & Company. p. 5.

<sup>383</sup> *Loc. Cit.*

<sup>384</sup> Philip Kemp “Billy Wilder”, Andrew Sarris (ed.) (1998) *The St. James Film Directors Encyclopedia*. Detroit: Invisible Ink Press. pp. 560-564. The same could probably be said for Preston Sturges (the first writer-director in Hollywood) and the *Bête noire* of the auteur theory, John Huston.

But a movie is a movie, and if by chance Robert Z. Leonard should reign over a respectable production like *Pride and Prejudice*, its merits are found elsewhere than in the director's personality, let us say in Jane Austen, Aldous Huxley, Laurence Olivier, Greer Garson and a certain tradition of gentility at Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer. [...] Studio domination in the thirties and forties was the rule rather than the exception, and few directors had the right of final cut. Educated Americans were brought up on the jaundiced Hollywood chronicles of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Nathaniel West, John Dos Passos, Ring Lardner and John O'Hara. The vulgar but vital producer-entrepreneur was the sun king in this saga, and sensitive literary types were left out in the shade. In retrospect, however, the studio system victimized the screenwriter more than the director. It was not merely a question of too many scribes spoiling the script, although most studios deliberately assigned more than one writer to eliminate personal idiosyncrasies, whereas the director almost invariably received sole credit for his direction regardless of the studio influences behind the scenes. This symbol of authority was not entirely lacking in substance even in Hollywood, or perhaps especially in Hollywood, where the intangibles of prestige loom large.<sup>385</sup>

The case Sarris makes for the auteur theory and film directors is actually rather more limited than Schatz makes it seem:

The purity of personal expression is a myth of the textbooks. The camera is so efficient a manufacturer of "poetic" images that even a well-trained chimpanzee can pass as a "film poet." For all its viciousness and vulgarity, the Hollywood system imposed a useful discipline on its directors. The limited talents of a Gregory La Cava could be focused on an exquisite department-store-window whimsy involving Claudette Colbert and a family of mannequins. The genre expectations of *She Married Her Boss* took care of the rest of the movie, but in those few moments in the department store window, the La Cava touch was immortalized as a figure of style.<sup>386</sup>

The point is that Sarris is more cautious on behalf of the director and more aware of the production context of movies than his detractors make out. Despite his reasonable hypothesis and thorough documentation on the subject, I am not convinced by Schatz that the director, even in the most repressive Hollywood context, has a serious rival. Certainly, Pauline Kael did not think so either, for all her emphasis on film as a collaborative art and her canonization of Herman J. Mankiewicz.

I have made the point that Sarris is a critical film historian rather than a strictly empirical one, but in one respect his work is concurrent with current trends in properly non-filmic historical scholarship, which has become more sensitive to theory and more involved in synthesizing its

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<sup>385</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996) [1968] *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. New York: DaCapo Press. p. 30.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.* p. 32.

findings in overarching schemes.<sup>387</sup> What is worth noting is that contemporary historians outside film studies tend to be more open about their own positions than their predecessors. Historian Thomas L. Haskell insists that the writing of history depends on explanatory schemes which should not be implicit.<sup>388</sup> Sarris's formulation of auteur theory is exactly such an explanatory scheme, even if it is almost embarrassingly weak as a theory.

The subject of history in general is, like film studies, inevitably caught in an often painful process of continual renewal, but if a core difference is to be noted between history and criticism, we might say that history is determined by research and attempts to illuminate fragments of the past in a way that strives to go beyond personal reflections and at least be *intersubjective*, without ever achieving *objectivity*, if by the term “objectivity” one means a kind of valueless “neutrality”:

There is no such thing as objective film history. Each historian weights his presentation by the arrangement of chapters, the length of his paragraphs, the tone of his sentences, the choice of words. The historian's categories are usually implicit in his text, but he usually strives to preserve a spurious facade of “objectivity” by not seeming to have strong opinions. I choose to make the categories explicit for the convenience of my readers. Also, I feel that marginal distinctions are the most important distinctions a critic can make. They indicate a critical sensibility at work over the entire expanse of cinema, not just in the currently fashionable sectors.<sup>389</sup>

Just how personal and subjective the entire project *The American Cinema* was for Sarris is indicated by the fact that its time frame almost perfectly corresponds with his own lifetime. But there is evidence that Sarris, contrary to the preceding quotation, actually believed that film history can at least attempt to be objective, and can in fact attain a status that, to put the matter in relative terms, is less subjective than the project he himself attempted. In fact, his quite damning piece on Fred Zinnemann can only be seen this light. After all, Sarris claims that “Zinnemann's inclusion in any objective film history is mandatory.”<sup>390</sup>

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<sup>387</sup> Probably the most conspicuous trend in historical scholarship for the past two decades, so-called *Global History*, is an embodiment of this wider and more speculative outlook. Andre Gunder Frank's *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (1998) Berkeley: University of California Press, and David Landes's *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor* (1998) New York: W.W. Norton & Company are two relatively recent, major works of the genre, where the authors argue diametrically opposed hypotheses and draw diametrically opposed conclusions.

<sup>388</sup> Thomas L. Haskell (1998) *Objectivity is not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press. p. 2.

<sup>389</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996 [1968]) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. New York: DaCapo Press. p. 17.

<sup>390</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996[1968]) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions*. New York: DaCapo Press. p. 169.

This insight about “objective” film history is perhaps strange. Although he apparently sees it as theoretically feasible, this is certainly not Sarris's *metièr*. His own conception of film history can be characterized as either bold or reckless, and both descriptions are probably justified.

Basing his approach on the hypothetical notion of the auteur, Sarris’s synthesizing mode of history seems perhaps closest in spirit to the speculative thinker Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, though Sarris himself may well deny any such analogy:

A history which aspires to traverse long periods of time, or to be universal, must indeed forgo the attempt to give individual representations of the past as it actually existed. It must foreshorten its pictures by abstractions, and this includes not merely the omission of events and deeds, but whatever is involved in the fact that Thought, is, after all, the most trenchant epitomist. A battle, a great victory, a siege, no longer maintains its original proportions but is put off with a bare mention.<sup>391</sup>

Consider, in the light of Hegel's quotation, how Sarris can write of(f) the long-forgotten director Jack Garfein:

One of the last and least of Kazan's imitators, Garfein attracted some attention with his first film, then dispelled any incipient hopes with his second. His style, such as it is, consists of little more than contrived hysteria. Until anger is considered an adequate substitute for talent, Garfein's status will remain dubious.<sup>392</sup>

The Icelandic philosopher Stèfan Snævarr has characterized Hegel as a romantic rationalist<sup>393</sup>, a description that perhaps can be applied to Sarris with equal justification.

It is clear that Sarris sees film history essentially as a study of texts to unearth traces of dominant personalities who come to the fore through a heuristic deep structure in the correlation between the director and his films. As such, Sarris's perspective is unapologetically internalistic: “The thousands of sound films in the English language exist for their own sake and under their own conditions. They constitute their own history, be it sublime or ridiculous, or, as is more likely, a mixture of both.”<sup>394</sup> This is clearly a textual idea, but the boundaries between text and context have blurred in recent years. A notion of not just films but also the entire realm of culture as a text has taken root in

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<sup>391</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1991) *The Philosophy of History*. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books. p. 5. Translated by J. Sibree.

<sup>392</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996[1968]) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. New York: DaCapo Press p. 259.

<sup>393</sup> Stèfan Snævarr (2008) *Kunstfilosofi: En Kritisk Innføring*. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget. "Hegel og Rasjonalismen" pp. 79-92.

<sup>394</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996) (1968) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. New York: DaCapo Press. p. 25.

some segments of film studies that are not particularly historically inclined. As Jeffrey Geiger and R.L. Rutsky point out: “A number of theorists have argued that the entire realm of culture can itself be seen as a text, or a set of texts—to be read and interpreted.”<sup>395</sup>

The more or less purely textual basis of Sarris's approach nevertheless places him in a precarious position as a historian and pegs him as a slightly decadent aesthete rather than a dispassionate historian. This was a necessary corrective to the critics and historians who did not really pay attention to what was on the screen: “Film history is both films *in* history and the history of films. The forest critics tend to emphasize the former at the expense of the second.”<sup>396</sup> Sarris, in other words, did not partake in the still-common belief that Siegfried Kracauer, arguably the most famous of the “forest critics,” was necessarily a superior *film historian* simply because he “was more interested in Hitler than in *Caligari*.”<sup>397</sup>

For Sarris, the cinema past is a vast repertoire of aesthetic experiences which not only affords but *demand*s passionate personal involvement. His preference for the classical cinema and expertise on old films is based on a curious half-and-half mix of misty-eyed nostalgia and hardnosed pragmatism:

Film history constitutes a very important part of my autobiography. Fortunately, the resources of archives, television, museums and revival houses make it possible to reappraise nostalgic memories in the clear, cold light of retrospection. Old movies come out of their historical contexts, but they must be judged ultimately in the realm of now.<sup>398</sup>

This is the aesthetic critic dealing with the past through the eyes of the present, without any conscious attempt to recreate the original viewing situation by sympathetically judging the film on its own historical terms. Sarris is not as consistently “presentist” throughout his criticism as this passage would indicate, but for some scholars, judging the past in terms of the present is a risky business which tends to lead astray. The auteur critics in general could also be accused of the reverse fallacy, judging the present in terms of the past.

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<sup>395</sup> Jeffrey Geiger & R.L. Rutsky (2005) *Film Analysis: A Norton Reader*. W.W Norton & Company: Introduction p. 27. Emphasis in original text.

<sup>396</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996 [1968]) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. New York: DaCapo Press. pp. 24-25.

<sup>397</sup> Andrew Sarris (1970) *Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema 1955-1969*. New York: Simon & Schuster. p. 14. Sarris is referring to Siegfried Kracauer's most famous book: *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*. (1947) Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

<sup>398</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996 [1968]) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. New York: DaCapo Press. p. 25.

Conservative, or rather orthodox, historians would prefer to call this simply criticism. Historian Herbert Butterfield is extremely negatively inclined towards such enterprises: “The study of the past, with one eye, so to speak, upon the present, is the source of all sins and sophistries in history. [...] It is the essence of what we mean by unhistorical.”<sup>399</sup>

Even so, I wish to make a limited case for Sarris as a critical historian, and feel compelled to point out that many modern historians pride themselves on the diametrically opposed attitude to the one outlined by Butterfield; this is, in fact, the only plausible way to understand Benedetto Croce's celebrated *bon mot*: *All history is contemporary history*.<sup>400</sup> I take this puzzling formulation not to mean that all history is *about* the present in any direct sense, but rather that accounts of the past must have some *relevance* in the present tense in which they are written and read. This, I think, is precisely what motivated Sarris.

So what, in the final analysis, is Sarris's ultimate standing as a critical film historian? I have already pointed out that he introduced the concerns of classical art history to film scholarship. He performed the essential primary function of writing an aesthetically oriented, critically opinionated and subversive film history from a critic's perspective, by using the examples of the older arts as his simile. Honing in on style as one of very first film historians by simply seeing so many more films than his predecessors, he laid an important groundwork. Margaret Finch writes the following about style in art history in a way which finds its perfect cinematic analogy in Sarris's writing:

Style may be defined as those distinctive characteristics that enable an observer to link an artwork with other works. There are fundamentally two types of style: these are an individual personal style, and the style common to a group of artists. In other words, the distinctive traits in a work of art enable the observer to link an artwork with other works by the same artist or with other works by a different artist.<sup>401</sup>

Sarris may be seen as naive for focusing on personal style, on what John Alsberg has termed *stylus*<sup>402</sup>, in collectively made, commercial and popular movies, but at least he triggered an awareness about not only how movies can be works of art, but also how they look and how they convey unified themes and meanings that reflect their makers. When Sarris looked back on his long career as an auteurist in 1977, he observed:

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<sup>399</sup> Herbert Butterfield quoted in Edward Hallett Carr (1981) [1961] *What is History?* Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books. p. 41.

<sup>400</sup> Arthur C. Danto (1965) *Analytical Philosophy of History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 130.

<sup>401</sup> Margaret Finch (1974) *Style in Art History: An Introduction to Theories of Style and Sequence*. Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press. p. 1.

<sup>402</sup> John Alsberg (1983) *Modern Art and its Enigma: Art Theories from 1800 to 1950*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson. pp. 62-76.



After years on the front lines, my own attitude to the auteurist controversy may be summed up by the defiant words sung by the late Edith Piaf: “*Non, non je ne regrette rien.*” Still, if had to do it all over again, I would reformulate the auteur theory with a greater emphasis on the tantalizing mysteries of style than on the romantic agonies of the artists.<sup>403</sup>

In a sense, others have taken up that mantle. Swedish film scholar Per Persson has remarked:

“Research on specific directors and filmmakers are still in *Schwung*, but they always focus on social, economical and historical parameters, rather than the biography of the actual filmmaker.<sup>404</sup>”

The work, however, of fostering stylistic awareness for audiences and film historians, is not yet done. The structural auteurists that followed in Sarris’s wake more or less left style out of the equation, erecting instead massive theoretical structures dedicated to *themes*, that other great Sarrisian concern. “A vision of the world”, which the pantheon directors supposedly projected according to Sarris, must of course be understood largely in terms of themes. Where I feel the structural auteurists that followed in his wake went wrong was in focusing on the most questionable aspect of Sarris’s thinking. I have in mind what we may call the residue of interior meaning:

The auteur theory is not so much a theory as an attitude. A table of values that converts film history into directorial biography. The auteur critic is obsessed with the wholeness of art and the artist. The parts, however entertaining individually, must cohere meaningfully.<sup>405</sup>

But there is no binding reason why they should cohere meaningfully, and we must raise the question as to whether such meaningful coherence is inherent or superimposed by the critic. However, as I have indicated, an awareness of cinematic style in Anglo-American criticism could be said to have begun with Sarris, and it is it is here his importance has yet to be played out. Sarris’s methodological individualism is not beyond criticism and cannot be claimed to be historically sophisticated in an academic sense, but it is nevertheless preferable to the sociocentric outlook he rebelled against—which is reductive not only of film history but history itself, reducing Clio, the

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<sup>403</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996 [1968]) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. New York: DaCapo Press. p. 272

<sup>404</sup> Per Persson (2000) *Understanding Cinema: Constructivism and Spectator Psychology*. Stockholm: PhD. Diss.. Stockholm University. p. 4.

1. <sup>405</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996[1968]) *The American Cinema Directors and Directions*. New York: DaCapo Press p. 30

proud muse of history, to the subservient handmaiden of sociology, to paraphrase the Swedish historian Rolf Torstendahl.<sup>406</sup>

Faced with the question of what is underrepresented in film historical scholarship today, there is a strong case to be made not for a new kind of sociologically inclined film history, (a tradition which has grown immensely for the last generation or so since the publication of Garth S. Jowett's in many ways hugely impressive book *Film – The Democratic Art*<sup>407</sup>), but on the contrary for the position that the intersection between style and technology in film history is the aspect of film scholarship which is most dimly understood, and here the literature is still almost embarrassingly thin. The number of empirical histories of film style can, with little exaggeration, be counted on the fingers of one hand.<sup>408</sup>

Barry Salt, a pioneer of so called statistical *mise-en-scène* analysis, pays homage to Sarris and his art- and artist-centred approach, even while faulting it for being too impressionistic and too much the work of a critic: “The auteur theory is basically an evaluative theory having implicit subsidiary analytical and interpretive components that are only demonstrated in practice.”<sup>409</sup> This *practice*, however personal in complexion, was essential to film studies, and few have praised it so movingly as David Bordwell did from the perspective of 2001:

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<sup>406</sup> Rolf Torstendahl (1966) *Historia Som Vetenskap – Introduktion Till Historieforskningen*. Stockholm: Förlaget Natur och Kultur. pp. 117-133.

<sup>407</sup> Garth Jowett (1976) *Film – The Democratic Art: A Social History of American Film*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company. Despite its title, this book is concerned not with the art of the cinema, but rather its sociology and its social history.

<sup>408</sup> Of those worth noting apart from Barry Salt's groundbreaking work, four quite different works stand out from the pack:

Victor F. Perkins (1972) *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies*. New York: Penguin Books

Paul Schrader (1972) *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

David Bordwell, Steiger, Janet & Thompson, Kristin (1985) *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. London, Routledge.

David Bordwell (1997) *On The History of Film Style*. Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press.

Of the three, Perkins's book (the work of a *Movie-* critic) is clearly the one most steeped in the auteurist tradition. Schrader's book is also clearly marked by the influence of auteurism. Schrader began his career as a critic and became known as a *Paulette* after Kael helped him get in to UCLA Film School despite him lacking the formal qualifications. It is not particularly perverse, I think, to argue that Schrader's career as a director during the last fifteen years has yielded richer and far more interesting films than that of Martin Scorsese in the same period, his frequent and much lauded collaborator.

<sup>409</sup> Barry Salt (1992[1983]) *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis*. London: Starword Revised and Expanded Second Edition p. 11.

For those of us who learned so much from Sarris, there remains much to do. [...] “The auteurs,” Sarris remarked over thirty years ago, “are still fighting an uphill battle to make movie audiences conscious of style.” *La lutte continue*, as the French used to say.<sup>410</sup>

All in all, Sarris succeeded extraordinarily well in his actually quite modest aim of leading us out of the forest and into the trees. His advice for film scholars is still sound and his claims for the theory he promulgated modest:

The film scholar should see as much as possible and write about as much as possible. To avoid passing judgement on a film because of lack of sympathy is an act of intellectual arrogance. Nothing should be beneath criticism or contempt. I take the transcendental view of the role of the critic. He must aspire to totality even though he knows he will never attain it. The transcendental view disposes of the either/or tone of many opponents of the auteur theory. This tone suggests that the critic must make an irrevocable choice between the cinema of directors and the cinema of actors, or between a cinema of directors and a cinema of genres, or between a cinema of directors and the cinema of social themes and so on. The transcendental view of the auteur theory considers itself the first step rather than the last stop in the total history of the cinema. Eventually, we must talk about everything if there is enough time and space and printer's ink.<sup>411</sup>

We cannot really blame Sarris' formulation of the auteur theory for having been too effective or for having obscured other aspects of film history. To blame him for all those auteur monographs that others have since written, which according to many do pass muster as film histories, is as absurd as blaming him for all those awful first-year term papers which ride on viciously circular premises: “I love Tim Burton's films so his films must be art. His films are art so he must be an artist/auteur.”<sup>412</sup> Auteur-centred studies was never meant by Sarris to be the last word on film scholarship, and there are indications that his views on it have evolved over the years. When he attended a conference in 1975, he noted about William Rothman's exegesis on Hawksian symbolism: “I was very stimulated by Rothman's paper. It was audaciously and uncompromisingly auteurist in a way that I am not so much any more.”<sup>413</sup> Few of us believe today that uncovering

<sup>410</sup> David Bordwell “Sarris and the Search for Style”. Emanuel Levy (ed.) (2001) *Citizen Sarris: Essays in Honor of Andrew Sarris*. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press. pp.165-173.

<sup>411</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996) [1968] *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. New York: DaCapo Press. p.34.

<sup>412</sup> I speak from personal experience. The ultimate outcome of my first year in college was a very undistinguished auteur-driven paper on Sam Peckinpah, one of Pauline Kael's pet directors. At the time I responded deeply to the muscular technical accomplishment and artistry of *The Wild Bunch* but recent re-viewing of the film has made me more acutely aware of that film's rather uneasy mixture of romanticism and nihilism. The film must still be admired as one of the few truly groundbreaking fountainhead films of *The New Hollywood Cinema*, but I cannot help but regard the film with a slight, (if deeply ambivalent) distaste that partly obscures its awesome merits.

<sup>413</sup> Andrew Sarris (1978) *Politics and Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press. p. 156.

interior meaning is a condition or goal for film criticism, but without Sarris's example, it is difficult to imagine that the current batch of film scholars grounded in historical methods would have had a tradition in film scholarship to modify or reject at all. Film studies has its own traditions and its own internal history, and without the idea that popular films could be art and their directors artists, it is difficult to see where the hypothetical and counterfactual impulse for film history would have come from.

So much for film history. It is time to wind down and take in the wider perspective of Sarris and Kael not only as film historians, but also to look at what, in the final analysis, is their true *metier*—their works as critics and cultural commentators.

What, finally, is current today of the Kaelian gambit of playing *art* and *trash* against one another? Is the Sarrisian auteur theory still vital, or has it been much altered during its journey from a novel countercultural interpretation to the status it enjoys today—a part of our common understanding so obvious that we barely reflect upon it? It is time for a few concluding remarks. In the conclusion, scholarly analysis will finally yield to journalism as I attempt to pass judgement, from my own personal standpoint, on who is actually the best critic of our two protagonists, and address the outcome of Raymond J. Haberski's concept of "The duel for the soul of American film criticism"—which, after all, is repeated in the title of the thesis.

### Final Thoughts

True to the spirit of the work of the two critics that this thesis has been an attempt to shed light on, elucidation must at this point succumb to something resembling a final evaluation. I can no longer dodge the persistent question which has been implicit throughout my text: Who won the battle for the soul of American film criticism? The answer, though multifaceted and longwinded, probably cannot help but disappoint some readers. I offer an answer somewhat tempered with reservations and qualifications.

First of all, the very question might be seen as journalistically oversimplified and a bit tacked on, playing up as it does Sarris's and Kael's original feud over the auteur theory while neglecting other aspects of their criticism. When a study encompasses more or less their whole body of work and attempts to give a full comparative picture of their collected writings, as I have done, it is tempting to quote Sarris: "I am grateful to film for allowing me to focus my intellectual

insights and worldviews within a manageable frame. I believe that the subject of film is larger than any one critic or indeed the entire corps of critics.”<sup>414</sup>

Sarris's formulation could be construed as a rejection of Haberski Jr's idea that American film criticism in fact had *a soul* to be won by the critic who was most cogent, timely, perceptive or whatever. Although perhaps essentially true, there is still a case to be made for the odd mixture of subversion of taste and cultural gravitas provided by fountainheads of film culture beginning in the mid-twentieth century, when film seemed not only the liveliest art, but the most aesthetically exciting and culturally relevant as well.

Few commentators are as sympathetic to both Sarris and Kael as I am, and regarding the question I first posed with reckless rhetorical bluster at the end of the last chapter, I must admit that it is tempting to hedge my bets. However prudent, this course of action would feel like copping out. I will, however, attempt to answer the question in two different ways. Empirically, in terms of who won the battle over *film studies per se*, there can be little who's impact and influence has been the greatest. As Emanuel Levy pointed out in 2001: “[T]hose claiming that ”auteurism is dead” may actually mean that, as a critical method, it is so absorbed in our consciousness and so integral to our movie culture that there is no need anymore to fight for it. The battle over auteurism is long over and the winner is...Andrew Sarris.”<sup>415</sup>

Quite ironically, Sarris came out on top and eventually emerged victorious out of the “Circles and Squares”- debate in the long run, even if “Circles and Squares” is a much stronger piece of writing than “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962.” However, this is actually just one way to see this issue, from a viewpoint, moreover, which is quite limited. The output of works in film scholarship by the university presses since the start of the 1970s may have vindicated Sarris as a film scholar<sup>416</sup>, but we may still make the case that Kael is the better critic overall. This, in turn, depends on what you want to emphasise, and there *are* certain distinctly positive qualities in Kael's criticism which are less pronounced, if not quite absent in Sarris's body of work.

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<sup>414</sup> Andrew Sarris (1970) *Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema 1955/1969*. New York: Simon & Schuster. pp. 15-16.

<sup>415</sup> Emanuel Levy "The Legacy of Auteurism", *Emanuel Levy (2001) Citizen Sarris: American Film Critic – Essays in Honor of Andrew Sarris*. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press Inc. pp. 77-99.

<sup>416</sup> An outstanding example of how romantic auteurism may be applied, brought up to date, deepened and supplemented by other critical approaches is Susan White's definitive study of Sarris's pantheon figure, Max Ophuls: Susan M. White (1995) *The Cinema of Max Ophuls: Magisterial Vision and the Figure of Woman*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Though Sarris's prose style is no less personal than Kael's, it is unquestionably more formal and measured. What Kael captured better than anyone was the excitement of 'going to the movies,' whereas Sarris's body of work is a near perfect illustration of the principle of 'films recollected.'

No one can argue that Kael is as good a writer as anyone who have their attention to films. Even a Sarrisian like Kent Jones admits this much:

What is winning in Kael - moving, in fact, is the urgency of her need to communicate her emotional responses to films and, especially actors who made an immediate impact, in a correspondingly immediate style so breathlessly intoxicating that it haunts film criticism to this day. Her best pieces shimmer and throb like a Tommy James single. And that has always been the rub, for her and her devotees. Anything that smacked of premeditation or intellectual mediation, anything that moved in any other direction than towards the immediate, was anathema.<sup>417</sup>

When Kael used her powers of intellectual reflection, which were considerable, she did so to debunk other writers. Her own aesthetic doctrine was sensory, immediate and grounded in direct experience. But what a writer! But for the pull of movies, she probably would have been a novelist. I think she identified with the "Lost Generation" authors who treated movies with a genuine if slightly ambivalent amusement, and I suspect she would have given up criticism to have written something like *Beat the Devil* (John Huston, 1953 - adapted by Truman Capote from James Helvick's novel.) The opening chapter of "Trash, Art, and the Movies" contains her most evocative writing and is a case in point. This piece seems to have been modelled on the opening passages of John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* There is enough in her criticism to suggest that she could have been a significant writer of fiction.

Sarris, on the other hand, mapped the cultural field of cinema by systematizing his impressions and intuitions in a way that was indispensable for nascent film scholarship:

The auteur theory was [...] never any theory at all, but rather a collection of facts, a reminder of movies to be resurrected, of genres to be redeemed, of directors to be discovered. To sum up, montage, the double imagery of documentary and fiction, the use of fables to express feelings, the sheltering cultural inferiority complex of the medium, the industrial organization of movie-making and the contrasting demands of repetition and variation combined to create a situation in which movies managed to break the most sacred rules of art, and the first became last, and the last became first.<sup>418</sup>

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<sup>417</sup> Kent Jones (2005) "Hail the Conquering Hero" Film Comment, May/June 2005.

[Http://www.nyfilmfestival.net/fcm/5-6-2005/Sarris/htm](http://www.nyfilmfestival.net/fcm/5-6-2005/Sarris/htm)

<sup>418</sup> Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen: Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York: Simon & Schuster p. 58.

Sarris was one of the first to probe these relationships, but that is not why I think he was a better critic. Kael settled into dogmas too quickly and made a cult out of seeing films only once, as if they by definition do not bear close scrutiny. Sarris, on the other hand, very famously reversed his judgement on *2001: A Space Odyssey* with a candour and humility that Kael could never muster. In *The American Cinema*, Sarris had written off Kubrick's film: "Ultimately, Stanley Kubrick shares with Claude Lelouch a naive faith in the power of images to transcend fuzzy feelings and vague ideas. The ending of *2001* qualifies in its oblique obscurity as instant Ingmar."<sup>419</sup> Three years later, he was persuaded to revisit this most prestigious of head movies under other circumstances:

I must report that I recently paid another visit to Stanley Kubrick's *2001* while under the influence of a smoked substance that I was assured by my contact was somewhat stronger and more authentic than oregano on a *King Sano* [cigarette brand] base. (For myself, I must confess that I soar infinitely higher on vermouth cassis, but enough of this generation rap.) Anyway, I prepared to watch *2001* under what I have always been assured were optimum conditions, and surprisingly (for me) I find myself reversing my original opinion. [...] However, I don't think *2001* is exclusively or even especially a head movie (and I speak now with the halting voice of authority). [...] I am still dissatisfied by the open-ended abstractness of the allegory, not to mention the relatively conventional sojourn into psychedelia. Nonetheless, *2001* now works for me as Kubrick's parable of a future toward which metaphysical dread and mordant amusement tip-toe side by side.<sup>420</sup>

That I think Sarris was right the first time is in a sense irrelevant. He has always been willing to revisit, rethink and reformulate. It is almost as if Kael saw this trait as pedantry, or even a sign of intellectual weakness. Thus, there is probably a hard core of truth to David Thomson's charge that her breathlessly vivacious prose and headlong flight from one topic to the next tends to discourage reflection.<sup>421</sup> She did not grapple with Andrei Tarkovsky or the later films of Robert Bresson, for instance. I think a lack of faith in reflection is evident in her famous statement from "Trash, Art, and the Movies": "Responsibility to pay attention and appreciate is anti-art, it makes us too anxious for pleasure, too bored for response."<sup>422</sup> The question is whether younger American filmmakers with an auteurist view of themselves took Kael at her word, and contributed to the development of movies with her extolled excitement and sensation over sense and thought?<sup>423</sup>

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<sup>419</sup> Andrew Sarris [1968(1996)] *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. New York: DaCapo Press. p. 196.

<sup>420</sup> Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen: Essays on Films and Related Subjects*. New York. Simon & Schuster. pp. 202-203.

<sup>421</sup> David Thomson (2003) *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. pp. 449-450.

<sup>422</sup> Pauline Kael (1970) *Going Steady*. Boston.: Little, Brown & Company. p. 104.

<sup>423</sup> What is beyond question is that *Jaws* has had an enormous impact not only on how films are made but also on how they are exhibited and marketed. For a critical introduction to this somewhat troubling side of contemporary

For all the respect afforded to Robert Altman and Martin Scorsese, the most influential figure to emerge in the sixties and seventies was Steven Spielberg, even if his desire to be seen as a *Mensch* later in his career displeased Kael and still makes young film students mock him. At a young age, his grip on the visceral aspects of filmmaking was uncanny and his eye innovative, while his views on film have always been that of a studio head who thrives on consensus and enormous audience responses. Kael wrote admiringly of his first big hit and his first truly characteristic theatrical feature: “There are parts of *Jaws* (1975) that suggest what Eisenstein might have done if he hadn't intellectualized himself out of reach.”<sup>424</sup> Spielberg has been one of the pioneers who have taken film beyond film, exploring the technological boundaries of movie-making rather than thematic boundaries. His use of special effects, notably digital compositing and CGI has led the way in Hollywood, and has made the basis for *mise-en-scène* criticism that underscores the auteur theory a murkier proposition than when Sarris first formulated his theory. The kind of filmmaking process that occurs on the set and under the director's control that Truffaut valorised in *Day for Night* (1973) is no longer current, least of all in Hollywood.

What Sarris rightly thought was obvious in 1970 is much less so now:

The extent to which actors (documentary) not only interpret but augment characters (fiction) gives the screen a double aesthetic image. The inescapable realism of the documentary image restricts the scope and stature of the fictional image<sup>425</sup>

There is much yet been written about how this side of the digital revolution impacts on screen acting: As John Baxter remarks: “To talk about 'performance' in movies at the beginning of the twenty-first century is to discuss an art as fossilised as Egyptian wall-painting.”<sup>426</sup>

The basic ideas of auteurism and style are still hard to dismiss as critical tools, however. Writing about one of Spielberg's first attempts at prestigious filmmaking, *Empire of the Sun* (1987), John Baxter has noted:

Style is more than a suit of clothes; it embodies decades of experience. Spielberg's influences run through *Empire* as the name “Brighton” runs through a stick of rock. Break it anywhere and there's the mark of a comic book in the emphatic low-angle splash in a puddle, or the influence of Hollywood classics in a crane shot over a crowd of refugees that recalls both *Gone with the Wind* and *Lawrence of Arabia*. To have become a different

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Hollywood history see: Justin Wyatt (2003[1994] *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

<sup>424</sup> Pauline Kael (1980) *When the Lights Go Down*. New York: Holt, Rhinehart & Winston Inc. p. 195.

<sup>425</sup> Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen: Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York: Simon & Schuster p. 57.

<sup>426</sup> John Baxter (2003[2002]) *DeNiro: A Biography*. London: HarperCollins Publishers p. 3.



filmmaker, Spielberg would have needed to go back to his childhood and not seen *The Greatest Show on Earth*, *Captains Courageous* and *Bambi*.<sup>427</sup>

It has become more important than ever to consider and raise questions about the importance of cultural influence on even the most dexterous and dazzling artist or showman, at a time when filmmakers (especially in Hollywood) are often accused of knowing too much about movies and too little about everything else. But Baxter's perspective on Spielberg does not really address how quickly auteurism moved from vanguard critical strategy to a kind of co-opted marketing strategy. The writing was on the wall by 1970, when Joseph Gelmis published an anthology of interviews entitled *The Film Director as Superstar*.<sup>428</sup> No film scholar has discussed the subsequent commerce of auteurism as incisively as Timothy Corrigan:

The idea of the auteur-star may appear merely to hark back to earlier avatars of auteurism who were placed in certain aesthetic and intellectual pantheons; from Orson Welles to Robert Bresson, the celebrity of the auteur was the product of a certain textual distinction. As generally consistent as that tradition of the textual auteur is, more recent versions of the auteurist positions have swerved away from its textual center. In line with the marketing transformation of the international art cinema that defined the film artist in the seventies, auteurs have become increasingly situated along an extratextual path in which their commercial status as auteurs is their chief function as auteurs. The auteur star is meaningful primarily as a promotion or recovery of a movie or a group of movies, frequently regardless of the filmic text itself.<sup>429</sup>

This has obviously less to do with how movies are studied than how they are consumed, but in the multiplex and in the art house, the economic legacy of auteurism is *Cashiers du Cinema*.

It was Kael who clearly wanted to be seen as *the* American populist among film critics, but it was Sarris who caught the popular imagination. Kael fought for the immediate, unpretentious pleasures of the movies, because the movies had so much more to offer than simply great art, a level of achievement she felt movies, even the best of them, rarely attained.

When she insisted that most movies we enjoy are not works of art, she felt she was protecting that concept as a term of value or quality. In truth, film was one of the last cultural areas where the concept of art as a term of value orientation and the canon had any subversive meaning. During the

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<sup>427</sup> John Baxter (1997 [1996]) *Steven Spielberg: The Unauthorised Biography*. London: HarperCollins Publishers. p. 333.

<sup>428</sup> Joseph Gelmis (1970) *The Director as Superstar: Kubrick, Lester, Mailer, Nichols, Penn, Polanski and Others*. New York: Doubleday Inc.

<sup>429</sup> Timothy Corrigan (1991) *Cinema without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press. p. 105.

sixties, the practice of art history, for example, moved decisively towards visual culture, with much less emphasis on the canon and questions of artistic value. (In art history proper, the sixties saw the arrival of so-called post-painterly abstraction, an indication that painting had become so stripped bare that it simply self-destructed, or perhaps imploded is a better word.)

Value remained the core of Kael's views on art, and she no doubt felt she defended her position on behalf of something important: "It's preposterously egocentric to call everything we enjoy art—as if we could not be entertained by it if it were not; it's just as preposterous to let prestigious, expensive advertising snow us into thinking we're getting art for our money when we haven't even had a good time."<sup>430</sup>

There is a tenor in Kael's writing which seems to underline just how the aesthetic, sensory aspects of films can be more overwhelming than simply artistic or stylistic ones; there is something in film art (as opposed to other art) that is purely emotional and goes beyond the detached aesthetic attitude we often take in relation to traditional and high modern art. In the preface of her last collection, she noted:

An avidity for more is built into the love of movies. Something else is built in: You have to be open to the idea of getting drunk on movies. (Being able to talk about movies with someone – to share the giddy high excitement you feel – is enough for a friendship.) Our emotions rise to meet the force coming from the screen – and they go on rising throughout our movie-going lives. When this happens in a popular art form – when it's an art experience that we discover for ourselves – it is sometimes disparaged as fannishness. But there is something there that goes deeper than connoisseurship or taste. It's a fusion of art and love.<sup>431</sup>

This almost seems like an auteurist credo. After all, fannish binging on favourite directors in the way earlier generations of more or less bright minds had binged on their favourite writers seems to be the most lasting impact of auteur criticism on the young and impressionable film students on campuses the world over, even if the actually tangible material of what is published by the university presses is a more visible and more academically legitimate legacy inherited from the auteurists who transcended the obscure magazines in which they were first promulgated and entered academia. It was this idea inherent in auteurism which became the most useful. Kael's ideas about the subversive elements of trash in art today finds a major outlet in the very safe and cozy films of John Waters, whose films show how quickly an aesthetics of trash merged with camp, which was

<sup>430</sup> Pauline Kael (1970) *Going Steady*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company p. 92.

<sup>431</sup> Pauline Kael (1991) *Movie Love: Complete Reviews 1988-1991*. New York: A William Abrahams Book. Dutton. p. xxi.

certainly not Kael's intention. More than an aesthetic doctrine, the fruitful interplay between trash and art seems to have arisen out of a need to rationalize an intellectual guilt. Andrew Sarris is spot on when he speaks of a “quaint reconciliation of what [Kael] can enjoy viscerally with what she can endorse cerebrally.”<sup>432</sup> In the early sixties, the study of film took off because of critics who took in what was on the screen and relayed their enthusiasm. Though no card-carrying auteurist, Kael was in a very similar position from the outset and relied on similar strategies. In 1973, Sarris actually attributed to Kael what he must consider the by and large positive, if theoretically neutral, virtues of his own criticism: “[Kael is] screen-oriented, [...] concerned to the brink of hysteria [and] more readable than literate.”<sup>433</sup>

Studio executives feared Kael in the seventies, but Sarris's influence on the American film has arguably been greater, if less direct, because of the impact of the auteur theory as sketched above. This is a fact he regards with mixed feelings, feelings that also disclose that he did not share Kael's high (some would say panegyric) regard for *New Hollywood Cinema*, which today has become ingrained as the most persistent interpretive cliché in film current historical scholarship<sup>434</sup>:

Now I do think a great many directors became self-indulgent during this period and I think that they're oversimplifying their power. There was a whole drug culture in the sixties and seventies and a lot of these directors just went completely crazy. They didn't accept any limits of any kind. Perhaps that's why the films of the thirties and forties are considered classics, because they were filmed in a rather controlled environment. When you look at the great books of literature, how many of them were done in a society that was rather constrained? Is *War and Peace* less of a novel because Tolstoy could not indulge in full frontal nudity? I mean, come on! You know, people are babbling. There is a lot of licentious babbling going on in the name of free expression, and it has nothing to do with anything else. And I am certainly am not going to say that all this auteuristic fervour and ferment, of which I was a part, was designed for the greater glory of Michael Cimino, Martin Scorsese, Francis Coppola, Peter Bogdanovich or any of the directors working during that period.<sup>435</sup>

Sarris may not quite have seen the range of his auteurist polemic and Kael could not escape its basic proposition, even if she tried to modify it on non-analytic terms and reject its excesses. For all her

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<sup>432</sup> Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen: Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York: Simon & Schuster p. 117.

<sup>433</sup> Andrew Sarris “The State of Cinema Criticism in the United States”, Donald E. Staples (ed.) (1973) *The American Cinema*: Washington D.C: Voice of America Forum Series. pp. 371-380.

<sup>434</sup> The clearest indication of this ingrained bias and its apotheosis is arguably to be found in a extremely one-sided book crammed with gossip that appeared in the late 1990s: Peter Biskind (1999[1998]) *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and Rock'n Roll Generation Saved Hollywood*: New York: Simon & Schuster. A Touchstone Book.

<sup>435</sup> Andrew Sarris, quoted in George Hickenlooper (1991) *Reel Conversation: Candid Interviews with Film's Foremost Directors and Critics*. New York: A Citadel Press Book. p. 3-16 .

resistance against the academic appreciation of film and suspicion of high culture, the final proof that Kael had entered the mainstream of interpretive practices on film came at the end of her career when the Walker Art Center published a selection of her reviews in connection with a retrospective of the films of Jonathan Demme.<sup>436</sup> Kael had herself, in effect, if not intention, not only entered high culture but written a belated study of a director, twenty-two years after the Museum of Modern Art had published Sarris's first book, *The Films of Josef Von Sternberg*. Consider the last time you read a monograph on a director, and it will dawn on you that the achievements of the auteur critics are not minor. Before the *Cahiers* writers, there were no book-length studies on Alfred Hitchcock, and today it is difficult to imagine that there is anything new left to be said about him or his films. The vast amount of literature on Hitchcock is arguably the clearest indication that auteurism prompted discovery, and, perhaps, over-discovery.

The reasons that Sarris and Kael broke through and spoke to so many interested in film must be at least partly explained by referring to their own fervour and intelligence. The *zeitgeist* of their formative period may have been informed with a respectability for film culture largely because the other arts seemed historically and conceptually exhausted and done to death,<sup>437</sup> but just as not every film is equally good or aesthetically worthwhile, nor is every critic equally important or interesting. A critic may have more or less favourable conditions, but a lot still depends on the critic.

According to film scholar Ernest Callenbach, who was the editor of *Film Quarterly* at the time "Circles and Squares" was first published, neither Kael nor Sarris had a real theoretical bone in their bodies.<sup>438</sup> But ideas can rarely transcend the words which are used to express them, and Sarris and Kael were thankfully much better and consistent writers than theorists. They succeeded better than most in establishing an aesthetic discourse on film. As journalists, they also performed what

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<sup>436</sup> Pauline Kael on Jonathan Demme: *A Selection of Reviews Accompanying the Retrospective Jonathan Demme: American Director*. Presented at the Walker Art Center. 15-27. August 1988.

<sup>437</sup> Dutch philosopher Maarten Doorman has outlined the impasse in the traditional arts that opened the way for a different kind of film criticism thus:

"The historical avant-garde rejected art as a merely aesthetic phenomenon that had conquered an autonomous domain within societal relationships: in this perspective, art had become a kind of sanctuary that had nothing more to do with society or life itself. In this sense, art had ended. The fact that during the twentieth century the avant-garde nonetheless became the most important institutional art-movement and the most prominent ideology within the still-upheld domain of art is thus also proof of its weakness: the social success of the avant-garde is also its greatest failure." Maarten Doorman (2003) *Art in Progress: A Philosophical Response to the End of the Avant-Garde*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. p. 56.

Seen in this light, it is not far fetched to see Sarris's romantic form of auteurism as subversive. To paraphrase Henry Miller, the great libertine Sarris perhaps would have to have been: the auteur theory as formulated by Sarris is gob of spit, not in the face of Art, but in the face of that most prevalent and characteristic artwork of the twentieth century – the de-personalized readymade.

<sup>438</sup> Ernest Callenbach "Recent Film Writing: A Survey." Brian Henderson and Ann Martin (eds.) *Film Quarterly: Forty Years: A Selection*. Berkeley: University of California Press. pp. 27-46.

can be regarded as the primary task of the modern American intellectual. For once, Camille Paglia is measured and reasonable: “The American intellectual should mediate between academe and media, the past and the present. Language should be lucid, concrete, direct with the brash candor of the American people and the brusque can-do rhythms of American life.”<sup>439</sup> Sarris may have attempted to graft vestiges of French intellectualism on American pragmatism, but he was always his own man, quite apart from the official *Cahiers*-line. In Paglia's formulation, we see not only Pauline Kael's unacknowledged influence, but also an amplification of Kael's excesses.

Sarris and Kael's preferred subject was American film and its relationship with a more self-conscious and self-declared artiness of European film culture. Their conclusion was that the former was not necessarily less artistically valuable than the latter. Furthermore, they agreed that the particular greatness of the best American movies is unlike anything found elsewhere.

Here is Kael:

If debased art is kitsch, perhaps kitsch may be redeemed by honest vulgarity, may become art. Our best movies transform kitsch and make art out of it; that is the peculiar greatness and strength of American movies. [...] There is more energy, more originality, more excitement, more art in American kitsch like *Gunga Din*, *Easy Living*, the Rogers and Astaire pictures like *Swing Time* and *Top Hat*, in *Strangers on a Train*, *His Girl Friday*, *The Crimson Pirate*, *To Have and Have Not*, *The African Queen*, *Singin' in the Rain*, *Sweet Smell of Success*, or more recently, *The Hustler*, *Lolita*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Hud*, *Charade*, than in the presumed High Culture of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, *Marienbad*, *La Notte*, *The Eclipse* and the Torre Nilsson pictures.<sup>440</sup>

We may agree or disagree with Kael's blast against art films, but what is really worth noting is the argument that kitsch is debased art and art is kitsch transformed. This is a perversion of the high-toned ideas that were always inherent in Clement Greenberg's criticism, but there is something absurd about the argument: since film art is kitsch redeemed, she seems to say equally that art without the elements of kitsch is not art. Entertainment need not be art, but art must also *by definition* be entertainment; otherwise it is a chore. It is an idea that may still work in film criticism, but it is arguably less useful in the others areas of culture, at least if entertainment is to have any common-sense meaning as something distinct from mere entertainment. This has a bearing on current film culture. While the films of Kurosawa, Bergman, Antonioni and Fellini played to relatively large and respectful audiences during the heyday of film culture, the only foreign auteur

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<sup>439</sup> Camille Paglia (1992) *Sex, Art, and American Culture: Essays*. New York: Vintage Books. A Division of Random House, Inc. p. ix.

<sup>440</sup> Pauline Kael (2002[1965]) *I Lost it at the Movies: The Essential Kael Collection from '54 to '65*. London: Marion Boyars. p. 24.

that has a rather large and consistent following outside the festival circuit today is arguably Pedro Almòdovar, whose roots are squarely in popular filmmaking and popular art. Kael sums him up thus:

He absorbed the avant-garde slapstick of the sixties and the seventies along with Hollywood's frivolous and romantic pop, and all this merged with the legacy of Bunñel and his own intuitive acceptance of *loco* impulses. Generalissimo Franco kept the lid on for thirty-six years; he died in 1975, and Pedro Almòdovar is part of what jumped out the box. The most original pop writer- director of the eighties, he's Godard with a human face – a happy face.<sup>441</sup>

That Kael enjoyed and understood Almòdovar is almost self-evident *a priori*, but I cannot help wondering whether or not she would have dismissed or embraced a ravishing and often difficult sensualist like Claire Denis who has not reached the audiences she clearly deserves.

Andrew Sarris, the critic Kael accused of turning trash into art, has, if anything, been more measured than Kael about the status of the commercial (American) film as opposed to the art film. As early as 1973, he wrote:

As film scholarship becomes more sophisticated, the facile distinctions between so-called “art films” and so-called “commercial films” become less and less meaningful. Out of the sifting and winnowing emerges a new division of “art” and commercial films on one side and bad “art” and “commercial” films on the other. Not only do art and commerce intersect, they seem intertwined in the muddled processes of filmmaking. Even art films have to make money, and even commercial films have to make some statement. To put it in another way, more and more critics are demanding more fun in art, and more art in fun. The post-Marxist pop and camp movements have perhaps overreacted to the socially conscious solemnity of the past, but the increasing scepticism about mere good intentions is a healthy sign of higher standards. Unfortunately, the pendulum has swung from the extreme of sobriety to the extreme of silliness. Suddenly every director is entitled to equal time on the American critical scene in which critics are compelled to abandon many of their cherished prejudices and snobberies.<sup>442</sup>

Kael died in 2001 and her last pieces of criticism were written nearly twenty years ago. She was a great writer, but few people are more difficult to sentimentalize; according to David Thomson, she was “a terrific journalist who took enormous pains to seem spontaneous, who believed that it ought to be possible to write about entertainments in a way that made them more stimulating for

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<sup>441</sup> Pauline Kael (1991) *Movie Love: Complete Reviews 1988-1991*. New York: Dutton. A William Abrahams Book.

<sup>442</sup> Andrew Sarris “The State of Cinema Criticism in the United States”, Donald E. Staples (ed.) (1973) *The American Cinema*. Washington DC: Voice of America Forum Series. pp. 371-378.

thousands of people. [...] She was obstinately anti-auteurist because she fell into a stupid New York feud with Andrew Sarris (and because he'd made that key point [of authorship] first)."<sup>443</sup>

Kael fought for popular movies and soon discovered the benefits of *being* popular, but it is hypocritical to scorn critics for wanting to be popular when we consider how much tactical positioning takes place in academia. Still, she held court, and was depressed by all those lonely moviegoers who are drawn to film out of a naked need for reassurance and comfort, whereas Sarris intended *The American Cinema* for those perennial cinephiles, the solitary moviegoers.<sup>444</sup> Sarris is still active, and film scholars have sometimes taken it upon themselves to be nostalgic and sentimental on his behalf. David Bordwell writes: "As for auteurism, everybody knows the word, but when Oliver Stone and Quentin Tarantino are pressed upon us as having a vision of the world, we can only recall Sarris's melancholy speculation from 1968: 'In ten years or less there may be no American cinema of great artistic significance.'"<sup>445</sup>

In this instance, Bordwell the scholar is more sentimental than Sarris the critic, who does not believe in golden ages, but rather believes, like one of his favourite subjects, John Ford, in the benign drift of (film) history.<sup>446</sup> Quizzed about the state of film culture in 1991, Sarris said:

The so-called Golden Age of the forties was a period when Orson Welles and Preston Sturges were driven out of the industry. What's so golden about that? I mean, they keep talking about hype, hype, hype. But that's journalism. Journalism has to constantly fuel the alarm, the apocalypse, whatever. Look, I think there are as many good films now as there have ever been, and I know this because I don't have time to see everything I want to see. And that doesn't even count the retrospectives I want to catch up with. So I don't know what everybody's yapping about.<sup>447</sup>

George Hickenlooper, the interviewer on this instance, went on to pose the nagging question that is eating away at many current film scholars concerned with film as a popular art:

Hickenlooper: Well, why isn't there as much argument or fervor as there was?

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<sup>443</sup> David Thomson (2003) *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*. New York: Alfred. A. Knopf. pp. 449-450.

<sup>444</sup> Andrew Sarris (1996[1968]) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. New York: DaCapo Press. p. 15.

<sup>445</sup> David Bordwell "Sarris and the Search for Style", Emanuel Levy (2001) *Citizen Sarris: Essays in Honor of Andrew Sarris*. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press. pp. 165-173.

<sup>446</sup> Andrew Sarris (1975) *The John Ford Movie Mystery*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. p.161.

<sup>447</sup> Andrew Sarris quoted in George Hickenlooper (1991) *Reel Conversations: Candid Interviews with Film's Foremost Directors and Critics*. New York: A Citadel Press Book. pp. 3-16.

Sarris: Because we are all much smugger. We all play by many of the same rules, whereas both Pauline and I were outsiders. And were really sort of screwballs.<sup>448</sup>

So, the film culture in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century depended on a confluence of various events: the impasse in the traditional arts, television, archival facilities for old films and an academically virginal territory, there for the taking. There are more good writers on film today than there have ever been, but just because more visual artists graduate from American universities each year than there were inhabitants of 15<sup>th</sup> century Florence does not mean that the quality of fine arts produced today is aesthetically better or even more inventive than the art of the Renaissance. What is beyond question is that art today is less relevant and lasting, and intentionally so.

Still, there is enough of the methodological individualist in my makeup to recognize that the single critics do matter. We would have had the auteur theory in some form without Sarris's input, just as the value of trashiness that Kael argued for was a sign of the times in the sixties.

This takes nothing away from the fact that Sarris and Kael were witty, engaged and vital writers who caught the pulse of the medium at the time when the movies *seemed* most vital. The question as to whether or not the average movie is worse now than it was then is impossible to answer because we can never agree on the terms of discussion. Video may have killed both the radio star and a certain kind of film culture, but as Sarris observed in 1998: “Happily, these are the best of times, technologically speaking, to catch up with old movie classics clustered around their directors, writers, actors, cinematographers, set designers, and all the other artists and technicians involved in what is still liveliest art of them all.”<sup>449</sup>

Film as film may be dead—but whatever the future holds remains to *seen*.

## Conclusion – What Has Been Done?

The preceding chapters constitute an attempt to chart, in essayistic form, the contexts as well as the aesthetic ideas and underlying tastes of Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael. I have openly claimed that they are the most important film critics in American history. As such, I have placed them in a precarious but important position as mediators between journalism and academic film writing and demonstrated their importance as both critical essayists and aesthetic film historians. The large general chapter on criticism is made up of a critical discussion of their general ideas that are of

<sup>448</sup> George Hickenlooper (1991) *Reel Conversations: Candid Interviews With Film's Foremost Directors and Critics*. New York: A Citadel Press Book pp. 3-16.

<sup>449</sup> Andrew Sarris (ed.) (1998) *The St. James Film Directors Encyclopedia*. Detroit: Visible Ink Press. p. xii.



permanent value to criticism as such in a metaperspective, with emphasis on the nature of value judgements and how these can yield systematic knowledge. The debate stemming from Sarris's "Notes on the Auteur Theory 1962" and Kael's subsequent attack, "Circles and Squares", has been afforded ample space as the most important polemical debate carried out by journalistic critics. Secondly, there is a historical side to the issue, and their positions *in* history and their positions *as historians* have been described and evaluated in some detail. I could have included a paragraph on the development of structural auteurism in the sixties. I chose not to, because this has had no impact or influence whatsoever on Sarris's criticism.

The argument could be made that structural auteurism is theoretically more advanced and ought to have been discussed in a thesis that affords so much space to the auteur theory, but Sarris never attempted to explicate themes in binary opposites. In the words of David Bordwell, Sarris always preferred to observe cinematic style through thematic clusters,<sup>450</sup> something which obviously afforded a more flowing prose. Furthermore, it is the vanguard oppositional fandom of stylistic auteurism that still survives in film studies and as a cultural strategy among fans. Sarris's method has in recent years been applied to European exploitation directors like Mario Bava and Lucio Fulci by discerning horror buffs, while structural auteurism is a dead relic of the Marxist-inflected film theory of the seventies. Pertaining to this, I cannot really see the relevance or feel the impact of the sustained argument made by Graeme Turner that the auteur theory belongs in a discussion about the decline of [film] aesthetics.<sup>451</sup> (It was obviously rather a *beginning* of film aesthetics with a strong historical element.) This is nevertheless a common enough complaint among those who (like Turner) are grounded in cultural studies, but it is difficult to discern even a semblance of an *aesthetic* remedy in the writings of those who clutter their readings of films with readymade and often quite spurious ideology and jazzed up agit-prop arguments.

A similar complaint could be made against my discussion of Kael's trash/art interplay because I make no reference to the role of camp in that context. I can only point out that camp is a form of textually engaged, self-conscious audience-centred cultism in which Kael did not participate: "Perhaps movies came to fore in the sixties because, unlike books but like rock music, movies can be experienced tribally."<sup>452</sup> Tribalism in the enjoyment of movies were quite simply not her thing,

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<sup>450</sup> David Bordwell (1989) *Making Meaning: Rhetoric and Inference in the Interpretation of Cinema*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press. pp. 115-126.

<sup>451</sup> Graeme Turner (1999[1988]) *Film as Social Practice*. London & New York: Routledge. p. 43. Third Edition.

<sup>452</sup> Pauline Kael (1992[1976]) *Reeling: Film Writings 1972-1976*. London: Marion Boyars. p. xi.

and I think she disdained that cultist trait and perceived it as a negative feature of the British *Movie*-auteurists and the “right on” American students at university campuses.

Lastly, my analysis of Sarris and Kael as film historians could be faulted for an insufficient focus on various modes of non-aesthetic film history. I feel I can do no more than acknowledge their existence, as I have done, and present non-aesthetic film history merely as a foil to aesthetic film history. For the film historian as critic, aesthetic considerations, if not necessarily evaluative ones, take precedence over other aspects of film history, even from the wider metaperspective of historiography. The last chapter, “Final thoughts”, is intended (and hopefully understood) as the historical conclusion of this thesis, evaluating as it does contemporary film culture and the roles Sarris's and Kael's criticism continues to play. It is an attempt to grasp the tangible but elusive *nachleben* of their critical feud and its fallout.

If I have finally made the case that Sarris is the better critic, I must also point out that Sarris's body of work and Kael's body of work are necessary correlates which deepens and enrich one another; in many ways facets of the same tastes, priorities and approaches. The conclusion to be drawn is that the actual duel itself for the soul of American film criticism was more important than its outcome. Only two critics of genuine stature could embody the heated battle for film culture, notwithstanding that Sarris could discern 'no overriding moral issues involved in the conflicting tastes of two movie-reviewers'.<sup>453</sup> With this, I want to say that the similarities between Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael are greater than the differences, if not necessarily more important. The only thing left for me to do is quote Sarris and make his words my own: “At this climactic moment of self-revelation, all I can do is to commend my critical soul to your mercy and understanding.”<sup>454</sup>

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<sup>453</sup> Andrew Sarris (1973) *The Primal Screen: Essays on Film and Related Subjects*. New York: Simon & Schuster. p. 56.

<sup>454</sup> Andrew Sarris (1970) *Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema 1955/1969*. New York: Simon & Schuster. p. 16.

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