

The Death of the Auteur

By Robert Duffin

'Reverence for the director of a film as sole creator has been vastly exaggerated, through critical efforts. I'm thinking particularly of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* "author" concept – I've been living in Paris, and have been quite aware of it for a long time. The kind of theory of creativity that's arisen there (and in a related world in New York) is, succinctly, crap.'

Donald Cammell

Everyone and Anyone?

In the midst of the numerous forms of discourse that surround us in our everyday life, only very occasionally do we desire to know who authors them. Only from the time of the Renaissance has artistic

discourse been considered the work of the individual, and only since 1951 have cinephiles searched for authorship in films. Nowadays its pertinent to ask what the label 'auteur' means. When *Red Road* was released in October 2006, the press quickly pegged first-time director Andrea Arnold within the tradition of 'auteur' cinema. Danny Leigh, interviewing Arnold for *The Guardian* noted: 'One of *Red Road*'s most impressive qualities is its sense of identity ... The film instantly feels like an Andrea Arnold movie – her signature being keeping the story vice-tight while conjuring a succession of haunting images from the most unlikely sources.' Similarly Paul Dale, writing for *The List*, places Arnold in the company of fame maverick auteurs David Lynch and Terrence Malick, for Hannah McGill in *Sight and Sound* it's Douglas Sirk and Alfred Hitchcock. In *The*



Observer, Phillip French, their critic for 45 years, even draws a line from Arnold back to Fritz Lang. It seems completely ridiculous to award a filmmaker auteur status after only making one feature film. Yet, it has become a common occurrence in contemporary film writing to apply the label to emerging filmmakers showing a shred of personality in their creative work.

In the last few years alone, directors such as Christopher Nolan, Alfonso Cuaron, Wes Anderson and Richard Kelly have been named as 'auteurs' despite making only a handful of films between them. It would appear that not only has the term 'auteur' crossed over from film academia into the popular press, but has also undergone some form of transmogrification during this process. Instead of a term bestowed

upon filmmakers of note by the writers of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 'auteur' has become a byword for Hollywood to market fringe or personality-driven cinema.

American filmmaker Wes Anderson (*Rushmore*, *Royal Tenenbaums*) is renowned for the bizarre personality that drives his visuals. Writing for *New York Magazine* prior to Anderson's *The Darjeeling Limited* debuting at the New York Film Festival, David Amsden remarks: 'You need only watch a few frames of his movies to spot it as an Anderson picture.' After *Rushmore*, Anderson was called a visionary, and his self-consciously quirky characters and aesthetic were obsessed over by a new legion of fans. Above and beyond the films is Anderson the media personality who screams 'auteur'. He has the pale and skinny appearance of Woody Allen, the angular



body of Jim Jarmusch and sports designer suits that he wears two sizes too small, the quirk of a character that may populate the extended universe of his movies. The personal and cinematic aesthetics combine to make the Anderson brand, which has served him so well for nearly a decade.

Perhaps the most celebrated director to successfully exploit his auteur status, gained in a similar manner to Anderson, is Quentin Tarantino. With their characteristic non-linear narratives, extreme or hyper violence and their extremely cine-literate nature his films were never going to be easy sells to the movie-going public, referencing everything from obscure Manga and Westerns to 1950s American breakfast cereal commercials. Yet with the public embracing his fairly straightforward gangster debut *Reservoir Dogs*, Tarantino has been able to extend his brand name far enough to sell just about anything. The profanity-packed *Pulp Fiction*, with its playful circular narrative became an Oscar winner, and the blood soaked ode to the Shaw Brothers and Sergio Leone, *Kill Bill*, was a box office hit. Tarantino has been able to use his auteur-star status to push forward other fringe cinema under the banner 'Quentin Tarantino presents ...' This includes movies such as *Iron Monkey*, *Hero*, *Hostel* and *The Protector*. If a film is hard to sell, the Tarantino brand name on the poster can do more for its box office than a barrage of television and cinema trailers.

However in the last year the Tarantino brand has proved to be far from infallible. *The Grindhouse* project, co-created with Robert Rodriguez, was one product the American cinema-going public was not buying. The homage to B-movie theatres and exploitation cinema comprised two films (Tarantino's *Death Proof* and Rodriguez' *Planet Terror*), fake trailers and cinema management announcements, all presented with the intent to replicate in the 00s the grindhouse experience of the 1970s. Nonetheless, American audiences were far from enamoured with the idea, some accidentally leaving after the first feature and more just not going to see it at all. In the U.K. the films were given separate releases, with *Death Proof* premiering at the Edinburgh International Film Festival. It disappeared swiftly after going on general release, although a whistle-stop tour of U.K. Art House cinemas, including the Glasgow Film Theatre, by Tarantino himself has resulted in a limited release of *Grindhouse* in its original form at various venues.

This isn't entirely about debating the merits of the post-modern bricolage that is the Tarantino

oeuvre; that's been done to death and will be done again many times in the future. Instead, what's important is to remind ourselves where the 'auteur' theory came from, what it has become and, if Tarantino, Anderson et al. are our prime examples of the post-modern auteur, then whether or not it is now a defunct piece of terminology which no longer holds any meaning.

Birth of the Auteur Theory

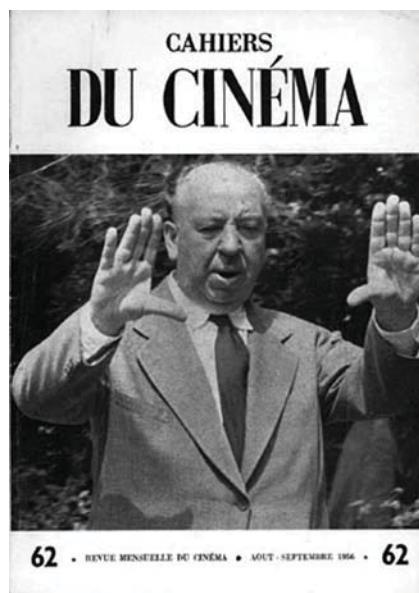
In 1951, Andre Bazin founded the French film magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma* and as a result is often historically referred to as the father of the auteur theory. While Bazin championed the work of Charlie Chaplin and Jean Renoir, it would be the younger writers for *Cahiers*, most notably Francois Truffaut, who would draw attention to the American filmmakers of the Hollywood studio system. In his 1954 essay 'Une Certain Tendance du Cinema Francais' Truffaut coined the term 'politique des auteurs' and determined that 'there are no good and bad movies, only good and bad directors'. Truffaut illustrated his point by drawing a comparison between auteurs who were artists, and metteurs en scène who were craftsmen. Up until this point it appeared that cinema could not be debated in the realm of art, yet the theory takes its roots in such an argument and finally allowed writers to take cinema 'seriously'.

Cahiers critics were aware that the American filmmakers they were championing, including Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks and John Ford, were working within the restrictions of the Hollywood studio system. This was a system where scripts and the types of films being made were chosen for the filmmaker by the studio, and importantly for this debate, a system that no longer exists. What the critics found to praise in this seemingly homogenous production line was the achievement of a personal style within the confines of production. However, the purpose of this writing was not to create a theory that would dominate film studies in the decades to come, in fact the French writers at *Cahiers* have frequently claimed the concept was never to be taken as theory. Instead, the purpose of Truffaut et al. was to condemn the sterile big budget post-War French cinema known as 'cinema de qualite' or 'cinema de papa'. During the Nazi occupation the Vichy government did allow the import and distribution of American films, most notably those of the Film Noir cycle, which the French became particularly enamoured with, influencing many future 'auteurs' such as Jean Luc Godard and Jean Pierre Melville.



In the early 1960s, writer for *The Village Voice* and *Film Culture*, Andrew Sarris brought the 'politique des auteurs' to the United States and coined the term 'auteur theory'. Sarris took issue with what he believed was the reductionism inherent in the sociological film criticism of the time. While many critics of the auteur theory claimed that it was ridiculous to completely ignore social conditions and means of production, Sarris argued that examining cinema as a product of reality without human intervention was even more preposterous. Sarris wrote that: 'Over a group of films a director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature.' It is this thread that gave birth to the auteur theory that exists to this day. The main problem with Sarris' argument is that his auteurist criteria remain vague, even admitting himself in 1976 that: 'Obviously, the auteur theory cannot possibly cover every vagrant charm of the cinema.' The main problem with the auteur theory as it stands today is not in the age-old Sarris/Kael debate over the validity of the term, but in the absolute conviction to the theory by big personality filmmakers who use it as a way of reinforcing their creative dominance.

Alfred Hitchcock is seen as one of the greatest auteur filmmakers in cinema history. His cinematic *mise en scène* is instantly recognisable, as is his thematic worldview and predilection for the exploration of obsession, guilt, paranoia and voyeurism. Yet perhaps this also has something to do with Hitchcock being one of the first international celebrity filmmakers. Biographer Donald Spoto, in his book *The Life of Alfred Hitchcock*, discusses Truffaut's book of interviews with Hitchcock: '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.' Hitchcock, over the course of his career, carefully cultivated his celebrity image thus cementing his position in the public consciousness. His persona as the



'master of suspense', the instantly recognisable shadow profile, presenting his own TV show with his macabre sense of humour and dry delivery. Not to mention the small cameo appearance in every one of his films that almost became a game for the audience to 'spot Hitch'. He was certainly the master.

Nowadays, perhaps Quentin Tarantino is the pupil. On the DVD director's commentary of *Hostel*, Eli Roth recounts the advice that Tarantino gave him after the success of his debut *Cabin Fever*: 'He gave me the most incredible advice ... Go around the world to every film festival and get your name out there, meet the press, meet the critics, make yourself the star.' Tarantino clearly understands the importance of self-promotion as Hitchcock did; making yourself the star puts you on the same level as actors who are more traditionally seen as the audience's draw for films. It's impossible to imagine what a critic like Sarris would have made of Quentin Tarantino. It's unlikely he would

put him in the pantheon with the likes of John Ford or Alfred Hitchcock, however for the marketing departments at the studios, ascribing auteur status as early as possible is what is best for business. Whereas the *Cahiers du Cinéma* writers were discovering auteurs from the bleak creative landscape of Hollywood, nowadays they are being invented from their earliest short films. The means of judging auteur status has clearly changed since the 1950s; perhaps the definition is now too loose, lacking a sense of exclusivity. However, a certain level of self-conscious auteurist tendencies is not

something that began in the 1990s with Tarantino and his ilk.

The Wannabe Auteurs

In the late 1960s and early 1970s historians have determined that Hollywood went through somewhat of a renaissance period of its own. By the early 1960s the studio system, around which the auteur theory was built, had collapsed. They haemorrhaged money as a result of failing to understand the new, youth-orientated,



demographic that were not impressed with the historical epics and musicals being produced in an attempt to draw audiences away from television. It is during this period that the next legion of American filmmakers emerged, a group who were raised on a steady diet of cinema and would become the first cineliterate generation to get their hands on cameras in Hollywood. Regardless of their desires for creative freedom, the promise of higher budgets, better talent and more creative control was appealing enough to send this new generation into the arms of the studios.

Directors such as Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg and George Lucas emerged and were aware of, in fact aspired to, the auteur theory. They grew up on a steady diet of television and old movies, and forged new ground in special effects, representations of screen violence and darker subject matters. Noel Carroll proclaimed this new Hollywood movement to be the 'cinema of allusions', and noted it was defined by visual and thematic references to classic Hollywood cinema and the European Art Cinema of auteur developers Godard and Truffaut. Lucas' *Star Wars* owes a debt to *Cahiers* favourite John Ford's *The Searchers*, Scorsese's much celebrated 'fizzing tablet' scene in *Taxi Driver* is a direct citation of *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, and Spielberg went as far as casting Truffaut in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

It appears however that in trying to assert their creative visions, these studio-friendly auteurs who sought to harbour a true artistic voice inadvertently handed the struggling studios the perfect way to market these emerging talents. In aspiring to be auteurs, the filmmakers offered the post-studio system Hollywood a whole new way to market cinema. As Timothy Corrigan notes in his article 'Auteurs and the New Hollywood', the auteur figure became re-conceptualised as a sign or brand name to identify films within the waning studio system. 'From its inception, auteurism has been bound up with changes in industrial desires, technological opportunities, and marketing strategies.'

In the early 1990s, the emergence of the VCR generation, including Tarantino, Steven Soderbergh, Wes Anderson and their ilk, saw them largely reject the studios in favour of shoestring budgets and the festival circuit. This established a massive independent scene in world cinema, which saw huge financial turnover and commercial audience success; however, it wasn't long before this was capitalised on

and the auteur reclaimed by the financiers. Almost every major studio would develop an independent wing within the decade in order to cater to those more inclined with the art house sect. The line between commercial and independent cinema was blurred, with the likes of Wes Anderson typifying the transformation.

His films are curious ornaments; meticulously off kilter and mannered but bolstered with an A-list cast of regulars (Owen Wilson, Bill Murray, Angelica Houston) and advertised with the by-line 'a Wes Anderson comedy' as opposed to 'a Wes Anderson film'. Anderson is different from Tarantino in so much as they appeal to different types of cinephiles. Tarantino speaks to the gore hounds and genre fans, whereas Anderson is the progenitor of sexed-up literati and sells to that market. His movies might not make millions, but he's the kind of trophy the indie wing will be proud to have on the mantelpiece. Looking at his body of work to date we can see the increasing levels of faith from the studio, from the relatively low-key *Bottle Rocket* to the lavish productions of *Royal Tenenbaums* and *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*. His set design, and flamboyant decorating became a signature; from the Tenenbaums townhouse to the cut-away set of Zissou's boat, the Belafonte. While Tarantino's effect on cinema was perhaps more notable with the number of *Pulp Fiction* knock-offs in the 90s, Anderson has defined the following decade. His studies of emotionally numb kinship, twee pop soundtracks and deadpan absurdity have become the standard indie stylings – see *Little Miss Sunshine*, *Napoleon Dynamite*, and *Charlie Bartlett*.

The directorial signature sought by *Cahiers du Cinéma* was supposed to be discovered over the body of work, not announce itself outright in each and every frame of the film as in the case of Anderson. As his budgets have increased, his wondrous worlds have become more convoluted and his focus has drifted beyond the emotional truth of his characters and fallen in love with his own aesthetic. Perhaps an extension of the auteur theory would involve the idea that too much creative control results in the inevitable loss of self-control, which naturally brings us back to Tarantino.

Tarantino-Esque

This era of filmmakers looking back and homaging the past began with the Movie Brats and continued right through to Tarantino. If anything he is the epitome of the VCR generation, the king of self-reflexive cinema, but this isn't reflecting the status of auteurism.



A post-modern patchwork ode to cinema may define his body of work, but denies him the right to be sole author of the text. If anything Tarantino shares authorship of *Pulp Fiction* with Godard, *Jackie Brown* with Jack Hill, *Kill Bill* with Toshiya Fujita and *Death Proof* with Monte Hellman.

Even the age-old debate regarding the validity of a sole author of a film ultimately boils down the nature of celebrity and the idea of who is more well known, who the public can place a face too. Ask anyone on the street if they know who Quentin Tarantino is, and they will capably reel off *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Jackie Brown* and *Kill Bill*. However, ask anyone who Sally Menke is and you're guaranteed to draw a blank. Menke is in fact the editor of every one of Tarantino's features, including the segment in *Four Rooms* and the *Grindhouse* project. She is surely equally responsible for the feel and rhythm of the work, yet Menkesque doesn't exist in the Hollywood lexicon. This isn't simply the adherence to a 50-year-old branch of film theory by journalists; it's due to Menke not being in the limelight, not playing the celebrity game. As mentioned, Wes Anderson plays the same game, meticulously crafting his appearance and manner in order to be cherished like one of his characters and equally loved by the aficionados. As with anything, however, popularity can only carry you so far.

Grindhouse was always going to be a tough sell for the producers Bob and Harvey Weinstein, regardless of the power of the Tarantino brand. The film recreates a night at a grindhouse theatre in the 1970s, complete with the 'prevues of coming attractions' and 'now our feature presentation' trails already seen in *Kill Bill*, adverts for canned Mexican cuisine, and one nauseating moment when a comedy trailer voice artist informs us that: 'This evening is brought to you by your friends at The Weinstein Company.'

The *Grindhouse* project, while a joint directorial effort with Robert Rodriguez, is Tarantino to the broken bone. Even the Rodriguez segment, *Planet Terror*, utilises the trademark yellow block typeface for the opening credits, features the fictional Apple cigarette brand present in all Tarantino films and even has a scene with a character eating a retro brand of cereal. Similarly, the fake trailer segments of *Grindhouse* bring under the Tarantino brand umbrella all the filmmakers who cite him as inspiration and wish to emulate his success as king of trash-art cinema: Edgar Wright (*Shaun of the Dead*), Rob Zombie (*The Devil's Rejects*), and Tarantino's apparent protégé Eli Roth (*Hostel*). Tarantino,

with his natural penchant for shameless self-promotion, casts himself in both *Planet Terror* and *Death Proof* and even extends the favour to Roth, allowing the two some friendly bar banter.

Death Proof itself veers dangerously close to being homage to Tarantino himself rather than exploitation cinema. Awash with masturbatory self-referentiality, of course there is the tiresome Tarantino foot fetishism, an opening sequence that exactly mirrors the iconic diner scene in *Reservoir Dogs*, discussion of Big Kahuna burgers, and even gratuitous quoting of *Pulp Fiction* by the very character Tarantino plays himself. More so than ever, Tarantino cultivates himself as the star, liberally sprinkling himself all over the two films in a way that would have made Hitchcock blush. Like Anderson, it's not so much discovering an auteur, as the arrival of one being announced.

However that is not to say that an auteur cannot still be found, and in the rubble of crushed hopes we find the man who provided the opening quotation, Donald Cammell. Described by the *New York Times* as a man 'whose name does not deserve to live on even in ignominy', Cammell was a gifted painter and illustrator who became involved with cinema in the mid-1960s believing it to be the next great art form. When not hanging out with his circle of celebrity friends he took a cameo part in Eric Rohmer's *La Collectionneuse*, and went on to write the screenplays for *Duffy* and *The Touchables*. His first feature film was the infamous *Performance*, which he co-directed with Nicolas Roeg.

Famously, *Times* critic Richard Schickel claimed *Performance* was 'the most completely worthless film I have seen since I began reviewing'. The producers at Warner Brothers were incapable of interpreting the narrative, insensitive toward its metaphysical themes, and disgusted by the homoerotic violence and nudity that eventually earned it an 'X' rating after extensive studio supervised editing. A test audience member vomiting on her partner during a screening in Santa Monica probably didn't help matters either, or so the legend goes. *Performance* is the artefact of a very particular subculture at a very specific time. Unbelievably, and in the spirit of the auteur, given the violence, sexually explicit material, extreme drug use, experimental narrative and editing, it was produced with Hollywood money, by Warner Brothers who were all too willing to try and cash in on the scene. While 'cult film' is perhaps another buzzword bandied around too often by film marketing departments, *Performance* is



the genuine article. Loathed, rediscovered and cherished by the fervent few, it was Cammell's first film and it effectively crippled his career.

While Cammell clearly rejected the spirit of auteur theory, instead celebrating the collaborative aspect of cinema, his story is the material of myth. Drawing a line through history, from Tarantino back to Cammell and finally to one of the original auteurs, Orson Welles, we can see another facet of the auteur issue come to light. All three have been subjected to the cruel scissors wielded by the moneymen, surely a key to true auteurism in the original sense. In 1970, if avant-garde cinephiles were looking for a martyr to call their own, Cammell was their Welles. A renowned list of unrealised film projects saw both men languishing in development hell, the studios butchered entire films like Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons* and Cammell's *Wild Side*, and both exhibited an ultimately self-destructive naiveté that was exploited by Hollywood. If Tarantino is the modern equivalent then the vaguely similar story of *Grindhouse* and *Kill Bill* are far less romantic. Tarantino is anything but naïve, and if anything obliged Miramax and The Weinstein Company in their demands that the films be split in two on both occasions.

However Cammell's second and final film had a tortured history equal to anything Welles had to suffer. *Wild Side* was made for the exploitation company Nu Image in 1995 with their main incentive in hiring Cammell being his ability to attract stars such as Christopher Walken. While originally claiming to be dedicated to an art house film that would promote their image as a company, they quickly reneged on their promises. Taking away his final cut privileges, the studio put more emphasis on the sex and smut of the film, drastically changing the tone, which was apparently a contributing factor to Cammell's eventual suicide. The posthumous re-edit in 1997, which returned the film to Cammell's specification, resulted in a consistently surprising film that clearly harkened back to *Performance*. While Tarantino was being lauded for experimenting with narrative and expectations in similar regions, his calculatingly cool works have nothing on the eccentric hysteria of Cammell's *Wild Side*.

However Cammell's rejection of the auteur theory reveals further flaws with the development, or lack thereof, within the study. The auteur status is something bestowed by others, regardless of whether or not it is craved by the filmmaker. Cammell's tragic life story and erratic body of work fit the mythologising,

almost romanticised, aspect of the term regardless of his own personal interest in claims of authorship. The search for an author in cinema was not started by filmmakers, but by film writers seeking validity in the art. With that knowledge, and the self-conscious trappings evident in the likes of Tarantino and Anderson, maybe there is some truth in the idea that 'the only performance that makes it, that really makes it, that makes it all the way, is the one that achieves madness.'

The Death of the Auteur?

When an indignant Pauline Kael asserted that 'criticism is an art', she revealed the chip on the shoulder of everyone who desires cinema to be taken seriously as an art form: they tend to turn a blind eye to commerce. While the discussion of a production's budget, gross from theatres and rentals, merchandise and tie-ins does occur in specialist spheres, film theory has been amicably divorced from economics for a long time. The very basis of the *politique des auteurs* created by *Cahiers* writers was to allow for film to be assigned the same cultural significance as painting and sculpture; yet things changed along the way. It had changed even in the early days, as James Naremore writes of auteurism in the early 70s: 'In certain American contexts, its name became useful as a kind of marketing strategy.'

Corrigan, under the heading 'Economics of Self-Sacrifice', suggests the modern auteur as being hindered by the financial, artistic, temporal and realistic restrictions. Once again Tarantino is the perfect example here as a multi-faceted auteur-star. One minute he is the stridently independent filmmaker, out shooting a car-chase movie homage to exploitation cinema with no computer effects and no star names. Next he's bowing to the pressure of the Weinstein Company, surrendering to them his creative vision of recreating a night at the *Grindhouse* experience to their marketing sense of what people can cope with. Unlike *Kill Bill* the *Grindhouse* split has occurred after its US release and perceived box office failings.

Corrigan's division of the auteur into auteur-star and creative auteur-creator further shows the polyvalence of the role. The modern auteur is both marketable for the studio as a resource of fiscal capital and also marketable to the studio to accomplish their own artistic ends. Yet in the case of Tarantino and *Grindhouse*, it would seem that now the auteur status will only carry you so far before the fat cats slap your wrist. The auteur must serve his or her purposes to a variety of



different groups of people, most importantly the spectators who are the ones that supply the pecuniary incentive for this system to operate, hence the demise of the works by the likes of Donald Cammell. The modern auteur only exists by the grace of the audience, so *Grindhouse* may prove to be the fall from grace for Tarantino.

Now more than ever before, the type of films being produced all over the world are largely determined and driven by the desires of the summative audience. The blockbusters are guaranteed to have the percentage looking for some summertime eye candy, but what of the just left of field filmmakers who are out to cultivate an artistic voice? There's money to be made there too, and the modern day movie studio wants that chunk of change as well. If fringe cinema can be marketed to audiences who decide they like films by a certain filmmaker, there is immense financial incentive in getting their personality out there in the press. So, are Andrea Arnold, Quentin Tarantino, Wes Anderson et al. really auteurs? In the intended meaning of the term, no they aren't. Yet in what the term has come to mean, the studios will definitely have their fingers crossed that audiences think so.

