***The Auteur Theory***

SUMMARY:

The auteur theory is a way of critically analysing a body of films through viewing its director as the films’ author and principal creative influence. First articulated in post-war France by film magazine *Cahiers du Cinema*, it viewed the director as the primary individual responsible for creating a valuable film. Auteurs, in the view of the *Cahiers* writers, could influence multiple aspects of the filmmaking process through the force of their personalities. The theory was expanded upon by British film critics at *Movie* magazine, as well as American film critic Andrew Sarris, who first used the phrase “auteur theory” to describe a system of categorizing the films of great authors versus the films of craftsmen or scenarists. The auteur theory further developed through the efforts of structural film criticism and feminist film theory, but was challenged in several forms, particularly a new wave of post-structural film critics at *Cahiers du Cinema*. Though it has met with much controversy since its initial formulation, it reverberates to the present day as a method of analysing films and their value through directors.

MAIN ENTRY:

The auteur theory is a way of critically analysing a film or corpus of films through viewing its director as the film’s author and principal creative influence.

The theory was first articulated in the 1950s in France among a group of leading critics around the film magazine periodical *Cahiers du Cinema*. The ban on foreign cinema by the Vichy regime was lifted after the end of World War II, and hundreds of films from Hollywood made during the 1930s and 40s flooded French movie theatres. The *Cahiers* critics found these genre films to be superior to the French “Tradition of Quality” – cinema that derived from adaptation of well-regarded literary works – prevalent in postwar French cinema. They began lauding a group of directors – particularly directors who worked in Hollywood studios such as Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, and Nicholas Ray – as the deceptively artistic individuals who were behind their favourite films.

In his 1954 essay, “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema” (Nichols 1976), film critic and director Francois Truffaut coined the term *la politique des auteurs* to refer to the way in which certain directors were *auteurs*, or “authors,” of their films by acting as both director and writer for their films. Truffaut and other *Cahiers* writers – particularly Jacques Rivette – focused on genre films such as westerns and suspense films made in the Hollywood studio system, emphasizing that *auteurs* could take what the studio gave them and express their worldview through the visual arrangements of the film, what the writers termed the *mise-en-scène*.

The *Cahiers* writers inspired critical writing on film directors around the world, but their impact was most felt in the United Kingdom and the United States. In Britain, the writers of *Movie* magazine directly engaged with the arguments posited by *Cahiers* by featuring a ranking of directors in its first issue in September 1962. Writer Ian Cameron stated the intent of the journal thusly: “The assumption that underlies all the writing in *Movie* is that the director is the author of a film, the person who gives it any distinctive quality” (Caughie 1981).

In the same year, American film critic Andrew Sarris introduced the phrase “auteur theory” in his essay, “Notes on the Auteur Theory 1962” (Sarris 1962). Sarris attempted to provide a methodology for the auteur theory by delineating what he argued were the “three circles,” or premises, of the theory: “the outer circle as technique; the middle circle, personal style; and the inner circle, interior meaning.” With the goal of differentiating good directors from the bad, Sarris argued for a pantheon of American *auteurs* – the 14 greatest film directors who worked in the United States – while relegating the rest to the category of scenarists, or *matteurs en scene* (Sarris 1968).

American film critic Pauline Kael famously sparred with Andrew Sarris in film magazines. One of the biggest objections Kael and other critics had to the auteur theory was its marginalization of the collaborative nature of filmmaking, and its elevation of the director above other important contributors such as the screenwriter, cinematographer, and actors. Kael developed this notion in a lengthy essay on *Citizen Kane*, where she credited Herman Mankiewicz as the chief authorial voice behind the film rather than its more frequently credited author, director Orson Welles.

Subsequent elaborations were made on the auteur theory and its practice of reading the director as the main authorial voice behind a film. Structuralist film theory approached the director as a system of structured thematic preoccupations that manifested itself within the film text. Peter Wollen, for example, in his *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema* (1968), argued for the director as an “unconscious catalyst,” whose films exhibited many different relationships between the author and the conditions of production. Structuralist film theory emphasized less the stylistic aspects of the director’s approach, and more the thematic oppositions characteristic of the individual mind, such as the “garden versus wilderness” or “East versus West” dichotomies of the films of John Ford.

Another generation of writers at *Cahiers du Cinema* took this formulation of the auteur as a set of signs even further. Editor Jean Pierre Oudart argued in his essay, “John Ford’s Young Mr. Lincoln,” (Caughie 1981) that Ford was less an unconscious agency in the film text than a subconscious system of codes that reflected public discourses and ideological underpinnings. By decoding the films of Ford, one could break through the narrative structure of the film to see the structure of Hollywood’s capitalist, studio ideology. Such a reading of the filmechoes a dialogue in literary studies at the time revolving around the rejection of authorship entirely. Roland Barthes’s essay, “Death of the Author,” for example, argues that the marginalization of the author’s concerns gives the agency of the text back to the reader or audience (Barthes 1977). This type of “post-structuralist” reading of the auteur removed much of the individual’s agency within the industrial apparatus.

Some film scholars have responded to the post-structural denunciation of the auteur theory by insisting on authorial agency despite culturally and institutionally defined forms. Feminist scholars, for example, have argued for the auteur theory’s importance in salvaging and archiving forgotten or ignored female film directors. Claire Johnston and other feminist film theories, for example, have argued for the directorial presence of Dorothy Arzner and her ability to resist Hollywood ideology by criticizing patriarchal norms within her films (Johnston 1975).

The legacy of the auteur theory and its privileging of the director as the artistic voice remains to this day. One of the most recent challenges to the theory has come from writer David Kipen, who argues for the screenwriter as the “surest predictor” of the quality of a given work. This work was also met with the criticism that by arguing so strongly for the pre-eminence of the screenwriter, Kipen had replaced one imbalance with another.

List of Works:

Barthes, R. (1977) “The Death of the Author,” *Image, Music, Text*, Glasgow: Fontana, 142-148.

Caughie, J, (ed.) (1981) *Theories of Authorship*, London: British Film Institute.

Gerstner, D. and Staiger, J. (eds.) (2003) *Authorship and Film*, London: Taylor and Francis Group.

Kipen, D. (2006) *The Schreiber Theory: A Radical Rewrite of American Film History*, New York: Melville House.

Johnston, C. (1975) *Dorothy Arzner: Toward a Feminist Cinema*, London: The British Film Institute.

Sarris, A. (1968) *American Directors and Directions: 1929-1968*, New York: Perseus Books Group.

Truffaut, F. “Une certaine tendance du cinema francais,” *Cahiers du Cinema*, No. 31, 1954. Translation by Bill Nichols (1976) *Movies and Methods Vol. 1*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 224-237.

Wexman, V.W. (ed.) (2003) *Film and Authorship*. London: Rutgers University Press.

Wollen, P. (1972) *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Paratextual material:

Francois Truffaut

https://film110sp12.pbworks.com/f/1329153053/François-Truffaut-google.jpg

Sarris with Hitchcock

http://pressblog.uchicago.edu/wp-content/uploads/sarris-hitch-new-yorker.jpg

Ford on set

http://content7.flixster.com/photo/98/71/97/9871977\_ori.jpg

Young Mr. Lincoln

https://www.moma.org/explore/inside\_out/inside\_out/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Young-Mr-Lincoln-2.jpg

Dorothy Arzner on set

http://www.sensesofcinema.com/wp-content/uploads/images/directors/03/26/arzner2.jpg

Bryan Hikari Hartzheim

University of California, Los Angeles