

Auteurs

I remember the moment I was first told about the existence of the auteur theory. I listened and listened as the explanation went on, and all I could think was this: "What's the punch line?"

(Briefly, the auteur theory came out of France, where a bunch of young, then would-be directors—Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, etc.—promulgated the notion that the director was the *author* of the film. Andrew Sarris of *The Village Voice* is the leading spokesman for the auteurist view in America.)

Maybe it's true in other places. Maybe Truffaut designs his own sets and possibly Fellini operates his own camera and conceivably Kurosawa edits every inch of the films he directs. They are all wonderfully talented men, and where the limits of their talents lie I have no way of knowing. In point of fact, I don't know *anything* about foreign filmmaking; nothing in this book is meant to cover their method of operation.

But I do know this: It sure as shit isn't true in Hollywood.

I have never met another fellow technician, not a single cinematographer or producer or editor, who believes it.

I haven't even met a *director* who believes it.

Godard, in a recent interview, said that the whole thing was patent bullshit from the beginning, an idea devised by the then young scuffers to draw some attention to themselves.

Well, then, if it's so untrue, why is the idea still around? Answer: the media. Every time a piece of criticism or interview refers to a movie as "Francis Coppola's *One from the Heart*" or "Martin Scorsese's *New York, New York*," the auteur notion is prolonged. And I suspect it's going to be with us for a while longer.

The word *auteur* has been defined as follows: "The person who originates or gives existence to anything."

The word *auteur* has come to mean this: It is the director who creates the film. (None of any of this is meant in any way to denigrate directors, by the way. They serve an important function in the making of a film, and the best of them do it well.)

But creator?

Look at it logically. Studio executives are not stupid, and they are, believe it or not, aware of costs. If the director creates the film, why does a studio pay three thousand dollars a week for a top editor? Or four thousand for an equivalent production designer. Or ten thousand plus a percentage of the profits to the finest cinematographers?

It's not because they're cute.

And it's not because they want to. They *have* to. Because that's how crucial top technicians are. Crucial *and* creative.

One example now, not because it's famous but because it's absolutely typical: *This is the way things are*. Peter Benchley reads an article in a newspaper about a fisherman who captures a forty-five-hundred-pound shark off the coast of Long Island and he thinks, "What if the shark became territorial, what if it wouldn't go away?" And eventually he writes a novel on that notion and Zanuck-Brown buy the movie rights, and Benchley and Carl Gottlieb write a screenplay, and Bill Butler is hired to shoot the movie, and Joseph Alves, Jr., designs it, and Verna Fields is brought in to edit, and, maybe most importantly of all, Bob Mattey is brought out of retirement to make the monster. And John Williams composes perhaps his most memorable score.

How in the world is Steven Spielberg the "author" of that? Why is it often referred to today as "Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*"? Am I ever not knocking Spielberg: He did, for me, a world-class job of directing that wonderful shocker.

But there's no author to that movie that I can see.

If I haven't mentioned Dreyfuss and Scheider and Shaw, it's not because they weren't crucial too. But there is a theory put forward by some (Gore Vidal for one) that the true influence of the director died with the coming of sound. In the silent days, Griffith could stand there and, with his actor's voice, he could talk to Lillian Gish or whoever and literally mold the performance with long, heated verbal instructions *while the camera was rolling*.

Not anymore. Now the director must stand helpless alongside the crew and watch the actors work at their craft. Sure, he can do retakes, he can talk to them before, but once the shooting starts, he can't move up and verbally be Svengali.

So why does much of the media continue with the notion that

say that anyone is the "author" of a film is demeaning to the rest of us.

Besides it's being false, that's another of my chief quibbles with the auteur theory: It's demeaning.

I also think that it's dangerous.

Dangerous to whom?

To the director.

I believe that the auteur theory was responsible, just to take one example, for the collapse of the career of one of my favorite directors: Alfred Hitchcock. (You may not have known that there was a collapse, not from his reviews. But after *Psycho*, in 1960, oh, what a fall was there.) Let me spend the next few pages trying to explain what I mean.

As noted, the notion began in France around '54, and for a while it attracted all the seriousness of the annual meeting of the Flat Earth Society. But Truffaut and his peers were bright and gifted and energetic; they kept plugging away.

One of the things they had to do, since they were advancing a new theory, was to come up with new heroes—heretofore critically ignored directors who had, in their minds, "a personal vision."

Hitchcock, from '54 to '60, was on a truly wondrous streak: glorious entertainments. *Rear Window*, *To Catch a Thief*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, *North by Northwest*, and *Psycho*, among others.

Because of his skill and his tv program and his wizardry at personal publicity, Hitchcock became, along with Cecil B. De Mille, one of the two most famous directors in the business. In other words, a star.

But not taken very seriously.

He won some Oscar nominations, but never the Best Director award. He was a great molder of sophisticated thrillers. But not important.

Just what the auteurs were looking for. Famous but ignored critically. With a personal vision. Perfect.

What they did in their writings was to elevate him. Let's say he was Ian Fleming before they began. Well, they didn't say he was John le Carré, they made him Graham Greene.

Ernest Lehman has been quoted in a recent interview on the subject of *Family Plot*, a 1974 film he made with Hitchcock.

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the maker of the film is the director? Among lots of reasons, here are a few.

It's convenient. If you want to talk about *Jaws*, you can't mention all the technicians I named earlier. So shorthand is one reason.

Another is that most people who write about movies don't know much about the actual problems of making one. (No reason they should. *Our* job is to make movies, their job is to write or talk about them.)

Still another is that even if you're involved with the making of a film, it's damn near impossible to say who is responsible for what.

And don't forget publicity—they don't send production designers out on hype tours. It's the star or the director. So when the star says "I made up my part" or the director explains that he had this vision and *voilà*, it's now up there on the screen for you all to see and admire, that's what gets reported.

As I've said before—and please believe me, it's true (and if you don't believe me, ask *anybody* in the business for verification)—*movies are a group endeavor*. Basically, there are seven of us who are crucial to a film, and we all seven have to be at our best if the movie's going to have a shot at quality. Listed alphabetically:

the actor

the cameraman

the director

the editor

the producer

the production designer

the writer.

In addition, there are times (*Chariots of Fire*) when the composer is as important as any element. But that varies. I think what made *The Exorcist* work was the remarkable makeup that Dick Smith created for the girl. Truly dazzling special effects are not easy to bring off, and sometimes that department makes the movie wonderful.

To elevate any single element in a film is simply silly and wrong. We all contribute, we are all at each other's mercy. To

By mistake a propman had two pieces of wood set up so that they looked vaguely like a cross, and the car goes downhill and crashes through a field, goes through a fence and knocks over the cross. Some learned New York critic commented: There's Alfred Hitchcock's anti-Catholicism coming out again. When I was at the Cannes Film Festival with *Family Plot*, Karen Black, Bruce Dern and I attended a press conference, and some French journalist had the symbolism in the license plate all worked out: 885 DJU. He had some *elaborate* explanation for those numbers. When he got through explaining it, I said "I hate to tell you this but the reason I used that license plate number was that it used to be my own, and I felt it would be legally safe to use." So much for symbolism.

The sudden firestorm of *serious* criticism concerning Hitchcock continued, reaching these shores shortly after the release of *Psycho*. I suppose it continues to this day, although for me it peaked in the mid-sixties with the publication of one of the genuinely ego-ridden books of the postwar world, the Truffaut/Hitchcock interview. It purports to talk about directing, but on every page the subtext tells us: "Aren't you fortunate that we're around to tell you these things?"

Anyway, Hitchcock was not unaffected by all this.

My God, who could be? I know if somebody came up to me and said, "Do you know who you really are, you're a modern Dostoevski," I would send him straight to Bellevue. But if people kept coming and coming, bright and serious young critics, and they said, again and again, "Only you, Bill, only you and Fëdor really understood the anguish of religious mysticism, look at the number of Christ figures in your novels, count the crosses referred to in *Tinsel*, the torture in *Marathon Man* is only a thinly disguised reference to the blood of Jesus and the torture *He* suffered—" pretty soon I'd start thinking, "Ah, well, who am I to argue against so many brilliant scholars? They're right. Of course they're right. It's me and Dostoevski all the way."

Following *Psycho*, in '63, came *The Birds*. Some nice shock effects, period. And from then on it really got bad—*Marnie*, *Torn Curtain*, *Topaz*, *Frenzy*—awful, awful films.

But they got great reviews from the auteur critics.

The reason is this: Once an auteurist surrenders himself to an idol, for reasons passing understanding, said auteurist flies in the face of one of life's basic truths: People can have good days, and people can have bad days.

Any movie by Chaplin, even shit Chaplin, is terrific. (I wish them all a very long life on a desert island with nothing but *The Countess From Hong Kong* for company.) Any John Ford, another of their favorites. And, of course, any Hitchcock.

I think the last two decades of Hitchcock's career were a great waste and sadness. He was technically as skillful as ever. But he had become encased in praise, inured to any criticism.

Hitchcock himself had become The Man Who Knew Too Much.

So yes, I think the auteur theory ruined him—or at least his belief in it. And I think that belief is dangerous to any director. I mentioned before that no director I ever met said out loud he believed in the auteur theory. But God knows what's silently eating away at them in the dark nights of their souls.

Is there then no American auteur director? Perhaps there is one. One man who thinks up his own stories and produces his pictures and directs them too. And also serves as his own cinematographer. Not to mention he also does his own editing. All of this connected with an intensely personal and unique vision of the world. That man is Russ Meyer.

I can't wait for Truffaut's book about *him* . . .

