AUTEUR THEORY

“The auteur theory is a way of reading and appraising films through the imprint of an auteur (author), usually meant to be the director.”

Andre Bazin was the founder, in 1951, of Cahiers du cinema and is often seen as the father of auteurism because of his appreciation of the world-view and style of such artists as Charlie Chaplin and Jean Renoir. It was younger critics at the magazine who developed the idea further, drawing attention to significant directors from the Hollywood studio era as well as European directors.

François Truffaut, possibly the most polemic Cahiers critic, coined the phrase ‘politique des auteurs’ (referring to the aesthetic policy of venerating directors). The French critics were responding to the belated influx of American films in France after World War Two (they had been held back by import restrictions for a number of years). Thus, directors like Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock and John Ford were hailed, often extravagantly, as major artists of the cinema.

Critics like Truffaut knew that American filmmakers were working within the restrictions of the Hollywood system and that the types of films and their scripts were often decided for them. But they believed that such artists could nonetheless achieve a personal style in the way they shot a film — the formal aspects of it and the themes that they might seek to emphasise (eg. Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol wrote a book on Hitchcock in which they highlighted recurrent themes in his films, including the transfer of guilt). With other, often European directors, the stamp of the auteur often involved them scripting and fashioning their own material.

With their auteurist approach, the French critics justified their appreciation of the Hollywood films they loved and to criticise the respectable French mainstream, which they viewed as having gone stale and uncinematic. It was an idealist declaration which provided something of a blueprint for their ensuing careers as film directors in their own rights, distinctive artists with a discernable personal styles and preoccupations.

The idea of the auteur gained currency in America in the 1960s through Andrew Sarris. He devised the notion of auteur theory (the French critics had never claimed the concept to be a ‘theory’). He used it to tell the history of American filmmaking through the careers and work of individuals, classifying them according to their respective talents.

“Over a group of films a director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature.” Andrew Sarris

Sarris’s approach led to the formation of a canon of great directors. But Hollywood was wary of the idea that it produced art rather than entertainment. Biographer Donald Spoto says that Hitchcock’s book of interviews with Truffaut “hurt and disappointed just about everybody who had ever worked with Alfred Hitchcock, for the interviews reduced the writers, the designers, the photographers, the composers, and the actors to little other than elves in the master carpenter's workshop. The book is a valuable testimony to Truffaut's sensibilities, and to Hitchcock's brilliantly lean cinematic style. It is also a masterpiece of Hitchcockian self-promotion.” Many other Hollywood directors rejected the idea of themselves as serious artists: they just made movies. Many directors in the studio system would see themselves as un-self-conscious craftsmen. Others, like Hitchcock, cultivated their persona (he revelled in the guise of ‘the master of suspense’, introduced his own TV series and appeared in cameo form in many of his films.

Today, the notion of the individual as auteur is less theoretically constrained, so that we might consider actors as auteurs as well as directors and producers. The key thing is that a recognisable imprint is left on a body of films, and this may involve varying levels of creative input. For example, in the Laurel and Hardy partnership, Stan Laurel made the significant decisions about their act whilst Oliver Hardy did little more than turn up and get on with his job. But on screen we are only aware of the combined and instantly recognisable effect of the two performing together. When considering an actor, the important question to address is the kind of identity he/she projects and how this identity is created through their performances. Is their
persona stable, or does it vary? Sometimes, actors are cast against type or give a markedly
different performance to that with which they are associated – what is the effect of this?

Extract from “The Singer or the Song?” (Ellen Cheshire):
Author As Production Worker

Is it possible for a director to personally carry out every aspect of production? Surely, if
the director is the true Auteur this is what is required. If the director does not fulfill all the
production functions, how is the 'author' of a film identified and established?

This is a question frequently asked, and the answer varies depending on how the film was
made. For example, if the film was made independently and was written, directed, starred,
produced by the same person - Woody Allen say - it is quite acceptable to claim that he is an
Auteur, whose unique style can be found from one film to the next. Hence it has generally been
agreed that those directors who work(ed) outside the mainstream are more prone to encompass a
variety of production tasks within the role of director, and therefore it can be considered that the
film's artistic vision is more likely to be their own. These directors take on the multi-task role for
a number of reasons, such as to save money or maintain control. Directors within this category
include: Art Cinema (Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini), American Independent (Quentin
Tarrantino, Woody Allen), French New Wave (Jean-Luc Godard, Francois Truffaut), Silent
Cinema (G W Griffiths, Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton).

However, 'Auteurs' have also emerged from the heyday of Hollywood (John Ford,
William Wyler) when films were made in almost factory-like conditions, with directors being
assigned projects, complete with script, cast and production crew, the completed film being a
product of the combined efforts of many rather than by an individual. However, in general, the
role of director comes closest to co-ordinating all stages of production which have most impact on
the way a film looks and sounds. The director must have control over and responsibility for the
myriad of tasks required to make a film, and combine them to fulfil one voice and one vision. The
role of a director can be seen to be similar to that of a conductor of an orchestra. The conductor
may not be able to play all the instruments, but he must be able to combine them to create a
harmonious arrangement of music.

One of the primary reasons the Auteur Theory persists and the acceptance of the 'Director
as Star' continues is for marketing and promotional reasons. It is far easier to sell an established
director's film to an already educated audience than to sell a film from a first time director.
Marketing campaigns are planned around the logical premise that 'if you liked X's last film, you'll
love their new one', thereby reaffirming that it is the Director's input alone that creates a film's
individual style.

Prior to the emergence of the Auteur Theory, films had previously been studied and
marketed by their genre or their stars. However the Auteur theory allowed film to be discussed
seriously and created a new way for films to be viewed and studied, especially in Hollywood
where commercial film-makers, whose work had generally been treated as a craft rather than art,
suddenly found their movies studied in universities all over the world. This helped to promote the
role of the director in the public's eye, creating the phenomenon of 'The Director as Star.' Current
'stars' include Martin Scorsese, Stephen Spielberg, Woody Allen and Quentin Tarrantino. Both
the desire for the Director to become the star, and the Director's need for the Auteur Theory can
be found in the following quote from Roman Polanski: "To me, the director is a superstar. The
best films are best because of nobody but the director. You speak of Citizen Kane or 8½ or Seven
Samurai it's thanks to the director who was the star of it. He makes the film, he creates it."
(Roman Polanski in The Film Director As Superstar by Joseph Gelmis, Pelican Books, 1970)

'It [Auteur Theory] sure as shit isn't true in Hollywood' (William Goldman, Adventures In
The Screentrade, Futura, 1983) As with all theories, there is always another point of view.
Thinking about the film-making process logically, the Auteur Theory does not stand a chance.
Compare the process of writing a novel - one person sitting in a room writing - to that of film.
Film is a collaborative effort, which needs the input of a multitude of trained professionals to create the finished product. One only needs to sit through the end credits of any feature film to see how many people are involved in making it. Each person brings their own creative input. Some get a chance to use it, others do not. Therefore, how can it be believed that the director (any director) is the film's true author and creative genius when millions of dollars are being spent on specialist creative contributors. William Goldman states that he has never met anyone working in the Hollywood film industry who believes in the Auteur Theory, including the directors themselves. He states that it is the combined effort of trained professionals that bring the film's coherent vision to the fore and claims that the seven most important contributors are, in alphabetical order: the actor, the cameraman, the director, the editor, the producer, the production designer and the writer.

This confirms that film-making is a group endeavour and to elevate one person's contribution above that of another is unacceptable. However, as Peter Woollen readily admits in 'The Auteur Theory', 'the director's primary task is often one of co-ordination and rationalisation' and can be dangerous for any one person to believe that they are indispensable and can do no wrong.

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Bored of Directors
Why can't a screenwriter be an auteur, too?
By Doree Shafrir
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In last Sunday's New York Times, Terrence Rafferty wrote about the fight between writer Guillermo Arriaga and director Alejandro González Iñárritu over their new film Babel, which opens today. Rafferty quoted Arriaga as saying, "When they say it's an auteur film, I say auteurs film. I have always been against the 'film by' credit on a movie. It's a collaborative process and it deserves several authors." Rafferty went on to write that Arriaga's "relatively uncombative tone may … disguise a rather more aggressive agenda."

While Rafferty neatly laid out the nature of the conflict between Arriaga and González Iñárritu, he assumed readers had a context for the debate. But what does it mean to be an auteur, and why does being considered one matter so much to filmmakers?

The word auteur can be confusing because it can be used to refer to any type of artist's unique style—a painter can be an auteur, as can a musician. But there's a difference between the word auteur and auteur theory, which relates specifically to film and is part of a cinematic debate that has raged for the better part of 50 years. The word itself is derived from the French for author, and the first definition of auteur in Merriam-Webster's online dictionary is "a film director whose practice accords with the auteur theory" (the second definition is "an artist [as a musician or writer] whose style and practice are distinctive"). M-W defines auteur theory as "a view of filmmaking in which the director is considered the primary creative force in a motion picture."

The term auteur first entered the cinematic lexicon in French New Wave director François Truffaut's 1954 essay "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema," which appeared in the influential film journal Cahiers du Cinema. Truffaut argued that the tools available to the director were roughly synonymous with an author's pen. The way the director used them articulated his or her vision. Reduced to its essence, an auteur, then, would have a distinctive vision or style, one that was recognizable in all of his or her films. And (most important in the context of the debate between Arriaga and González Iñárritu), the screenwriter, to Truffaut, was significantly less important than the director.
It took an American film critic, Andrew Sarris (who today reviews movies for the New York Observer), to popularize the term in the United States. In a 1962 essay titled "Notes on the Auteur Theory," Sarris expanded on Truffaut's ideas, saying that in order for a director to be an auteur, he or she had to possess a certain degree of technical competence, a personal style, and what Sarris termed "interior meaning," or subtext. With these thoughts, Sarris laid the groundwork for what would become one of the defining debates of film studies over the next few decades. For many of those years, Sarris' perspective was seen as the antithesis of film critic Pauline Kael's. In a 1965 essay, "Circles and Squares," Kael took auteurist film critics to task for what she saw as their blind loyalty to auteur directors whose films entered a sort of canon immediately, simply because they had been made by a particular director. In an especially damning comparison, she equated critical loyalty to an auteur director, no matter what the quality of his or her films, to loving a clothing label. Later, some critics argued that auteur theory amounted to little more than fetishization of a director whose work was valued more than the work of everyone else who worked on a film. That's why saying "A Martin Scorsese Film" on a movie poster can be so galling to, say, a screenwriter—especially a screenwriter like Arriago, who has been heralded for the indelible imprint he leaves on his work.

But the debate is more than an academic concern, or even one of popular recognition. Money and awards are accorded to "film by" credits, and with these credits come power and the freedom to pursue the projects directors want. Entrance into the auteur canon, for a director, can mean the difference between having to make the movie the studio wants you to make and the movie you want to make.

It's clear that González Iñárritu, director of highly stylized films Amores Perros, 21 Grams, and now Babel, is making a play for auteur status. (A wide variety of directors have achieved such renown, from Alfred Hitchcock and Woody Allen to Luis Buñuel, Wong Kar-Wai, and Jean-Luc Godard.) Arriaga's response is, "Wait one second—I've written all three of those movies. You can't have all the credit." On the surface, this seems a reasonable request, but it gets to the essence of who, in fact, makes a film. Unlike a book written by one author, a film is worked on by a team of many people. Is only González Iñárritu's vision being communicated in these three films? Or is Arriaga's as well? Auteur theory holds that it doesn't matter that many people contribute to the film. Ultimately, the director is in charge, and it's his vision and style—his mise-en-scène, which refers to everything he puts in front of the camera, including lighting, props, sets, costumes, and, of course, actors. Perhaps most recently, this view has been challenged by David Kipen's book The Schreiber Theory: A Radical Rewrite of American Film History, which re-imagines film history as if the careers of writers, not directors, were tracked.

When Rafferty writes that the movies made by Arriaga and González Iñárritu "reflect an unusual degree of equality between the literary and the visual," he concurs with Arriaga's assertion that Babel is not a film made by one auteur—González Iñárritu—but rather, by two.

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