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Film and Authorship

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The Revenge of the Author

This essay is an attempt to bring into alignment two major and contradictory areas of my own experience. I have had few intellectual experiences that so deeply marked me as the introduction to the work of Barthes in the late 1960s. Barthes's emphasis on the sociality of writing and the transindividuality of its codes has been a major and continuing gain in our understanding of literature and its functioning. At the same time, I have always been uneasy about the attempt to abolish notions of authorship entirely, and this uneasiness grew when, in the mid-eighties, I became actively involved in the making of films. The most general concern of the cast and crew of a film, not to mention the producer, is that the director know what film he is making, that there be an author on the set.

There is no more elegant statement of Barthes's opposition to the concept of the author than his extraordinarily influential essay titled "The Death of the Author," which summarised many of the most powerful theses of *S/Z*. Barthes's concern, in both the brief essay and the major study, was to stress the reality of the textual: the contradictory series of relations that a text enters into with the writings that precede it. The project may seem to have something in common with the New Critical attack on the author, but its aims are very different. New Criticism sought to liberate the text's meaning from the unfortunate contingencies of an author's time and place. Barthes's attempt is to liberate the text from meaning altogether. The author becomes for Barthes the privileged social instance of this meaning. The massive investment in the author which we witness in contemporary culture is for Barthes an investment in meaning, an attempt to stabilise the fragmentation of identity. Without the author as the crucial function that grounds and identifies the text, we could begin to emphasise how the text obliterates all grounds, all identities: "Writing is that neutral composite oblique space where our

From *The Eloquence of the Vulgar* (London: British Film Institute, 1999). Reprinted by permission of the author.

subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing."[1]

Barthes emphasises the priority of language in writing and derides any aesthetic based on expression. All one is able to analyse in a text is a mixture, more accurately a montage of writings, and the writer's only activity thus becomes that of editor—regulating the mix of the writings. It is at the moment we grasp the nature of the textual that we can also understand that the determination of the multiple writings making up the text is to be focused on the reader and not the writer: "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination." But Barthes goes farther than any orthodox kind of reception theory: "This destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted."[2]

Where are we to locate this etiolated ghost of a reader liberated from identity? How, historically, are we to place a reader without history, biography, psychology, and how can we socially situate his, her, or (as the lack of determination obviously includes gender) its emergence? The answer is to be found in considering modernism as a response to educational and social developments that posed readership as a major problem. It is Derrida who has stressed a constant fear of writing in terms of the inability of an author to control the reader's construction of reading. Derrida's concern has been to indicate how this lack of control is general to all situations of language use. What Derrida does not stress, however, is the historicity of this problem, the particular way in which technological advances pose this problem in specific forms to which there are specific responses. The advent of printing radically altered the relations of writer and reader, and our familiar category of author can be read in relation to that new technology. Whereas before printing all reading involved the prior transmission of an individual text, printing suddenly produced an audience which with the author is not, even in the attenuated relation of individual copying, directly related.

If we look back to the Renaissance, we find that the etymologically prior meanings of the word "author" stress the notion of both cause and authority without any special reference to written texts but it is in relation to the new technology of printing and the associated new legal relations that our own concept of author is elaborated.[3] Once tied to the printed object, the national author of the vernacular languages replaced

the classical authorities—and replaced them by virtue of his or her individual power. There are few clearer examples of this process than Milton. It is rarely stressed that in beginning his famous attack on Parliament's attempt to regulate printing Milton explicitly excludes "that part which preserves justly every man's copy to himselfe,"[4] for its ordinance of June 14, 1643 was the first properly to recognise copyright. But Milton's interest in copyright and his minute concern with the exact details of his printed text make clear how the new category of author relates to legal and technological changes.[5]

Most important, however, is the new relation to the audience which is thus figured. The dialogue implied in both the popular dramatic forms and the circulated manuscripts is replaced by a literal petrifying of meanings. Milton's first published poem, one of the prefatory poems to Shakespeare's Second Folio, uses the metaphor of readers turned into marble monuments to Shakespeare's "unvalu'd book." The audience may not be universal, may be fit though few, but it is certainly not an audience actively engaged in dialogue with the text. The act of composition is the poet's alone. Milton's blindness and the image of his solitary composition is almost an essential part of his literary definition. But the solitary author gains, in complementary definition, the possibility of a national audience.

When this concept is given a Romantic turn, the author ceases to authorise a national vernacular, but the new definition in terms of the solitary imagination and a local speech continues to presuppose, in its very definition, a potential national audience, although an audience now seen as at odds with the dominant social definitions. What brings the categories of both author and national audience under attack is the universal literacy of the nineteenth century, the production for the first time of a literate population. As the capitalist economy responded to this new market with the production of those mass-circulation newspapers that herald the beginning of our recognisably modern culture, we entered a new historical epoch of communication in which any author's claim to address his or her national audience became hopelessly problematic. Mass literacy spelled an end to any such possibility. There is now no conception of the national audience not threatened by a vaster audience that will not listen; the traditional elite strategies that defined the audience by those who were excluded are irredeemably ruined by those who will simply not pay attention. This historical situation is one of the crucial determinations of modernism, when all universal claims for art seem fatally compromised. Barthes's fundamental aesthetic is borrowed from the

modernist reaction to this problem—a writing for an ideal and unspecified reader, for that reader who, in Nietzsche's memorable phrase is "far off," that ideal Joycean reader who devotes an entire life to the perusal of a single text.

There seems to me to be a historical explanation of why we get such a powerful resurgence of the modern aesthetic in France, and it is to be found in the delayed but very powerful impact of the consumer society there in the decade from the mid-fifties to the mid-sixties. The fascination with and distaste for mass culture which runs through work as diverse as that of Barthes, the Situationists, and Godard indicates the extent to which the dissolution of the relations that supported traditional culture were widely felt and perceived. The paradox of modernism is that it fully lives the crisis of the audience while postulating an ideal audience in the future; it fully explores the slippage of significations which become so pressing as a securely imagined audience disappears while holding out the promise of a future in which this signification will be held together. The form of this future ideal audience has been conceived across a range of possibilities throughout the twentieth century. After 1968 in France, however, the favoured solution was the alliance of avant-garde art and revolutionary politics which had marked post-Revolutionary Russia and pre-Nazi Germany and which theorised the audience in terms of a political mandate authorised by a future revolutionary society.

Barthes's classless, genderless, completely indeterminate reader is yet another version of the solution to the modernist dilemma, but it preserves the crucial relation of author and reader bequeathed by the national literary tradition. Indeed, that preservation can be seen in the way that Derrida's project (closely related to Barthes's) was so eagerly seized in the United States as a way of preserving the traditional literary canon against radical curricular reform. Foucault in a famous and almost contemporary article signals this danger. Speaking of the concept of *écriture* and its emphasis on the codes of writing, he warns that the concept "has merely transposed the empirical characteristics of an author to a transcendental anonymity" and that it thus "sustains the privileges of the author."[6]

It is the case, however, that Foucault shares Barthes's commitment to those aspects of literary modernism which concentrate on the difficulty of the author's position. Beckett's "What matter who's speaking, someone said, what matter who's speaking" acts as a kind of epigraph for the essay.[7] Despite Foucault's emphasis on the need to look beyond literature if we are to understand the functioning of the author and despite his concern

to trace the history of authorship, the entire article is still written with an emphasis on the untenability of the traditional Romantic valuation of the author as the originator of discourse. In Foucault there is no consideration of the new forms of education and entertainment which have rendered that position untenable but, in the same moment, have opened up new possibilities.

It is significant that when Foucault does mention he has limited his discussion to the author of the written word that he catalogues his omission in terms of painting and music—arts whose development is contemporary with, and indeed dependent on, the evolution I have sketched within national cultures. Foucault offers no discussion at all of the cinema, which not only displaced the dominance of the written word but also introduced radical new relations between texts and audiences. This omission is in some way all the more surprising since a mere decade earlier *Cahiers du Cinéma* had half elaborated a new concept of the author in relation to cinema. I say "half elaborated" because the *Cahiers* critics (François Truffaut, Eric Rohmer, Jean-Luc Godard, and Jacques Rivette) never saw their task in theoretical terms. Their concerns were polemical and specific. Above all they were concerned with the importance of the script for the construction of a film. They saw the weakness of the French cinema in terms of its overvaluation of the written element in film, which failed to take account of the mise-en-scène which was accomplished by emphasising the role of the metteur-en-scène, the director. This emphasis went hand in hand with the second task: the redescription of the huge archive of Hollywood cinema by selecting from its thousands of films a series of corpuses that could be identified through the consistent use of mise-en-scène, the consistency being provided by those directors (John Ford, Raoul Walsh, Howard Hawks—the names are now familiar) who could be called "authors."

The project is thus curiously at variance with the literary use of the term "author." For Barthes, the author is the figure used to obscure the specificity of the textual. For *Cahiers*, the author, while sharing the Romantic features of creativity, inferiority, etc., was the figure used to emphasise the specificity of the codes that went to make up the cinema. It is exactly that mix that makes for the interest and pleasure of those articles, and no one was more elegant than Truffaut in his juxtapositions:

> You can refute Hawks in the name of Ray (or vice versa) or admit them both, but to anyone who would reject them both I make so bold as to say this: *Stop going to the cinema, don't watch any more films, you will never know the meaning of inspiration, of a viewfinder, of poetic intuition, a frame, a shot, an idea, a good film, the cinema.*

The emphasis of this sentence, which I re-emphasise, is the necessity of understanding film in terms of the relation between the fundamental articulations of the cinema (viewfinder, frame, shot) and the fundamental themes of great art (inspiration, poetic intuition, idea). The scandal of *Cahiers*, however, is that it insisted on the relevance of themes of great art to a form whose address to the audience neglected all the qualifications of education, class, and nationality which the various national cultures of Europe had been so concerned to stress. This position is interesting because it is a theory of the author produced both in relation to the materiality of the form and also—and this is crucial—from the point of view of the audience.[8]

The attempts, in the late sixties and seventies, to develop this concern with the materiality of the form and to analyse further the cinematic codes that *Cahiers* had been the first to bring into discursive focus, ran into inevitable epistemological and political impasses because they sought to undertake the development without any recourse to the category of the author. The difficulties are clear in the pages of *Screen*, which most consistently tried to carry out this theoretical project. The logic of the codes revealed in analysis was not located in any originating consciousness but was immanent to the text itself. The emphasis on the textuality of meaning, independent of the conditions of either production or reception, brought great gains but, like Barthes's project of the late sixties (to which it was very closely allied), it rested on very precarious epistemological ground, constantly veering between freezing the text outside any but the most general pragmatic constraints (provided by psychoanalysis) and collapsing it into a total relativism and subjectivism where the reading inhered in the reader.

Parenthetically one might remark that it is not clear even from close reading of the *Screen* of this period that the category of author was ever abandoned according to the theoretical programme. Perhaps the most powerful single piece from that period, Stephen Heath's exemplary analysis of Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil*, unites formal and narrative determination in the attempt by the detective Quinlan (Welles) to keep control of his cane.[9] When we consider the significance of the signifier cane in Welles's own biography, then it is obvious that Heath's text as we have it is radically incomplete, needing elaboration in terms of Welles's own life and his relation to the institutions of cinema. *Screen*'s aim of producing

readings independent of their grounding within specific determinates of meaning was always suspect. If there was great importance in emphasising the potential polysemy of any text, its potential for infinitisation, and if there was fundamental significance in analysing the transindividual codes from which any text was composed, it is still the case that texts are continuously determined in their meanings. The question is how we are to understand those determinations without producing, on the one hand, an author autonomously creating meanings in a sphere anterior to their specific articulation and, on the other, an audience imposing whatever meaning it chooses on a text.

It may be helpful in answering this problem to consider from a theoretical perspective the process of filmmaking. However one is to understand the collectivities at work in the production of a written text, it is obvious at a very simple level in the production of films that it is directly counterintuitive to talk of one responsible author. Even a very cheap feature film involves thirty to forty people working together over a period of some six months, and the mass of copyright law and trade union practice which has grown up around film has largely as its goal the ever more precise specification of "creativity," the delineation of areas (design, lighting, makeup, costume) where an individual or individuals can be named in relation to a particular element of the final artifact. The experience of production relations within a film makes clear how one can award an authorial primacy to the director without adopting any of the idealist presuppositions about origin or homogeneity which seem to arise unbidden in one's path. If we are to talk of an audience for a film, then, at least in the first instance, that audience cannot be theorised in relation to the empirical audience or to the readings that audience produces. So varied are the possibilities of such readings and so infinite the determinations that enter into such a calculation that it is an impossible task. Indeed, were it possible to calculate the readings produced by any specific film, then the Department of Reader Response would be the most important section of any film studio, and Hollywood would be a less anxious place with much greater security of tenure.

Any future audience can be approached only through the first audience for the film—the cast and crew who produced it. It is the director's skill in making others work together to produce a film, which is of necessity invisible at the outset, that determines the extent to which the film will be successfully realised. It is the collective determination to make visible something that has not been seen before that marks the successful production of a film, and it is insofar as the producers of the film are also its

first audience that we can indicate the dialectic that places the author not outside the text but within the process of its production. It might be said further that such an analysis provides an ethic that is certainly important and may be crucial in differentiating among the numerous productions of the new popular forms of capitalist culture. I venture to suggest that those elements in popular culture which genuinely mark important areas of desire and reflection are those where the producers have been concerned in the first place to make something for themselves. Where the determination is simply to produce a work for a predefined audience from which the producers exclude themselves, one will be dealing with that meretricious and toxic repetition that is the downside of the new forms of mechanical and electronic production. A further generalisation would be that genuine creativity in popular culture is constantly to be located in relation to emergent and not yet fully defined audiences.

The process of filmmaking indicates not only how the moment of creation integrally entails the figuring of the audience but also how that audience is figured in relation to a reality that thus achieves social effectivity. This is a solution to the problem of realism which avoids the trap of representation (which elides the effectivity of the textual) and the snare of endless textuality (which endlessly defers the text's relation to the real). The repositioning of the reader or viewer by the work of art in relation to a social reality is thereby altered by the repositioning that allows the traditional heuristic and oppositional claims of realism without its traditional epistemology.[10]

Considerations of this order enable us to conceptualise the author as a contradictory movement within a collectivity rather than as a homogeneous, autonomous, and totalising subject. If the process of filmmaking allows us an obvious way of seeing the author in a plurality of positions, it should not be taken as an empirical formula for the studying of authors. If one were to take a specific film and attempt to constitute the author in relation to this first audience, one would be faced by a multiplication of the determinations on that audience to a level that makes any exhaustive analysis not simply technically but theoretically impossible. The usefulness of the film analogy, and the usefulness of the *Cahiers* critics who deliberately adopted a position similar to that of experienced technicians, is that it indicates the multiplicity of positions in which we must locate the author. It should not be thought, however, that the theoretical task is to specify the determinations that would limit the possible meanings of the texts in relation to possible positions in which it could be produced and received. Such a dream of scientific rigour discounts that our own position

as reader is always present in any such calculation and that the very fact of a future allows for positions as yet unaccounted for. It should be stressed at this point that infinity once again becomes a real term in the analysis.

The difference between this conception of infinity, however, and Barthes's, is that whereas Barthes's is located in some atemporal and idealist account of meaning, this infinity is rooted in a historical and materialist account of significations. Marx so dominates our thinking about materialism that it may seem at first that any conception of infinite determinations is hostile to materialism. For over two millennia, however, it was the commitment to an infinity of worlds that distinguished materialist thought from the variety of religious views to which it was opposed. Indeed, it may well be that Marx's own unwillingness to produce the philosophy of dialectical materialism derived from his understanding of the centrality of infinity to any materialist philosophy.

If we are to understand the implications of these considerations for any practice of criticism, there is no doubt that the only place to start is with the most important example we have of materialist criticism: Walter Benjamin's fragments, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism.*[11] In a stunning tour de force Benjamin commences with an analysis of Baudelaire's physiognomy and its resemblance to that of a professional conspirator and then weaves in and out of the social and literary text as he moves from the taverns, where the political conspirators gather, to the question of the wine tax and how the tax relates to the poem on the ragpicker. He reintegrates the question of wine into the social spectacle of Paris—as the drunk family weaves its way home—and into its political economy: the *vin de la barrière* produced by the wine tax absorbs several social pressures that might otherwise threaten the government. Benjamin's method is to start with the doxa of nineteenth-century life and to work through until connections begin to reveal themselves. Eschewing any theory of mediations, he uses montage to imbricate the literary and social text. There is no question of judging this method in terms of cause and effect within a social totality (all of which categories in this context become idealist): the crucial causal relation is between the analyst and the past and is a truly dialectical one in which the proofs of reading develop in the analysis. Such methods are extremely alien to academic thought, and it is not surprising that the academic Theodor Adorno was so repelled by this text. In that most discouraging of letters which he sends to Benjamin in November 1938, he takes almost personal exception to "that particular type of concreteness and its behavioristic overtones" and warns Benjamin that "materialist determination of cultural traits is only

possible if it is mediated through the *total social process.*"[12] But to imagine that the social process can be totalised is to misunderstand the living relation of the present, which determines that the past can be totalised only for now. It has no totality in itself but rather an infinite number of possibilities vis-à-vis a future it cannot know but which will bring it to life.

Benjamin saw quite clearly that the notion of "totality" and its associated concept of mediation were attractive because they were an attempt to fetishise the past into a controllable finitude and to avoid the risks of scholarly engagement in the present. His reply to Adorno stresses the personal basis of his own study and his need to keep the contradictions of his personal concerns in tension with "the experiences which all of us shared in the past 15 years." He distinguished sharply between this productive contradiction and a "mere loyalty to dialectical materialism." Indeed, so deep and productive is the opposition between the personal and the social that Benjamin refers to it as "an antagonism of which I would not even in my dreams wish to be relieved." And he goes on to state that "the overcoming of this antagonism consititutes the problem of my study."[13] It seems to me that his disagreement with Adorno was to dominate his thoughts for the short period of life that remained. The major text of that period is the fulgurant and elliptical paragraphs which compose the theses on the philosophy of history. I now find it impossible to read those paragraphs except as a prolonged and mediated reply to the *bêtise* of Adorno's letter. The constant opposition between the historicist and the historical materialist is fully comprehensible only if we read the text, in large measure, as an expression of the opposition between Adorno and himself. Every line of that remarkable text repays study, but for current purposes I want merely to quote the first half of the sixteenth thesis:

> An historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism gives the "eternal" image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past.

Benjamin here makes clear the extent to which the critic enters into a full relation with the past in which his or her present reveals the past as it is for us. The crucial problem here is how we are to understand that "us." How does the critic's (and notice that the term must here be considered interchangeable with "historian") personal constitution relate to any wider social collectivity? Where Adorno relies on concepts of totality

and mediation to constitute a fixed social past, Benjamin in the theses relentlessly uses the concept of "class struggle" to locate us in a mobile social present. The virtue of the concept is that it emphasises contradiction and division; its weakness is that it is very doubtful that any current definition of class, either Marxist or sociological, will not limit its contents to a reductive notion of the economic. The rhetorical function this concept plays in the theses cannot be sustained when it is given any substantial investigation. Benjamin would find himself limited to another form of the Adorno criticism from those who would demand "political correctness" in the present rather than "the total social process" in the past.

To elaborate Benjamin it would be necessary to build some notion of a social unconscious into the notion of class struggle. It is interesting that in early drafts of the "Arcades" project Benjamin had relied on Jung, for it is Jung, of course, who does propose a transindividual unconscious. Unfortunately Jung's concept of the collective unconscious is so historically unspecific that it is completely unequal to the task proposed. But the references to both Jung and Georg Simmel are not to be condemned from the pious position of the orthodox Adorno. They indicate a dimension that must be added to notions of class struggle which would radically transform that notion.

Without presuming on the content of such a transformation, one can indicate some of the effects of introducing the unconscious into the investigation of the past. The historical critic, the critical historian, brings to the past the currency of his or her own epoch; the effort to make the past speak must inevitably draw on resources of which the critic is unaware and which appear only in the construction of the past. The risks are considerable and there can be no question of guarantees. Adorno recalled Benjamin's remarking that each idea of the "Arcades" project had to be wrested away from a realm in which madness reigns, a realm in which the distinction between the nonsensically individual and the significantly collective disappears.[14] In this respect a critical work shares significant similarities with the creative work it analyses. The author finds him- or herself in their audience.

NOTES

There was one massive contradiction in film theory of the seventies. On the one hand there was the elaboration of theories—linguistic, psychoanalytical and Marxist—which challenged the primacy of the conscious subject. On the other, the auteur theory (which depended on just such a notion of the primacy of the conscious subject) was unavoidable: in its weak

form, simply as a necessary descriptive grid for the archive; in its strong form, still a crucial evaluative term. The essay presented here tried to use my experience as a producer to elaborate an account of the role of the director which would square these particular theoretical circles. Two conferences in the United States, one organised by Fredric Jameson at Duke University in 1987 and the other by David Simpson at the University of Colorado in 1988, allowed me to organise my thoughts.

1. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text: Essays*, selected and trans. by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142.
2. Ibid., 148.
3. See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 192.
4. *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don Wolfe, 8 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953–82), vol. 2, 491.
5. See, for example, Mindele Treip, *Milton's Punctuation and Changing English Usage. 1582–1676* (London: Methuen, 1970).
6. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 120.
7. Ibid., 93.
8. François Truffaut, "A Wonderful Certainty," in *Cahiers du cinéma, the 1950s: New Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*, ed. Jim Hillier (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 108.
9. Stephen Heath, "Film and System: Terms of Analysis," *Screen* 16 (1975), no. 1, 7–77; no. 2, 91–113.
10. For details of this argument, see my "Realism: Balzac and Barthes," in Colin MacCabe, *Theoretical Essays: Film, Linguistics, Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 130–50.
11. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: New Left Books, 1973).
12. Adorno to Benjamin in Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: New Left Books, 1976), 129.
13. Benjamin to Adorno, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, 136.
14. Adorno to Benjamin, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, 127.