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Auteur Theory

Auteur

1. A film director whose personal influence and artistic control over his or her films are so great that he or she may be regarded as their author, and whose films may be regarded collectively as a body of work sharing common themes or techniques and expressing an individual style or vision.

Setting the scene

Historically the notion of authorship conjured up the image of an isolated individual passionately working to create bodies of art. Characters such as those in Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) help perpetuate this romantic stereotype of the tortured Bohemian artist. When applying ideas of authorship to the field of Film Studies it is typically the director that is acknowledged as the creative force. The term auteur is French for author and the word derives from the prefix 'auto', meaning one.

The idea of a single controlling figure was acknowledged as early as the 1910s in the British fan magazine *Bioscope* where certain directors were identified as special. Similarly, in Germany the term *Autoren* film was used, which also promoted the idea of the director as author. However, screenwriters campaigned for their right to be recognized as the creative force. This debate from the 1910s continues to resonate a century later and is one of the founding ideas of film theory.

The idea that film is the sole work of a single contributor is problematic. Film is a collaborative process and therefore to attribute control to the director above all others is contentious. The number of people involved in producing a film is extensive: actors, writers, set designers, camera operators, musicians, financial backers, technical advisors, costume and make-up artists, editors, marketing and distribution staff, etc. To understand this debate fully, it is necessary to trace the emergence and development of Auteur Theory and explore its complexity. These debates about the auteur were initiated by an influential text from filmmaker and novelist Alexandre Astruc.

Astruc coined the term *caméra-stylo*, which literally translates as 'camera pen'. He wanted to bring film into line with other forms of art, namely raising its status from a working-class form of entertainment to match that of opera, ballet, poetry, literature and fine art. His article, 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: *La Caméra-Stylo*' (1948), called for a new language in filmmaking. He posited that the camera should be used in the same way that a writer would use a pen. He rallied filmmakers to move beyond institutionalized forms of cinema in favour of more personal ways of

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storytelling. The emphasis that Astruc placed on the 'personal' has fuelled debate. The most vigorous participants in this debate came from France.

The *Cahiers* group

The *Cinémathèque Française* in Paris was much more than a typical cinema, as it was home to a group of enthusiasts who collectively sought to revolutionize cinema. Led by Henri Langlois, the group showed films throughout the day and night, attracting the attention of likeminded individuals. Their fascination in cinema instigated a forum for debate and experimentation. For example, they would watch films without any sound so that they could focus solely on the importance of the image. This fanaticism and attempt to comprehend the very essence of cinema resulted in two major developments in film history: the journal *Cahiers du cinéma* and the *Nouvelle Vague*/French New Wave school of filmmaking.

These 'filmoholics' were often referred to as *cinéphiles* as they were obsessed with filmmaking. Among the key members of the group were:

- André Bazin (theorist)
- Claude Chabrol (New Wave director and writer)
- Jean-Luc Godard (New Wave director, writer and theorist)
- Henri Langlois (archivist)
- Alain Resnais (New Wave director)
- Jacques Rivette (New Wave director and writer)
- François Truffaut (New Wave director, writer and theorist)
- Roger Vadim (New Wave director and writer).

From within this influential group of filmmakers and thinkers, François Truffaut energized the debate with his article, 'Une Certaine Tendance du Cinéma Français'.

François Truffaut

'Une Certaine Tendance du Cinéma Français' (1954)

Truffaut's seminal text 'Une Certaine Tendance du Cinéma Français', signalled a radical shift in the auteur debate. He and his fellow *cinéphiles* found traditional French filmmaking conservative and unexciting. '*Tradition de la qualité*' was the term used to describe films that were typically based on adaptations of literary classics. The *Cahiers* group mocked this mode of production, calling it '*Cinéma du Papa*' (Dad's cinema) as they felt it was stuffy and outdated. More importantly this form of filmmaking privileged the role of the writer rather than acknowledging the director. In contrast to '*tradition de la qualité*' they aspired to create films that spoke to their generation. Their intention was to attack the ideology of bourgeois culture.

During World War II foreign imported films were limited due to the Nazi occupation of France. Post-war the influx of films, particularly from Hollywood, strongly inspired the *Cahiers* group. In spite of studio stipulations, they recognized that certain directors' films exhibited identifiable

stylistic traits. As a result of these observations Truffaut developed '*la politique des auteurs*' (auteur policy). It is important to establish that Truffaut never intended for his work to form the basis of a theory; it represented a policy, an attitude and a critical approach to reading film. The two overriding principles he put forward were:

- 1 *Mise-en-scène* is crucial to the reading of cinema and is essential in film analysis and criticism.
- 2 The director's personal expression is key in distinguishing whether they should be afforded the title of auteur.

Truffaut was concerned with the focus on film style (*mise-en-scène* and thematics) rather than film plot (content).

Reflect and respond

- 1 How did the *Cahiers* group change the previous sense of the auteur?
- 2 Why do you think Truffaut favours *mise-en-scène* over other aspects of filmmaking?
- 3 Can you identify any directors who are instantly recognizable due to the consistency in *mise-en-scène* throughout their films?

Mise-en-scène

The term *mise-en-scène* literally translates as 'put into the scene'. Originating from the theatre, it describes everything that appears in the frame. This can be divided into four specific components:

- 1 set design (props and décor)
- 2 lighting (and shadow)
- 3 acting (movement and gesture, not dialogue)
- 4 costume and make-up.

In order to understand the importance of *mise-en-scène* in relation to Auteur Theory, it is necessary to identify consistent stylistic traits across films to decide whether or not a director can be classed as an auteur.

Tim Burton provides an interesting study as his films have a distinctive aesthetic style. Consider the films *Sleepy Hollow* (1999) and *Big Fish* (2003). The narratives in both films are located in the woods, a typical trope found across Burton's oeuvre, with the gnarled, eerie trees serving to create a foreboding atmosphere. The viewer is drawn into an uncomfortable world, as generically Burton falls between the two camps of Horror and Fantasy. This is enhanced by the artistic use of light and shadow to anticipate the arrival of nightfall and unspoken horrors.

Burton owes a great debt to German Expressionism; this can be seen through the use of curves, the angular objects within the frame and the surreal nature of his storytelling. The lead protagonist, though central to the composition, is intimidated by the pervading forest. These elements of



Figure 1.1 *Sleepy Hollow* (Tim Burton, 1999)

the *mise-en-scène* combine to induce a sense of menace where man is pitted against nature, a recurring dynamic in Burton's work.

In addition to the importance of set design and lighting, the aesthetic consistency can also be applied to Burton's use of costume and make-up. A typical feature of an auteur is a director who uses the same actors time and time again. Throughout Burton's career Johnny Depp has been cast in numerous leading roles. Despite the disparate characters Depp has played, Burton recycles and develops roles rather than abandoning characters. *Sweeney Todd* can be seen as an extension, and in many respects an inversion, of *Edward Scissorhands*. The naïve, fearful and introverted character from the 90s is transformed into the cynical, murderous and predatory demon barber of Fleet Street; a ghost of his former self.

To examine this in more detail it is appropriate to focus on costume and make-up. In both films Depp sports a dishevelled look with unkempt hair. Similarly his black and white clothing



Figure 1.2 *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (Tim Burton, 1993)

is reminiscent of a Gothic, Romantic artist, a familiar motif woven throughout Burton's repertoire. The costume is flamboyantly adorned with frills typical of swashbuckling heroes of old. Yet unlike with the conventional heroes, the garments are crumpled and suggestive of neglect. The razor-sharp fingers that were imposed on the earlier character of Scissorhands become a fundamental part of Todd's character and once more integral to the narrative.

The consistency in design across Burton's work is exemplified by the highly stylized look explicit in the *mise-en-scène* of his films. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 exemplify tropes discussed above; extreme use of light and shadow, curves and angles, influence of both German Expressionism and the Gothic. Furthermore the compositions of the images are incredibly similar. The images above reflect Burton's consistent preoccupation with the macabre. His use of dark tones, spooky landscapes and scary objects provide an appropriate backdrop for his Gothic tales. These have become synonymous with his oeuvre.

Personal filmmaking

Another facet of the auteur argument is the notion of directors pursuing projects that hold personal significance. These personal aspects can manifest in many forms, such as political, social and cultural. For example Spike Lee is typically drawn to narratives about race and Martin Scorsese is interested in Catholicism.

To continue with Burton as an illustration, it can be seen that the theme of childhood isolation is pertinent within his films. As a child Burton was estranged from his parents, living with his grandmother from the ages of twelve to sixteen. During this period he sought solace by escaping into his imagination, which was fuelled by fairytales and classic monster movies. Burton identified with the monster rather than the hero as he was himself a loner. He states:

Every kid responds to some image, some fairy-tale image, and I felt most monsters were basically misperceived, they usually had much more heartfelt souls than the human characters around them. My fairy-tales were probably those monster movies, to me they're fairly similar. (Salisbury, 2006, p.3)

The film *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) is probably his most autobiographical to date. The unlikely hero of the narrative can be seen as Burton's *alter ego*. The resemblance to these main characters is also evident in Burton's physical appearance. He is often photographed looking awkward in crumpled suits and with long, tousled hair. The link between personal experience and filmic storytelling in *Edward Scissorhands* and many of his other films exemplifies the recurring sentiment in Burton's work.

In addition to thematic consistency, directors can also include personal signatures within their oeuvre. This can consist of a visual motif that is repeated across a body of texts. Earlier we discussed Burton's Gothic *mise-en-scène* as an illustration of a personal signature. Another example can be found in the films of Spike Lee where he places an actor on a dolly with the camera. The effect is that the character appears to float rather than walk and this technique is instantly recognizable as Lee's signature.

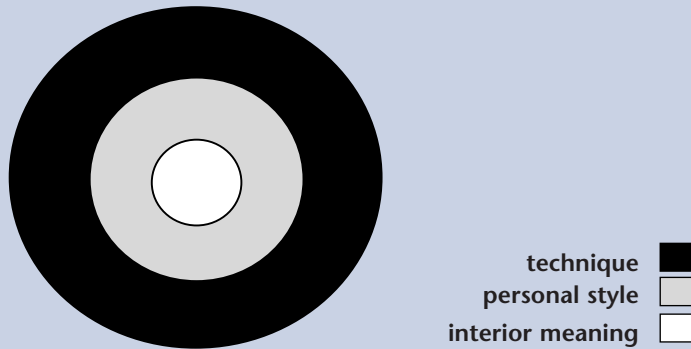
The importance of *mise-en-scène* and a director's personal signature are fundamental to the auteur debate. The ideas of the *Cahiers* group and Truffaut in the 50s were taken up and complicated by Andrew Sarris, an American critic writing in the 60s.

Andrew Sarris

'Notes on the Auteur Theory' (1962)

Sarris is most famous for mistranslating Truffaut's '*La Politique des Auteurs*' as Auteur Theory. Although it is predominantly referred to as a theory, it should be considered as a device for reading film. Sarris starts his essay by pointing out the flaws in Truffaut's thesis. He questions whether a director can be the author of a film and therefore solely responsible for its distinctive quality. He continues by stating that Auteur Theory: 'makes it difficult to think of a bad director making a good film and almost impossible to think of a good director making a bad one' (Sarris, 1962, p.561).

Sarris discussed his interpretation of Auteur Theory in terms of concentric circles (see diagram below): 'The outer circle as technique; the middle circle, personal style; and the inner circle, interior meaning' (p.563). He believed that for a director to reach the status of auteur, they would have to be accomplished in all areas. Most important, for Sarris, is the inner circle. Many directors are able to achieve the outer circles but if a filmmaker's work consistently attains 'interior meaning', this would suggest it is the work of an auteur. Here Sarris raises the important debate concerning the *metteur-en-scène* (see below).



Metteur-en-scène

The term *metteur-en-scène* was first coined by André Bazin, another *Cahiers* writer. A *metteur* is different from an auteur in that the former is a competent, and often very good, technician. Whereas an auteur can make a good movie out of a poor script, a *metteur-en-scène* would struggle; they merely adapt material given to them rather than making it their own. In other words, they may exhibit some of the attributes associated with an auteur but lack the extra depth involved.

Production

Another area for consideration is the budget that a director is able to secure. It does not necessarily follow that a large budget is an indication of auteur status; in fact the reverse can often be true. A director could be successful working in a specific genre and therefore accrue monetary backing as future projects are likely to be commercially successful. In contrast, many auteurs work outside the mainstream studio system and accordingly struggle to attract financial support. Often in the case of the latter, big-name actors appear in films at a reduced fee as they are more interested in the critical acclaim that can be gained from working with such a director. For example Tom Cruise worked with Paul Thomas Anderson on the film *Magnolia* (1999) and more recently Duncan Jones, son of David Bowie, managed to acquire the vocal talent of Kevin Spacey for his film *Moon* (2009) as the voice of the robot companion, GERTY.

Interestingly, this leads to another aspect of the auteur debate. *Moon* was Duncan Jones's debut film. Although it has been critically praised, we cannot deduce whether Jones qualifies as an auteur because he has only made one film to date. It begs the question: Does a director have to produce a certain number of films before he can be ascribed the status of auteur? Or should artistic ability be measured by quality rather than quantity? This is one of many obstacles that problematize the issue of authorship.

Problematizing the auteur

One of the main criticisms of the director as author is that film is a collaborative process involving an eclectic team of artisans, whose input is ignored when applying the theory. Peter Wollen refers to the additional layers of film production as 'noise' (Caughie, 1981, p.143). He stated that viewers have to separate the 'voice' of the director from superfluous 'noise'. Wollen was referring to other forms of interference such as input from actors, producers, camera operators. Once more this emphasizes the personal, distinctive vision of the director and asks the audience to be active in locating and hearing a continued narrative. Conversely, what he dismisses as superfluous 'noise' can be privileged as an alternative to the vision of the director. Here we will consider four possible candidates for the role of auteur in order to further the debate on authorship:

1 Actor

The actor has a unique presence within a film, not only on screen but also as a marketing tool to attract an audience. Films are more frequently advertised using the name of the star rather than that of the director. Certain stars have the kudos to ensure a film is realized. For example Alejandro Amenábar's *Abre los Ojos/Open Your Eyes* (1997) was remade as *Vanilla Sky* (Cameron Crowe, 2001) due to Tom Cruise's enthusiasm for the Spanish film. Similarly Tom Hanks was highly influential in bringing the film *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Joel Zwick, 2002) to the screen. Additionally, some actors have made the transition into directing, for example, Clint Eastwood, Mel Gibson and Kevin Costner.

2 Cinematographer

One of the main preoccupations in discussions of the director as auteur is the focus on visual style. The responsibility for style often lies behind the camera. The selection of specific angles and depth of field influences the spectator's understanding of an entire scene. Therefore the cinematographer is key in the overall look of the film and could be considered an auteur. Interestingly in America they are known as the 'director of photography' (DP). There are certain directors who have also undertaken this role, for example David Lean and Lars von Trier; however, these are exceptions.

3 Writer

This is possibly the most problematic category. If we consider *The Lord of the Rings*: J. R. R. Tolkien penned the original books; Peter Jackson directed the franchise (2001–3); yet it was Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens, with Peter Jackson, who wrote the screenplay. This clearly calls the idea of authorship into question. The British director Richard Curtis believes that it is paramount that a writer is part of the filmmaking process because:

A film is made at least four times. Once in the writing. Then in the shooting, which is the second film. Then in the editing, which is the third film. Then there might be a fourth film ... losing bits that you love The screenplay is only the beginning. (Owen, 2003, p.96)

4 Composer

Many directors work repeatedly with the same composers: Steven Spielberg with John Williams, Sergio Leone with Ennio Morricone, Tim Burton with Danny Elfman. Therefore much of the distinctive style associated with these directors is reliant on this collaborative process. The score and soundtrack are once again integral to audience interpretation.

These four ways of discussing authorship signal a move away from Truffaut's *Politique*; this idea was further complicated by the work of Roland Barthes.

Roland Barthes

'Death of the Author' (1968)

Roland Barthes was a theorist, critic and writer on cultural and social meaning. His seminal text 'Death of the Author' was written for literary criticism. However, a look at his ideas will show how they are easily applied to questions of authorship in film. According to Barthes, Western culture places too much emphasis on the creative force; assigning meaning of the text to the author. He challenged this tradition by giving preference to the reader. He maintained that it was the reader who gave a text meaning. The reader is the interpreter and there can never be one definitive reading of a text, be it film or literature. We all interpret information in different ways.

In order to fully appreciate messages contained in a work, it would be necessary to have knowledge of an author's intended purpose. But this author-centred approach closes down the

full range of possible meanings. The traditional notion of the author needs to be reviewed. The onus instead is placed firmly on the reader/viewer, as they need to engage with the material and become an active reader. Whereas the passive reader allows information to be absorbed without any conscious effort, the active reader will question and challenge the text. This allows an endless play of meaning; the text is no longer closed but instead remains open. The 'death of the author' leads to the 'birth' of the reader.

Reflect and respond

- 1 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the ideas of Barthes?
- 2 It is now common to speak of a Scorsese or a Tarantino film. What characteristics would you expect to see in a film by either of these two directors?
- 3 Can a film's meanings be attributed to a single creative source?
- 4 Why do we place so much emphasis on 'authorship'? Why do audiences and critics continue to want a cinematic author?
- 5 Can you name any famous cinematographers, composers, editors or other technical crew members?
- 6 Is Auteur Theory now an outdated mode of analysis for Film Studies? If yes, what are the alternatives?

Making a case for an auteur

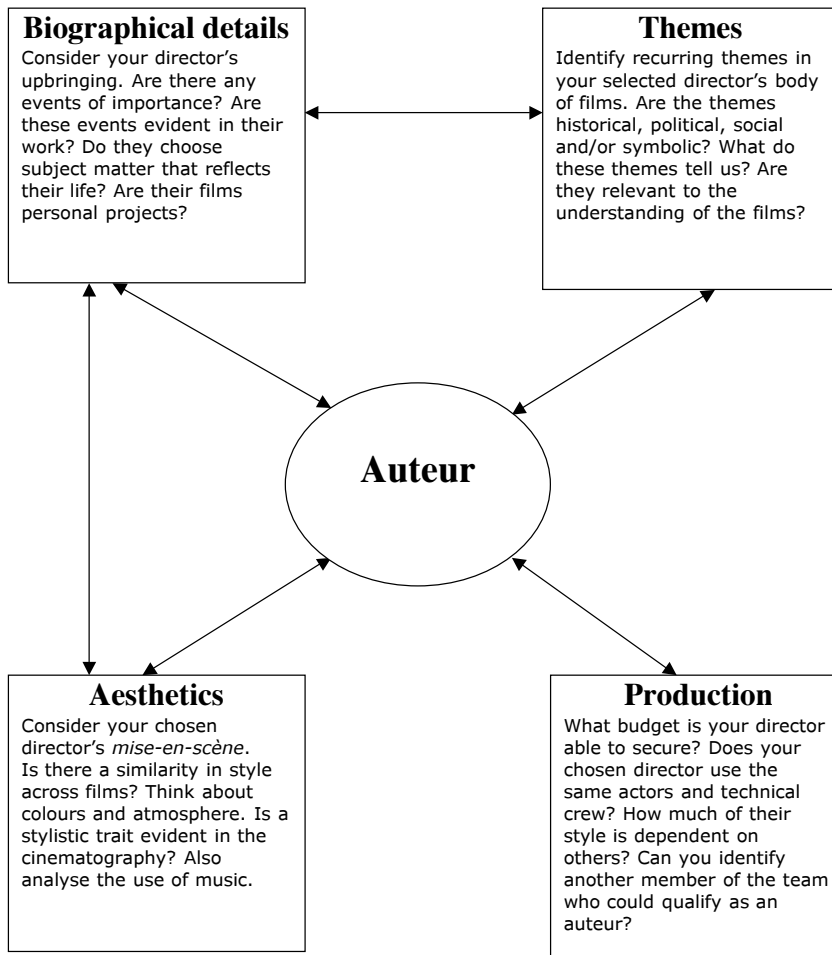
The diagram on p.12 should help you focus your thoughts when trying to make an argument for a director as auteur or not.

It is important to note that there are arrows leading to and from the 'Biographical details' box. This is to indicate that a director's life can, and typically does, influence aesthetic and thematic choices.

Using this template as a starting point, the following case studies may help you ascertain whether a director deserves the title of auteur.

Case study: Alfred Hitchcock

Alfred Hitchcock was involved with every aspect of filmmaking both before and during a shoot and exercised a great deal of control over his work. On most projects he developed the screenplay; was active in casting; and influenced the choice of soundtrack and visual style. In exercising such control to produce a highly personal artistic vision he was able to override the constraints of the studio system; this entailed him having authority over the final cut (a privilege afforded most auteurs). It was Hitchcock's complete control over all elements that led to Truffaut citing the director as an example in early auteur debates (see Hitchcock interview, 1967, in Truffaut, 1986).



The most commonly examined areas attest to his title as 'master of suspense'. He is recognized as revolutionizing the thriller genre, playing with an audience's nerves and fears and often tackling subjects of a taboo nature. For example, *Strangers on a Train* (1951) touches on issues of homosexuality; *Psycho* (1960) deals with the Oedipus Complex; and *Marnie* (1964) looks at repressed memory.

Devices such as recurring themes, camera technique, editing, particular use of sound and silences, chiaroscuro lighting, the MacGuffin (an object that serves as the impetus for the plot) and cameo appearances all combine to present Hitchcock's personal vision of the world in his thrillers. Due to the array of innovative stylistic features that were employed by Hitchcock only a few examples can be selected here. This study will look first at those characteristics that are concerned with filmmaking (aesthetics and production) and second at those characteristics rooted in Hitchcock and his personal vision (biographical details and themes), which together combine to suggest his auteur status.

Aesthetics

Hitchcock is considered an expert of cinematic technique. His dialogue, sound, plot and character were always secondary to the image.

However, he used all these components in imaginative ways. In *Blackmail* (1929), his first sound film, he utilized silence and dialogue to dramatic effect. Repetition of the word 'knife' is amplified within a conversation; this device aurally represents the violent stabbing action of the knife and psychologically gnaws away at the guilty character. Similarly, Bernard Herrmann's score for *Psycho* was composed with the distinct intention of emphasizing the violence of the famous shower sequence after many images had to be cut due to censors. Here the staccato strings accentuate the physical assault.

It is probably for his innovative camera techniques and editing that Hitchcock is considered a master. The placement and movement of the camera was carefully controlled. Dolly zooms, which became known as the 'Hitchcock Zoom', are seen in *Vertigo* (1958). They were combined with strange camera angles to heighten dramatic meaning in many films, especially when psychological elements were involved. Returning to the shower scene, Hitchcock builds suspense by using cuts that get progressively shorter until the victim lies dead, with her blood trickling down the plug hole.

Themes

The act of murder in his films points to another of Hitchcock's motifs; a fascination with eyes. Hitchcock understood how the eyes, as windows to the soul, revealed what a character thinks or needs. Extreme close-up shots and point-of-view editing force spectators to experience the perspective of both the victim and the killer. In a voyeuristic way the audience enters the violent, frightening scene. The film *Frenzy* (1972) engages shot/reverse-shot to mirror the eyes of both the murderer and his prey.

Hitchcock's preoccupation with eyes continues throughout his oeuvre. In *Rear Window* (1954), Jimmy Stewart's character repeatedly watches his neighbours through a pair of binoculars. Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) spies on Janet Leigh through a peephole cleverly hidden behind a painting. The director takes his obsession with eyes to an extreme level. Consider the images below (Figures 1.3 and 1.4). Here horrific blindness is enforced on elderly victims. The vivid desecration of the skull shocks the audience and highlights the fragility of the human body.



Figure 1.3 *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960)



Figure 1.4 *The Birds* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1963)

Production

A typical trait of an auteur is to employ the same actors and technical crew time and time again. A look across fifty years of Hitchcock films shows that he tended to choose the same screenwriters, art directors, composers and actors, usually working with them over a short period of time. Bernard Herrmann, the composer, was the exception to this, working on eight films over a period of nine years from 1955. Herrmann was responsible for some of the most successful scores in Hitchcock's films; notably *Vertigo*, *Psycho* and *North by Northwest* (1959). Additionally, Jimmy Stewart and Cary Grant each appeared in four Hitchcock films while Ingrid Bergman and Grace Kelly each starred in three films.

Biographical details

Command of the *mise-en-scène* and familiar cast and crew are only part of the vision of an auteur. Integral to the auteurist position are aspects of the director's own life which are deemed to have influenced his work. Critical writing on Hitchcock often focuses on his childhood, Catholic upbringing and fascination with aspects of guilt, punishment, fear and morality. Critics and journalists soon began to recognize these familiar tropes and discuss them at length, speculating on their origins. Hitchcock fostered this speculation, by alluding to childhood experiences when interviewed.

In particular he spoke of an incident when he was punished by his father (Spoto, 1983, p. 4). This is often read as the motivation for Hitchcock's fears and distrust of authority and also for his recurring theme of the innocent man wrongly accused. In this anecdotal tale, Hitchcock was sent to a police station by his father as punishment for a minor offence. There he was locked, terrified, in a cell for a short time. The experience engendered a fascination with the plight of the ordinary man when the victim of mistaken identity, wrongfully accused or imprisoned. His early film *The Lodger* (1926), and many later films, among them, *The Thirty-nine Steps* (1935), *The Wrong Man* (1957), *Vertigo* and *North by Northwest*, all share and develop this theme and all include a character trying to prove his innocence.

The recurring themes in his films of loneliness and depressive illness can be traced back to his childhood. He felt that he was an outsider, 'I don't ever recall having a playmate [...] I looked and observed a great deal' (Spoto, 1983, p.20). Outsiders who feature in his films include an amnesiac accused of murder in *Spellbound* (1945), a woman with a fear of sexual contact in *Marnie* and a serial killer made psychotic due to his sexual impotence in *Frenzy*. However, it is not only villains who are outsiders; alienated heroes appear in *Rear Window* and *Vertigo*.

Alongside this alienation there is evidence of Hitchcock's misogyny and episodes of sadism are to be found in biographical accounts. These similarly became dominant themes in many of his films. Tormented blonde heroines are foregrounded as vehicles for male voyeurism and as objects of sadistic male fantasies. It appears that Hitchcock saw female sexual vulnerability as a powerful dramatic device to be exploited, as can be witnessed in *Psycho*, *Marnie* and *Frenzy*. Furthermore, these heroines suffered violent deaths, further demonstrating the director's fascination with sadism. Violent death and murder, in particular strangulation, made an appearance from his earliest films.

Hitchcock was an accomplished self-publicist and carefully manufactured his public image. Unusually for the time, Hitchcock's name featured prominently in the marketing and promotion of his films. His cameo roles formed part of this promotion, while his narration of prologues and

epilogues in his TV shows increased his visibility to another audience. His striking way of signing his name was made up of a series of eight strokes of his pen to create a silhouette likeness of himself. This, alongside his highly visible, rotund figure, combined to market his image as a director. Another aspect of this self-promotion was his decision to restrict his work to the narrow focus of a single genre, thus establishing his brand-name as the master of suspense.

Conclusion

However, whether Hitchcock can be considered an auteur remains a contentious issue. While Hitchcock's worldview and stylistic tone are very apparent across some fifty years of filmmaking, of his forty-four films from *Blackmail* to *Family Plot* (1976), thirty-seven were literary adaptations. Unfortunately, in Hollywood the screenwriter is often seen as a technician rather than as a creative person. That is, to make a novel into a screenplay is a mechanical process that can be learned by hacks. David O. Selznick, a 'hands-on' producer who worked with Hitchcock until *Notorious* (1946) was keen that film adaptations should be faithful to the original book. This did not suit Hitchcock. Therefore to establish and maintain his status as auteur, Hitchcock needed to move authorship away from the original author. Rather than be recognized for literary adaptations which would dissipate his auteur status, Hitchcock chose to make films from relatively unknown books and authors. This enabled him to buy, for example, *Psycho* (novel by Robert Bloch) and *Strangers on a Train* (novel by Patricia Highsmith) cheaply. After banning the novelists from any further intervention, Hitchcock remodelled the plots to allow for his personal interpretation. In his interview with Truffaut, Hitchcock noted that, 'What I do is to read a story once, and if I like the basic idea, I just forget all about the book and start to create cinema' (Truffaut, 1986, p.71). Hitchcock's strategies worked, as very few of the novelists are connected with their adapted texts even if they later gained fame. For instance, Patricia Highsmith is known for the Ripley character but not as the writer of *Strangers on a Train*. Despite the involvement of screenwriters, novelists, playwrights, composers, art directors and cinematographers, Hitchcock's personal worldview shines through and coheres fifty years of filmmaking.

Case study: Guillermo del Toro

At what point a director can be accepted as an auteur is a question that has been asked since debates concerning directorial authority first began. The contemporary Mexican director Guillermo del Toro is being discussed in both academic and popular publications as a potential auteur. He is an interesting candidate as he has directed only seven films to date:

- *Cronos* (1993)
- *Mimic* (1997)
- *El Espinazo del Diablo/The Devil's Backbone* (2001)
- *Blade II* (2002)
- *Hellboy* (2004)
- *El Laberinto del Fauno/Pan's Labyrinth* (2006)
- *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008).

Biographical details

Del Toro is one of three Mexican directors who have received critical attention over the last ten years. Affectionately referred to as the Three Amigos, del Toro along with Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu and Alfonso Cuarón all share the same ideology and strive to promote Mexican filmmaking on a global scale. A similar political agenda is woven throughout their films and a case could be made for any one of the group to be labelled as an auteur, but here we will turn our attention specifically to del Toro.

Following the success of his debut vampire picture *Cronos*, del Toro was invited to direct his first Hollywood film. The experience was less than ideal, as he felt his authority was constantly being undermined by the studio. Once *Mimic* was completed he fled back to his native Mexico where he made *The Devil's Backbone*. He was motivated to return to the US in 1998 when his father was kidnapped. Although del Toro has made films in Mexico, America and Spain and is able to attract funding for blockbusters and independent art-house productions, a stylistic and thematic consistency still runs throughout the body of his work.

Themes

Del Toro can be considered a generic filmmaker. As early as 2002, Kimberley Chun referred to del Toro as 'one of the most original and ambitious horror auteurs since David Cronenberg' (2002, p.28). His films are primarily a hybrid of the Horror and Fantasy genres. He is more specifically influenced by the world of fairytales and fables as his films continue to explore boundaries between reality and the world of imagination and the supernatural. Accordingly, del Toro often manages to go against the grain of generic conventions, for example, the character of *Hellboy* is not your usual comic-book adaptation. Rather than a moral, altruistic superhero, Hellboy is a jealous, jaded and flawed character.

At the heart of the majority of the director's work is the theme of childhood. Del Toro is akin to Ingmar Bergman in his innate ability to capture childhood innocence and depth on screen. His two art-house successes *The Devil's Backbone* and *Pan's Labyrinth* both enquire into the workings of the child's mind. Del Toro often relates the importance of his own childhood and convincingly describes encounters with monsters and ghosts, which he claims fuelled his filmmaking in later life. Yet his films do not cater for a younger audience as children in his movies often experience extreme violence, which once more is not typical of traditional filmmaking.

Another key theme inherent in his works is a political agenda. Occasionally films will take place at a specific moment in history, making the political subtext apparent (the Spanish Civil War is integral to both *The Devil's Backbone* and *Pan's Labyrinth*); even when not explicitly expressed an anti-authoritarian message underlies most of his films.

Aesthetics

In numerous interviews del Toro cites the Spanish artist Francisco de Goya as an influence. Stylistic similarities can be seen between the colour palette adopted by Goya and the tones and atmosphere captured in a del Toro production. In particular he often discusses the impact that *Saturno devorando a su hijo*/*Saturn Devouring His Children* had on him as a child (Figure 1.5). This

painting is part of a collection known as the 'Black Paintings'; also in this group is *The Great He Goat/The Witches' Sabbath*. Here the silhouetted horned figure, which appears in many of Goya's paintings, bears a striking resemblance to the iconic Faun featured in *Pan's Labyrinth*. Del Toro's love of chiaroscuro lighting can similarly be recognized in the dark shadows that are eerily cast in Goya's brush strokes.

The imaginary, surreal worlds typically inhabited by the lead protagonists in the films of del Toro are frequently located underground. This adventure into a world of darkness and the unknown is also evident in the literary writings of Lewis Carroll. Ofelia's journey into the labyrinthine world of Pan draws parallels with that of Alice's into Wonderland. In the press notes that accompany the film, del Toro talks of the symbolism apparent in the journey:

I tried to reconnect with the perversity and very sexual content of his work. In fairy tales, all stories are either about the return to the womb (heaven, home) or wandering out into the world and facing your own dragon. We are all children wandering through our own fable. (2006)

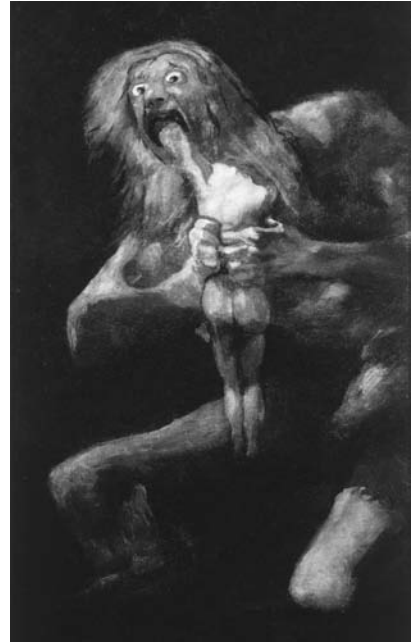


Figure 1.5 Francisco de Goya, *Saturn Devouring His Children* (1819–23)

The symbolism throughout del Toro's oeuvre demands closer attention. The iconography is often reflective of his fascination with insects and clockwork mechanisms but many images hold greater spiritual and religious connotations.

Production

Del Toro's films manage to traverse big-budget commercial Hollywood filmmaking and low-budget art cinema. The director is fortunate to be in a position to secure large budgets. Conversely he funds his art-house ventures from his own production company, 'Tequila Gang'. Del Toro founded his company following his experience of being produced by El Deseo (a production company established by the Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar). Both the Tequila Gang and El Deseo were set up to nurture up-and-coming filmmakers from Mexico, Spain and Latin America. Whereas many directors see working for Hollywood studios as a betrayal of artistic integrity, del Toro does not distinguish between his films in this way, naming *Pan's Labyrinth* and *Hellboy* as the films he takes greatest pride in.

Del Toro typically works with the same cast and crew. After casting Ron Perlman in his 1993 film *Cronos* and *Blade II* in 2002, he petitioned for Perlman to take the lead in the comic-book adaptation *Hellboy*. Perlman was predominantly known for his television role in *Beauty and the Beast* (1987–90) but producers felt they needed a star to sell the film and had Vin Diesel in mind. Del Toro refused to compromise and as a result Perlman was hired. Another actor who has



Figure 1.6 *Hellboy* (Guillermo del Toro, 2004)



Figure 1.7 *Pan's Labyrinth* (Guillermo del Toro, 2006)

featured in a number of his films is Doug Jones. Jones first appeared in the director's American debut *Mimic* as an extra. He was then cast as one of the lead characters in the *Hellboy* franchise. His role as the psychic amphibian 'Abe Sapien' (Figure 1.6), and more importantly his physicality, must have inspired del Toro as the director went on to cast Jones as the two most memorable characters in *Pan's Labyrinth* – that of the Pale Man (Figure 1.7) and the Faun.

Del Toro also tends to use the same Mexican cinematographer, Guillermo Navarro. Navarro has been instrumental in shooting his films with the exceptions of *Mimic* and *Blade II*. More recently the director has returned to the same editor. Bernat Vilaplana first worked with him on *Pan's Labyrinth*. He has since worked on *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*, which suggests that the collaborative relationship may continue.

Conclusion

Del Toro is a director, producer and writer. There is a distinct magical darkness to his films. Thematically he is concerned with childhood, memory, death and the politics of oppression. He can be classed as a generic filmmaker as his films adhere to the Fantasy/Horror blueprint, yet they are not contrived. Instead they provoke the audience to question wider political and social questions. Del Toro is becoming a household name and therefore attracting audiences on the strength of his previous work. The best illustration of this can be seen in the marketing of the Spanish film *El Orfanato/The Orphanage* (2007). *The Orphanage* was directed by Juan Antonio Bayona but was sold as a del Toro production. He produced the film and Bayona owes his mentor a great debt not just financially. *The Orphanage* covers the same ground as del Toro's *The Devil's Backbone*, with both films set in orphanages that are haunted by the ghosts of children and featuring a historical Spanish political subtext. Here del Toro proves himself an inspiration to younger directors. However, this influence goes far beyond style and content because he is also helping to support new talent. His name is increasingly recognized as an endorsement of quality, but whether he should be granted the status of auteur is yet to be seen.

Reflect and respond

- 1 Can you think of any reason why Hitchcock should not be considered an auteur?
- 2 To what extent do you think that Hitchcock's aesthetic is influenced by the composer Bernard Herrmann?
- 3 Make a case for whether you think del Toro is or is not an auteur.
- 4 What are your thoughts concerning the auteur status of Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu and Alfonso Cuarón?
- 5 Can you think of any other potential auteurs typically famous for making movies in one particular genre?
- 6 Comment on the tensions between art and industry in debates on auteurism.
- 7 Identify up-and-coming directors whom you believe may be accepted into the canon of great auteurs.
- 8 How have DVDs and Blu-ray changed the construction of the media personality of the director as author?

Conclusion

The question remains, why has Auteur Theory survived as a critical approach when filmmaking is clearly collaborative? Here are some possible answers:

- The director as auteur allows cinema to claim artistic and academic legitimacy; you have film artists just as you have literary or visual artists. Film should be scrutinized in a similar manner to traditional art forms.
- Academics and critics tend to champion the director as it is easier when writing to attribute responsibility to a sole individual. This practice of using the director as 'shorthand' has become accepted as the norm and in turn promotes Auteur Theory.
- Auteur Theory is key to the cultural capital of fan communities, cinema buffs, journalists and academics, all of whom publish using a variety of formats. The internet has given fans a platform to voice their opinions. Similarly newspapers, magazines, journals, radio and television all produce items promoting directors to their respective audiences.
- DVD and Blu-ray marketing include extra features to promote the role of the director: commentaries, 'making-of' documentaries, interviews and 'special edition' directors' cuts.
- Similarly a vast amount of journalism in print and on television features interviews with directors, not just stars, in order to promote the latest film offerings. Therefore Roland Barthes's idea that the author is theoretically dead appears, now more than ever, to be out of step with our contemporary media.

More recently academics have introduced the term 'post-auteur'. This can be seen as an extension of earlier criticisms where authorial intent has been questioned due to the dedicated involvement of actors, producers, screenwriters, etc.

Despite such recent trends, the director is still very much 'of the moment'. With the film industry struggling to come to terms with the drop in DVD sales and the emergence of peer-to-peer

file-sharing (illegal downloads), actors and directors have become a stable commodity. Directors continue to garner respect, which can in turn draw people back into the auditorium. This is the case with a number of contemporary American indie auteurs such as Paul Thomas Anderson, Wes Anderson, Spike Jonze and Richard Linklater. Furthermore, viewers who are keen to see the work of these, and similar, directors could be enticed into the cinema to see a good copy of the film. Only once the DVD becomes available can a decent version of the film be illegally posted on the net (ripped from the DVD). Prior to this, unlawful recordings of the film taken from the cinema screen might be available to those who are impatient. However, these would be substitutes of poor quality. Accordingly, in this modern climate of illegal downloads, the auteur still manages to draw viewers back into the cinema. For that reason, academic enquiries into the role of the director will continue to be pertinent.

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