

I. The Death of the Author/Birth of the Auteur

[A] theory is also a historical event: it is a discourse that comes on the scene at a given time, in a given place, and by its very presence is capable of defining the ambience in which it appears. In this sense, it is a historical reality, something that reflects the path (or even the error) of thought.

Francesco Casetti (quoted by Caughie 6)

It was the French—Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault—who announced the author's, the literary author's, demise. The American William Gass's fine essay on "The Death of the Author" offers a dissenting opinion on the contention of fatality, noting that Barthes' obituary, substituting wish for deed, was premature: "when Roland Barthes announced the death of the author, he was actually calling for it."

In Gass's critical eulogy, the death of the author is comic, not tragic; it "signifies a decline in authority, in theological power, as if Zeus were stripped of his thunderbolts and swans, perhaps residing on Olympus still, but now living in a camper and cooking with propane. He is, but he is no longer a god" (265).

And it was the French, too, of course who had announced only two decades earlier the advent of the auteur. Cineastes began to think and talk and understand the movies through the specially-ground lenses provided by *La politique des auteurs*. The American film critic Andrew Sarris, whose *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929-1968*, a book that contributed significantly, thanks to its famous classification scheme for both major and minor film directors, to the importation of auteur theory into the US, would insist, a decade later, that "Over a group of films a director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature. The way a film looks and moves should have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels" (586). Truffaut formulated the original auteur theory in opposition to the monopolization of film art by writers,

Sarris' critical venture was likewise undertaken "against the wind." He sought to undermine the too-great hold of sociological and political critics. He wanted to talk about the art in the movies he loved, not their social significance.

The auteur theory's initial appeal, Peter Wollen observed, was obvious: it "imply[ed] an operation of decipherment . . . reveal[ing] authors where none had been seen before" (77). By the end of the 20th century, however, auteurism had fallen into disfavor. And so we find film scholar Robert Stam insisting that

In its more extreme incarnations auteurism can be seen as an anthropomorphic form of "love" for the cinema. The same love that had formerly been lavished on stars, or that formalists lavished on artistic devices, the auteurists now lavished on the men—and they largely were men—who incarnated the auteurists' idea of cinema. Film was resurrected as secular religion; the "aura" was back in force thanks to the cult of the auteur. (88)

The tone of such a presumptive post-mortem here is one of disdain, and yet by century's end it was received wisdom.

An important 2007 essay by the Scottish film scholar John Caughie contests the death of the auteur. With Casetti's insistence on the historicity of theory (see the epigraph to this section) as an essential foundation for his thinking, Caughie sets out to reestablish auteurism's deep context. What were the circumstances at the time of auteurism birth AND its dethronement? According to David Bordwell both were the result of film studies' struggle for respect. Traditional auteurism was simply too buffery for an academic context.

In the effort to win academic respectability, film scholars could best show their work to have significance if there were a powerful theory backing it up. Auteurism was a connoisseurship that required a staggering knowledge of particular films. In an academic context, such knowledge could seem mere buffery, so auteur studies could not justify studying movies "seriously." An analysis of Hitchcock that purported to demonstrate a theory of signification or the unconscious was more worthy of academic attention than an analysis of recurring authorial motifs. (quoted in Caughie 28)

The result was predictable. "It was not," Caughie explains, "the author who spoke, but ideology, an ideology which could be detected in the gaps, ruptures and contradictions of the text. The method inherited from auteurism remained the same, a detailed reading to uncover the text's hidden places, but it was no longer the personality of the author which was hidden there, but ideology—of which the author was the bearer rather than the creator" (17). The movie author thus became "a shadow of his former self, leaving traces in the text rather than dominating it with his unique signature; shading into structure, inscription or function," a mere "effect of the text." The auteurism of Truffaut and his American importer Andrew Sarris' was supplanted by Lacanian, Structuralist, and Post-Structuralist concerns.