

Controversy & Correspondence

AUTEURISM IS ALIVE AND WELL

The recent pseudo-controversy over auteurism in the hospitable pages of *Film Quarterly* seems to have collapsed of its own weightlessness, and I don't wish to prolong the agony unduly. The dreary "debate" between Graham Petrie and John Hess dwindled inevitably into

petty squabbles over real and alleged distortions of one's position by the other. In the process of playing Tweedledum and Tweedledee, however, both Petrie and Hess have completely misstated my own position by first setting up straw men labeled "auteurists," and then ascribing (without quotation marks) to these invented imbeciles the most idiotic statements imaginable. Mis-

statement is perhaps too precise a term to apply to two such imprecise and ill-informed polemicists. Mistake is closer to the mark. Hence, it would be too tedious for me and for the readers of *Film Quarterly* to plunge into a morass of blind items and anonymous accusations. For one thing, I do not happen to be the world's foremost authority on the writings of Graham Petrie and John Hess. Consequently, I cannot rule out the possibility that they have deviated into sense elsewhere. Nor can I conclusively evaluate their intention to take over the future of film scholarship from us gray-beards of an earlier generation. I suspect, however, that people who wilfully misread the past can never hope to influence the future. My present effort is intended therefore to place the past in its proper perspective. Unlike Petrie and Hess, I happen to believe that methodology is no substitute for history. There are no shortcuts to film scholarship, and no magic potions from Paris with all the secret ingredients of truth and beauty. I admire the writings of the late André Bazin as much as anyone. Indeed, I was the first American critic to quote Bazin extensively, and I don't need lectures on the subject from Petrie and Hess. Nonetheless, Bazin died in 1959, which means that his writings reflect no consciousness of the cinema of the past fifteen years. His enormous impact can be understood today only in terms of the absolute authority of the Anglo-Russian montage theoreticians up until the late fifties and early sixties. I speak on this very subject in *The Primal Screen*, pages 138-139: "Thus I find myself compelled to bridge the generation gap between my aged self and my students by resurrecting the traditional Anglo-Russian montage-documentary aesthetics against which I have been rebelling for the past fifteen years. I suppose it is like a Trotskyist's being forced to explain who Stalin was in order to achieve self-definition. Similarly, I must assign readings in Eisenstein and Pudovkin and Rotha and Griffith and Kracauer and Spottiswoode and Reisz and Lindgren and Balázs and Manvell and Sadoul and Grierson and Bardèche and Brasillach and Wright and Arnheim and many others before I can make my students appreciate the shattering impact on my sensibility of the anti-montage formulations of the late André Bazin. Unfortunately, Bazin has been translated piecemeal into English at least twenty years too late for any polemical confrontation with the Old Guard of Film Scholarship. Neorealism and the New Wave have come and gone, Godard and Antonioni have risen and fallen, and all now seems confusingly eclectic. Even when I screen *Citizen Kane* and *Open City* for my students on successive weeks, it is difficult for them to perceive the aesthetic resemblance Bazin discerned between these two meditations on *mise-en-scène*.

Similarly, auteurism can be understood only in terms of its own historical coordinates, namely Crowther and Kracauer as the Power and the Glory of social significance in film criticism and scholarship. By contrast, Ferguson, Agee and Warshow were in their own lifetimes merely cult figures in the film world. Petrie credits (quite correctly) Manny Farber with "praising the 'masculine' values of Walsh, Fuller and Siegel for many years and for reasons that have little to do with *auteurism*." Petrie's otherwise unexplained quotation marks around the word "masculine" constitute a snide throwback to Pauline Kael's diatribe against the alleged closest homosexuality of the Hawksians more than a decade ago. I don't know (and don't care) what Petrie's sexual politics happen to be, but even Kael can't get away with that kind of innuendo in polite company anymore. Indeed, Kael seems to occupy in the Petrie-Hess Punch-and-Judy Show a role even more marginal than my own. Are we (Pauline and I, Perils and All) being phased out for a new critical vaudeville team? Petrie-Hess? Sorry, boys, but your names on the marquee won't draw flies. And your timing is off. Above all, your premises are erroneous.

Auteurism is not now and never has been an organized religion or a secret society. There are no passwords or catchwords. Furthermore, the members do not spend their time speculating on the number of auteurs who can dance on the head of a pin. I have never taken out a patent on the words "auteur," "auteurist" or "auteurism," and I don't consider myself ripped off when someone writes a book on a director, or screens a retrospective of the director's films. Petrie's book on Truffaut would seem to make Petrie an auteurist by Petrie's own loose standards of what makes an auteurist. And there is certainly more than a little closet auteurism in Petrie's own awkward category headings for directors (Creators, Misfits, Rebels, Unfortunates, and Professionals). Welcome to the auteurist closet, Mr. Petrie, but you'll have to stand in line. And why stop with Manny Farber as a precursor of certain aspects of auteurism. Why not go even further back to such director-conscious critics as Frank Nugent of the *Times*, Richard Watts, Jr. of the *Herald-Tribune*, and the late Robert Sherwood of *Life*. Dwight Macdonald and the late John Grierson wrote classic thumbnail surveys of Hollywood directors in the manner of *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *The American Cinema* way back in the early thirties.

Around 1960, however, there were only two regularly published auteurists in America—myself and the late Eugene Archer. And even Archer ran for cover after the first outburst of anti-auteurism. So there I stood all alone against hundreds of non-auteurists. Archer hap-

pened to be writing at the *Times* in the shadow of Bosley Crowther, and he (Archer) chose to be cautious on the subject of American auteurism. I remember an article he wrote (in 1963 or 1964) in which he puffed up the *Cahiers* regulars who had gone into film-making from criticism. Archer himself was beguiled by the siren call of the nouvelle vague to make his own films, and he wound up becalmed on the beach, ridiculed by the French cinéastes he had promoted in the pages of the *Times*. But that is another story.

I had been writing straightforwardly Griersonian criticism for about five years before I entered my Bazinian period. The critical problem in the late fifties was how to assimilate new stylistic initiatives in color and composition, and still retain the classical criteria of coherent narrativity. The screen suddenly seemed bloated and unnatural, very much like John Huston's rubber whale in *Moby Dick*. We had no way of coping with apparent failures such as Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, Ford's *The Searchers*, Renoir's *French Can Can*, Ray's *Bigger Than Life*, Rossellini's Ingrid Bergman movies, Hawks's *Rio Bravo*, and many, many other latent masterpieces. The dominant critical tone in America was one of sociological sermons in which Hollywood was urged repeatedly to repent. Our discovery of Bazin and the other critics of *Cahiers du Cinéma* was invigorating largely because it liberated us from this gloomy critical atmosphere in which Left was always right, and in which Man towered over mere men and women. (Mr. Hess's Marxist-structuralist prescription for the New Criticism seems to be taking us back to the gloom and doom of the past, but with more bureaucratic jargon than ever before.) Also, we were reassured that no movie was too ignoble to be seen by the noblest sensibility. Hence, the mindless arrogance of Petrie's casual suggestion that *Sea of Grass* (part of our permanent record of Spencer Tracy, Katherine Hepburn, Robert Walker and Melvyn Douglas) be destroyed because it does not measure up to Petrie's standards for Elia Kazan's career. So much for Petrie's lip service to film scholarship.

Both Petrie and Hess try to puff up the French *Cahieristes* at the expense of various critics working in the English language. Petrie doesn't even bother to use real names for his anti-auteurist diatribe; Hess mentions me and Robin Wood, who, I am sure, has never termed himself an unmitigated auteurist, as indeed who has, myself included. The epithet "auteurist" is flung about by Petrie and Hess with the same gay abandon with which the catch-all "communist" is hurled at the outside world by the less enlightened citizens of Orange County. Miraculously, however, François Truffaut is absolved of any complicity in auteurism by Petrie and Hess as if they intended to make American and British

auteurists play Haldeman and Erlichman to Truffaut's oh-so-innocent Nixon. Petrie suggests that Truffaut was more sophisticated than American and British critics about the processes of film-making. Petrie neglects to mention that Truffaut reviewed English-language films for years without even a minimal comprehension of the language. I grew up on Hollywood novels, production gossip, star-gazing, etc. It's in my blood stream. I never found Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol *et al.* particularly sophisticated about the realities of Hollywood. What astounded me was their ability to intuit a creative situation simply from the evidence on the screen. *Cahiers du Cinéma*, contrary to what Petrie implies, started going downhill as soon as it began to substitute tape-recorded interviews for speculative critiques. The fact that most of the *Cahiers* critics depended on French sub-titles or dubbing to know what was going on in English-language movies had two consequences. First, they were able to find redeeming qualities in films with bad dialogue. Second, they were free to concentrate on the visual style of American movies, something that most American reviewers neglected to do. In this way, *Vertigo* could be reevaluated in Paris as the progenitor of *Last Year in Marienbad*, whereas in America Resnais was considered high art, and Hitchcock was not even considered pop art.

Petrie and Hess can't have it both ways. They can't assail auteurism on the one hand and applaud *Cahierism* on the other. François Truffaut, contrary to the sweetness and light reasonableness he has cultivated in the past decade for his public personality, was once the most hated film critic in France. He was the most forceful polemicist of *la Politique des Auteurs*, and it was he, not I, who insisted most strongly that the worst film of Renoir was more interesting than the best film of Delannoy, and he still holds to that position. I recently confronted him with the notion that Delannoy's Inspector Maigret film with Gabin, Girardot and Dessailly struck me as more entertaining than Renoir's Maigret film, *La Nuit du Carrefour*. Truffaut refused to discuss such a heresy. Also, Petrie and Hess tend to imply that Truffaut was above the more esoteric cult games of Anglo-American auteurism. Quite the contrary. It was Truffaut himself who put the late Edgar G. Ulmer on the map as a crazy *Cahiers* taste, and not for such relatively respectable efforts as *The Black Cat*, *Bluebeard* and *Detour*, but for a really peculiar poverty-row quickie called *Murder Is My Beat*. Indeed, Truffaut's disastrously cheeky interview with the fair-minded Archer Winsten of the *Post* in the late fifties gave *Cahierism* a black eye from which it never fully recovered. I remember going to a 42nd Street theater one night with Gene Archer to see an Ulmer double bill: *The Amazing*

Transparent Man and *Beyond the Time Barrier*. As we emerged from the theater three stupefying hours later, Archer remarked in his slow Texas drawl: "The French call him a *cinéaste maudit*." (pause) "They don't come any more maudit."

Nor was Ulmer a passing critical fancy of Truffaut's. When Truffaut had become a world-renowned director he persuaded Jeanne Moreau to do a film with Ulmer on Mata Hari. Rumor has it that the production was a disaster, and Ulmer had to be replaced by another director. Nor was Truffaut alone on *Cahiers* with his grotesque predilections. It was interesting that neither Petrie nor Hess brought up the very painful subject of Jerry Lewis, and they both seem blissfully unaware that Truffaut has recently written a book on Alfred Hitchcock, that touchstone of touchstones for auteurism. Hess even tries to suggest that *Cahiers* has evolved painlessly from auteurism to Maoist-structuralism. The truth is that Truffaut, Rivette, Chabrol *et al.* are now anathema at the new party-line *Cahiers du Cinéma*, where an editor was fired a few years ago for retaining his membership in the allegedly reactionary French Communist Party.

Petrie quotes an interview with Franklin Schaffner (out of context) to suggest that the final cut is the ultimate criterion of film creativity. This quaintly pre-Bazinian notion has fallen into the rubbish heap of history. Then Petrie makes the audacious suggestion that Greta Garbo might have had something to do with *Ninotchka*, and Bette Davis with *Now Voyager*. Hallelujah! What sophistication on Petrie's part! I was brought up on Hemingway's ode to Garbo in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and Charles Jackson's eloquent appreciation of her performance as *Camille* in his novel, *The Lost Weekend*. Indeed, I once said explicitly in an essay on Garbo (reprinted in *Confessions of a Cultist*) that Garbo was her own *auteur*. I remember speaking with Franklin Schaffner on a jet flying back from the Mar Del Plata Film Festival. The late Van Heflin was clowning around on the line to the rest room. Schaffner told me to look at Heflin's hands. They looked small and claw-like in relation to his head and the rest of his body. Heflin's hands, Schaffner told me, were what had kept Heflin from becoming a big star. Like the late Robert Ryan's clouded, ambiguous eyes. Truffaut once noted in his diaries on *Fahrenheit 451* that Julie Christie had a much smaller head than Oskar Werner, and this affected the psychological balance of their love scenes together. We have a long way to go before we fit all the pieces together in the massive jigsaw puzzle of the cinema. Auteurism was never meant to be an exclusionary doctrine, nor a blank check for directors. It was stated at the outset that it was more the first step than the last stop in film scholarship, and I think its

basic approaches have stood up remarkably well over the years. In practice, after all, it depends on where one is writing, at what length, and for whom. I am currently working on a film history which will be organized atomistically by movies rather than auteuristically by directors. After that, I shall revise and update *The American Cinema* auteuristically. I have recently done a survey of Warners music for *Rolling Stone*, and I shall soon write an evaluation of the entire structuralist scene about which Hess professes to be so euphoric. And I am not now, nor have I ever been interested exclusively in American movies. Back in 1962, I noted (in "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962"): "In fact, the *auteur* theory itself is a pattern theory in constant flux. I would never endorse a Ptolemaic constellation of directors in a fixed orbit. At the moment my list of auteurs runs something like this through the first twenty: Ophuls, Renoir, Mizoguchi, Hitchcock, Chaplin, Ford, Welles, Dreyer, Rossellini, Murnau, Griffith, Sternberg, Eisenstein, Stroheim, Buñuel, Bresson, Hawks, Lang, Flaherty, Vigo. This list is somewhat weighted toward seniority and established reputations. In time, some of these *auteurs* will rise, some will fall, and some will be displaced by either new directors or rediscovered ancients. Again, the exact order is less important than the specific definitions of these and as many as two hundred other potential auteurs. I would hardly expect any other critic in the world fully to endorse this list, especially on faith. Only after thousands of films have been re-evaluated will any personal pantheon have a reasonably objective validity. The task of validating the auteur theory is an enormous one, and the end will never be in sight. Meanwhile the auteur habit of collecting random films in directional bundles will serve posterity with at least a tentative classification."

After twelve years auteurism is still in a transitional stage, and the cinema continues to confound our expectations. If I choose to continue analyzing the artist behind the camera by studying the formal and thematic consciousness flitting back and forth on the screen, it is because I do not wish to return to the sterile sermonizing of the past. I should hope that differing critical approaches can coexist. If not, it should be remembered that auteurism was born out of a passion for polemics. What I object to most strongly in the Petrie-Hess exchange is the shared disdain of both writers for what they consider to be excessive specialization. This again is the old Kael argument, restated recently at the National Book Awards where she declared that film criticism is a "mongrel art." This phrase seems more appropriate for a lapdog of the literati than for a mastiff of the movie medium. I rejected this attitude in 1962, and I reject it today.

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