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## American Film (1977) - The Auteur Theory Revisited

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# Article

## The Auteur Theory Revisited

Andrew Sarris

*What is auteurism? The man who should know thinks it's time to make things perfectly clear.*

One would think that after fifteen years of furious controversy there would be no need for another article on the auteur theory. Yet all sorts of scholarly books and articles continue to disseminate an astounding amount of misinformation on the origin and evolution of auteurism. What to do? Having been officially credited or blamed for bringing the words auteur, auteurism, and auteurist into the English language, I seem to be stuck with these tar-baby terms for the rest of my life. My own previous writings on the subject have been compiled in *The Primal Screen*, a little read volume that came out in 1973. "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962" first appeared in *Film Culture*, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1970" followed in *Film Comment*, and so now in 1977 a pattern of periodicity seems to justify my current endeavor. Also, auteurism seems to have become a scapegoat for just about every cultural affliction associated with the cinema.

For example, Gore Vidal (in the April *American Film*) associates auteurism with the deification of directors over writers in the moviemaking process. Vidal is very amusing when he gossips about his own experiences in film, and his testimony is not without interest. Indeed, a cynical observer of his checkered career might suspect that he was trying to get out from under the impending scandale of *Caligula* by blaming the director, Tinto Brass. And what a name for a director of a Vidal property! Tinto: lurid distortion. Brass: chutzpah on the Tiber. Vidal exempts very few directors (Bergman, Hitchcock) from his diatribe, and he does not hesitate to go after such hitherto sacred cows as Jean Renoir and Rene Clair. (Nicholas Ray, the most notorious of all cult directors, is, of course, dismissed without ceremony.) At one point Vidal professes to regret that he did not become a director himself even though he is now richer and more powerful than Renoir, Clair, and Ray put together.

Speaking of Renoir's "great heist" of *The Southerner*, Vidal explains: "Renoir was a man who had great trouble speaking English, much less writing it, and the script was written by William Faulkner. According to Zachary Scott, who acted in it, Faulkner really liked the script and would have been pleased to have had the credit. But Renoir so muddled the business that the credit finally read: 'Screenplay by Jean Renoir.' "

Unfortunately, Vidal neglects to mention that *The Southerner* was adapted from a novel entitled *Hold Autumn in Your Hand* by George Sessions Perry, the forgotten man in the anti-Renoir, pro-Faulkner anecdote. Who was George Sessions Perry? I have no idea, and neither, apparently, does Vidal. He is (or was) a veteran of the vast army of virtually anonymous authors who have supplied so many of the stories on the screen. Vidal's anecdote implies that Faulkner thought up the story of *The Southerner* all by himself, and Renoir then stole the script and "muddled" it, whatever that means.

The anecdote loses something, at least for the cultivated readers of the *New York Review of Books*, where it originally appeared, if Faulkner is revealed as the middleman in the screenwriting process. Until Vidal is prepared to research how much Faulkner's script owes to Perry's novel, the indictment of Renoir as a plagiarist must be thrown out for lack of evidence. Besides, Renoir's reputation does not rest excessively on *The Southerner* any more than Faulkner's reputation rests on his screenplays, credited or uncredited. Both Renoir and Faulkner must be evaluated in terms of the total context of their careers.

This is one of the basic assumptions of auteur-ism, one that we have always taken for granted in literature, music, and the fine arts, but one that came very late to cinema because of the lack of archival facilities. Hence, film history existed long before there were qualified historians to appraise it. It might be said that the early auteurists discovered so many lost and forgotten treasures in the cinematheques that a theory of history was thrust upon them. They then suggested thematic and stylistic hypotheses which they sought to establish with the proof of a pattern of achievement. But movies were still alive and kicking, and individual careers were still evolving. Some auteurists had placed their bets on Hawks and Hitchcock, others on Renoir and Rossellini. Violent debates ensued between the partisans of Mizoguchi and Kurosawa, Dreyer and Bergman, Antonioni and Fellini, Walsh and Losey. No auteurist completely agreed with any other.

"The auteur theory itself," I wrote back in 1962, "is a pattern theory in constant flux." Despite all my disclaimers, qualifications, and reservations, however, a composite image of the auteurist emerged in anti-auteurist writings. Auteurists were invariably male (at least according to Pauline Kael). They never bathed because it took time away from their viewing of old movies. They shared a preposterous passion for Jerry Lewis. They preferred trash to art. They encouraged the younger generation not to read books.

Vidal himself seeks to establish a dialectical confrontation between the word and the image: "Movies are stories; only writers can tell stories. So the wrong people are making the movies." It might be argued by the defenders of directors that movies are stories told primarily through pictures, or, at least, movies should be stories told primarily through pictures. Vidal has an answer for that, too: "We do need the cameraman, the editor. But above all we need the script."

Vidal's position is not particularly audacious for Hollywood. One can imagine the ghosts of the old Hollywood moguls nodding in agreement with Vidal's summary dismissal of directors. All you need to make a good movie is a good story. Everybody on the Bel Air circuit knows that. A few years ago Esquire published a screenplay entitled *Two-Lane Blacktop* with a come-on across the cover to the effect that this was going to be the best movie of the year. When the critics and public failed to concur with Esquire's prediction, the magazine sheepishly shifted the blame to director Monte Hellman, accusing him of being an auteur. Actually, *Two-Lane Blacktop* was not such a bad movie at all. Choking on the exhaust fumes of the more vulgar and more violent *Easy Rider*, it never caught on at the box office with its subtly modernist malaise, and a brilliant performance by Warren Oates was wasted. This is one of the problems in resolving arguments between auteurists and anti-auteurists: The two sides can never agree entirely on what is good and what is bad. In opposition to the horror stories of Gore Vidal and Rex Reed, there is even a small cult for the movie version of Myra Breckenridge.

As much as Vidal jeers at even the most illustrious movie directors, he genuflects before the hosts of the television talk shows. Indeed, the tube may be the medium through which the elan Vidal flows most freely. Cynics may be unkind enough to suggest that a best-selling author has less to lose by attacking a Renoir or even a Rockefeller than by offending a Johnny Carson, a Merv Griffin, or a David Susskind. Curiously, an auteurist rationale of sorts can be devised for these autocrats of the coffee table in that they exercise a degree of stylistic influence on the way their guests talk—Carson tending toward the quizzical, Griffin the quixotic, and Susskind the querulous.

All in all, Vidal's is a very canny and self-serving attack on auteurism. Cinematic style does not seem to concern him at all, and he makes the startling observation at one point that better movies are adapted from bad books than from good books. This would seem to place him in the potentially embarrassing position of having to choose between literature and cinema. Also, he seems to disqualify himself as a possible director of even his own projects when he confesses that he has little patience with actors. It is to his credit that he is honest enough

to report peripheral insights even when they undermine his central thesis, and I hardly wish to flog him for his frankness. Still, he has chosen to follow in the not-so-grand tradition of anti-auteur-ists by setting up straw men in garish berets, and then blowing them down with the hot air of misplaced outrage.

If one were to examine the pertinent texts of the fifties, the sixties, or the seventies, one would be hard put to find a single generalization in auteurist criticism sweeping enough to justify the simplistic attacks made against it. For one thing, auteurism did not evolve in a vacuum. In the beginning, particularly, its preoccupation with visual structure and personal style was largely a reaction against the sloganized vocabulary of social significance and socialist realism. The open-minded and open-hearted French attitude toward myth and genre enabled a new generation of American critics to rediscover and reclaim the American cinema. Suddenly there was credit to parcel out for Hollywood's long despised output, whereas before the auteurs there was only blame. After fifteen years on the front lines, my own attitude to the auteurist controversy may have been summed up in the defiant words sung by the late Edith Piaf: *ilNon, non, je ne regrette rien.*

Still, if I had to do it all over again, I would reformulate the auteur theory with a greater emphasis on the tantalizing mystery of style than on the romantic agony of the artists. Why, I wondered back in the mid-fifties, had so many Hollywood movies endured as classics despite the generalized contempt of the highbrows? The auteur theory turned out to be a very workable hypothesis for this task of historical reevaluation. But I was never all that interested in the clinical "personalities" of directors, and I have never considered the interview as one of the indispensable weapons in my critical arsenal.

The interview is an autonomous art form like any other, and it follows that directors who give good interviews do not necessarily make good movies, and directors who give bad interviews do not necessarily make bad movies. I am, if anything, anti-interview in that I believe that a director's formal utterances (his films) tell us more about his artistic personality than do his informal utterances (his conversations).

That is why I was far more strongly influenced by the cinematheque-oriented critics on *Cahiers du Cinema* before 1960 than the tape-recorder interviewers on *Cahiers du Cinema* after 1960. It is not a question simply of Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol, Rohmer, Rivette, Valcroze, and others validating their pre-1960 critiques with their post-1960 film-making. I doubt that Gore Vidal has any notion of what Truffaut was writing about back in 1954 when Truffaut first articulated *La Politique des Auteurs* as an attack on the tradition of quality in the French cinema. Godard's translated criticism has merely mystified even his most determined American admirers. Having published twelve editions of *Cahiers du Cinema* in English between 1965 and 1967, I can testify that many of my French-speaking acquaintances in America were frequently unable to decipher the cryptic pronouncements of *Cahiers*.

Indeed, few people seem to be aware that my original article on the auteur theory was largely an examination of André Bazin's critique of *La Politique des Auteurs*. Vidal lumps together all French film critics into one monolithic auteurist bloc as if *Cahierism* was a national vice. Yet *Cahiers* never sold more than fifteen thousand copies of any monthly issue, and its opinions were violently opposed by other specialized French film publications, most notably and most persistently by *Positif* which made a point of preferring Huston to Hitchcock, and Fellini to Rossellini. For every Bazin in French film criticism there were a dozen French Bosley Crowthers and Siegfried Kra-cauers. One did not have to be an auteurist or a *Cahierist* to adore Jerry Lewis. He happened to be a very catholic French taste. In fact, the most prominent of the Lewis lovers were on the staff of *Positif*.

Similarly, the auteurs of the fifties and sixties did not introduce the cult of the director. Dwight Macdonald and John Grierson were writing very knowledgeably about Hollywood directors back in the early thirties. The great majority of film histories around the world have been organized in terms of the collected works of

individual directors. If, as Vidal implies, all that auteurism represents is an emphasis on directors, this so-called theory should be banished for its banality.

A great deal of confusion has been caused by the assumption that auteurism was inseparably linked with the personal tastes of individual critics. Since I was one of the first two American auteurs (along with the late Eugene Archer), I must bear a large part of the blame for this confusion. Let me state at this point, albeit belatedly, that auteurism and Sarrisism are not identical. Both, I hope, have been evolving over the past quarter of a century on a widening front of scholarly activity. Along the way, certain tendencies have clustered around auteur-ism to form a basis for discussion. Among these tendencies have been the antimontage writings of Andre Bazin, the many French meditations on *mise-en-scene*, Lawrence Alloway's celebrations of pop art, and Peter Wollen's valiant efforts to reconcile auteurism with semiotics. Some of these formulations conflicted with others to such an extent that alleged auteurs were often at each other's throats. I have written extensively on many of these internal conflicts, and I have no desire to rehash them now. What I propose instead is a report on the theoretical fallout from the polemical explosions of the past. An attempt will be made to add historical perspective to auteurism, and emerge with a usable residue of critical theory for 1977.

Bazin's most striking contribution to film aesthetics was the restoration of interest in the integrity of the visual field. If he did not actually demolish the montage theories of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Kuleshov, and Vertov, he did succeed in reducing these theories from imperatives to options. Bazin's writings were never systematic enough or comprehensive enough to establish new imperatives, and there is little indication that he ever wished to establish a new orthodoxy to replace the old. But he did change the way many critics looked at motion pictures. No longer was the ambiguity of the individual image disdained for the dialectical conflict between successive images. Examining both the deep focus shots in *Citizen Kane* and the slow pans in *Open City*, Bazin managed to link these two otherwise dissimilar films in a very ingenious concept of optical realism.

When Bazin's writings first began to filter across the Atlantic in the mid-fifties, the American cinema was in the midst of a formal crisis with wide screens. Most American reviewers either ignored the width altogether or dealt with it in isolation from the script. Wide-screen color canvases like *East of Eden* and *Rebel Without a Cause* were reviewed in America as if they were small-screen, black-and-white Philco Television Playhouse productions like *Marty*. I recall Claude Chabrol's attack on my review of *East of Eden* as "ennuyeux." He was right to the extent that my critique did not do justice to the film's emotional sweep encompassed in tilted, distended compositions. As for *Rebel Without a Cause*, Vidal has testified how unimpressed he was with this film during his salad days at the Chateau Marmont. Across the ocean in Paris, however, the French critics were ravished by Nicholas Ray's delirious *mise-en-scene*. What probably happened was that Vidal was listening to one film while the French were looking at another.

It is no secret that few if any of the French critics had a working command of English, and, of course, Gore Vidal's English has always been impeccable. This is not to say that the dialogue of a talking picture should be ignored, but, rather, that American movies 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 profound splendor. And it is to our everlasting disgrace that the French understood James Dean on a mythic level long before we did. Similarly, they understood how deeply Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* had influenced Alain Resnais's and Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Last Year at Marienbad*. While the New York critics were honoring Stanley Kramer's *The Defiant Ones*, the Cahiers critics were cheering Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil*. Obviously, their eyes were quicker than our ears.

In the long run, however, they could not have the last word on the American cinema, though they gave many of us the first glimpse of this elusive entity. American film criticism has not been the same since. There was a time when movies were judged almost entirely in terms of an absolute fidelity to social reality. Good intentions alone were too often considered the paving stones to heaven. By establishing the notion of individual creation in even the Hollywood cinema, the French shifted the critical emphasis away from the nature of content to the director's attitude toward the content.

This attitude was expressed through a somewhat mystical process called *mise-en-scene*, defined perhaps most eloquently by French critic-director Alexandre Astruc: "But Mizoguchi knows well that, after all, it is not very important for his film to turn out well; he is more concerned with knowing whether the strongest bonds between himself and his characters are those of tenderness or contempt. He is like the viewer who sees the reflection of pleasure on the features of the one he watches, even though he also knows quite well that it is not this reflection alone which he is seeking but perhaps quite simply the tedious confirmation of something he has always known but cannot refrain from verifying. So I consider *mise-en-scene* as a means of transforming the world into a spectacle given primarily to oneself—yet what artist does not know instinctively that what is seen is less important than the way of seeing, or of a certain way of needing to see or be seen."

As I wrote some years ago, I would suggest a definition of *mise-en-scene* that includes all the means available to a director to express his attitude toward his subject. This takes in cutting, camera movement, pacing, the direction of players and their placement in the decor, the angle and distance of the camera, and even the content of the shot. *Mise-en-scene* 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.

Bazin, Astruc, and Roger Leenhardt caused a ferment in film aesthetics by demystifying so-called "pure" cinema. There was no such entity, they insisted. We could now discuss such hitherto *verbo-ten* subjects as adaptations without placing surgical masks over our faces. What were once considered germs from the other arts were now treated as vitamins. Hence, whereas Agee worried that Olivier's film treatment of *Henry V* was not truly cinematic, Bazin applauded Olivier for honoring cinema by honoring theater.

The French critics tended to brush aside the distinctions between cinema as a medium and cinema as an art form. "The cinema is everything," Godard declared. And he meant it. Every scrap of film was grist for his sensibility. The cinema was no longer a holy temple to which only certain sanctified works were admitted. Cinema was to be found on every movie screen in the world, and Hollywood movies were no less cinematic than anything else. There was still room for disagreement in this new critical climate, but the disputes were couched in terms more relative than absolute.

About the time that *auteurism* was swimming across the English Channel to London's movie-manes, and across the Atlantic to New York's film cultists, pop art exploded all across the cultural landscape, and nothing has seemed the same since. The two movements converged uneasily in the sixties in such multifaceted artifacts as Richard Lester's *A Hard Day's Night* with the Beatles, John Boorman's *Having a Wild Weekend* with the Dave Clark Five, Jean-Luc Godard's *One Plus One* with the Rolling Stones, the experimental kinetics of Frank Zappa, and the personal appearances on film of Bob Dylan.

Lawrence Alloway, who had coined the term "pop art," proposed "a criticism of movies as a pop art which can have a critical currency beyond that of footnotes and preposterous learning." Alloway thereby came into conflict with the scholarly tendencies of *auteurism*. The terms in which he defined the cinema—whether as "the index of a *Bau-delairean* art of modern life" with "modernity" defined by Baudelaire as "that which is ephemeral, fugitive, contingent upon the occasion" or as "the art synthesis proposed by Wagner, the total work to which all arts contribute"—were terms that pertained more to sociological criticism than to *auteur-ist* criticism. For the

hard-core auteurs, the hitherto despised Hollywood movies could be judged as high art. For Alloway, high art had been supplanted by pop art, and new forms of judgment were required. Alloway's stress on the topicality and expendability of movies as consumer products was not without a certain ironic condescension toward the medium. By contrast, most auteurs tended to view movies as sacred relics of a spiritual medium. Their tone was reverent and, hence, vulnerable. Their only excuse (and mine) was that they thought that they were writing only for other believers.

No one to my knowledge has ever commented on the Kierkegaard quotation from *Either/Or* with which I introduced my 1962 auteur article: "I call these sketches shadowgraphs, partly by the designation to remind you at once that they derive from the darker side of life, partly because like other shadowgraphs they are not directly visible. When I take a shadowgraph in my hand, it makes no impression on me, and gives me no clear conception of it. Only when I hold it up opposite the wall, and now look not directly at it, but at that which appears on the wall, am I able to see it. So also with the picture which does not become perceptible until I see through the external. This external is perhaps quite unobtrusive but not until I look through it do I discover that inner picture which I desire to show you, an inner picture too delicately drawn to be outwardly visible, woven as it is of the tenderest moods of the soul."

Kierkegaard's "inner picture" eventually found its way into my essay as "interior meaning," a term that gave me a great deal of trouble at the time, but one that has since come to define what all serious film criticism seeks to discover. Pace, Gore Vidal. Auteurism has less to do with the way movies are made than with the way they are elucidated and evaluated. It is more a critical instrument than a creative inspiration. Peter Wollen has suggested the hypothetical nature of the enterprise, and I will go along with that. The cinema is a deep, dark mystery that we auteurs are attempting to solve. It is a labyrinth with a treacherous resemblance to reality. I suppose that the difference between auteurs and structuralists is the difference between knowing all the questions before finding the answers, and knowing all the answers before formulating the questions.

At this late date I am prepared to concede that auteurism is and always has been more a tendency than a theory, more a mystique than a methodology, more an editorial policy than an aesthetic procedure. Contrary to anti-auteurist legends, auteurist critics around the world are an unruly lot. For the most part, they do not describe themselves as auteurs. They are content to describe the stylistic and thematic epiphanies of their favorite auteurs.

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