

Scorsese



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Use a range of auteur theories to examine the work of two significant directors you have studied on this module. One director should have produced the majority of their work prior to 1960 and the other should have produced it from the 1970s onwards.

Discuss the origins and main developments of auteur theory then examine the works of Howard Hawks and Martin Scorsese with relevance to their status as auteur directors.

In having their films examined as auteurs of the cinema, both Howard Hawks and Martin Scorsese have been described as great artists whose body of work demonstrates repeated themes and motifs, that put in context reveals a particular belief and world view that is held by the director. In fact, Hawks was among the first directors working in Hollywood who was considered to be a "major artist" by Cahiers du Cinema critic Jacques Rivette in his 1953 essay *The genius of Howard Hawks* (Hillier and Wollen, 1). In similar fashion, Ben Nyce in *Scorsese up Close*, describes Scorsese as a "True artist" on a "personal and artistic quest" (Nyce, 16). The view of a director as a great artist whose films express their own individual vision is one that characterised auteur theory from its inception and through most of the 1960's. But from the late 1960's arguments have been raised questioning "the ideology of the artist as sole creator of the art work" (Cook and Bernink, 235). Thus, auteur theory has been modified to include different approaches including structuralism, feminism and social and political concerns. By using different auteur theories to look at the work of these two directors, we shall try to determine whether the director can be referred to as the artist or

author of his films and whether the auteur theory is still relevant today.

Before auteurism was solidly established as a theory by the French critics of the Cahiers du Cinema, there existed criticism that acknowledged the director as the artistic centre of a film. This criticism tended to privilege directors with more creative freedom than their peers including directors such as D. W. Griffiths, Orson Welles and John Ford in America, and Sergei Eisenstein and Marcel Carne in Europe. Much of this writing was concerned with "constants of style and world view across the works of the directors concerned" but lacked "the systematic, polemic thrust of auteurism proper" (Hill and Gibson, 312). The ideas behind much of this work were expressed in Cahiers du Cinema in

Alexandre Astruc's call for "A new language of cinema in which the individual artist could express his or her thoughts, using the camera to write a world view, a philosophy of life" in his 1948 essay *The birth of the new Avant-Garde: the Camera-Pen* (Cook and Bernink, 240).

Astruc, along with Andre Bazin and the other reviewers of the Cahiers du Cinema developed these principles into what is known as the *politique des auteurs*. These critics wanted great film to be considered as an art form worthy of the attention given to great literature, music or art. The emphasis behind the *politique des auteurs* was to oppose the "established French film criticism with its support for a quality' cinema of serious social themes" (Cook and Bernink, 240). Though it also stressed that a director could transcend the industrial nature of filmmaking to stamp a unique vision and world view on their films and so deserve consideration comparable to an artist of the classical forms. This is highlighted by Jean-Luc Godard's boast that "having it acknowledged that a film by Hitchcock, for example, is as

important as a book by Aragon. Film authors, thanks to us, have finally entered the history of art" (Godard, 147). Godard was one of the critics who were known as the young Turks' which also included Francois Truffaut. A certain tendency of the French Cinema (1954) was the article that for many confirmed auteurism as a theory and gave the Cahiers a sense of direction that it was lacking.

Principle to this new direction for auteur theory was the distinction between directors who were auteurs directors, who used mise-en-scene to create their own personal style, and those known as a metteurs-en-scene " whose use of mise-en-scene, it was deemed, did not transform the script material into an original work" (Hill and Gibson, 313). Cases have been made for the scriptwriter as author, as well as the producer and the performer. These are valid arguments that stand up well to the director as author, but by making the director a stylist capable of original cinematic forms, the Cahiers critics created a solid theoretical base to argue from. The politique des auteurs was adapted by Movie magazine in the UK and by Village Voice and Film Culture in the USA and primarily by Andrew Sarris.

The principles of the politique des auteurs were adapted by Andrew Sarris to allow the cinema of Hollywood critical consideration. Much like the critics of Cahiers, Sarris was reacting against much of the criticism in America that was only interested in cinema of social realism. His polemic favoured the formal concerns of film and making the cinema of Hollywood worthy of critical consideration with the director at the centre of this attention. He confused the French theory changing the title from the principle of/polemic

for authors to the auteur theory' (Hill and Gibson, 311). With his revised theory Sarris created a "critical pantheon which graded directors according to the extent to which their personal vision transcended the hierarchical system within which they worked" (Cook and Bernink, 256). His pantheon was eventually revised to only include Hollywood directors.

Peter Wollen in *Signs and Meaning in The Cinema* "The auteur theory grew up rather haphazardly. It was never elaborated on programmatic terms As a result, it could be interpreted and applied in rather broad lines" (Braudy and Cohen, 565). The result of this was the emergence of two different ideas of auteur theory. Some theorists were primarily interested in "revealing a core of meanings, of thematic motifs" and others who "stressed style and mise en scene" (Braudy and Cohen, 566).

It is interesting to examine the work of Howard Hawks and Martin Scorsese together because their directorial careers and attitudes to filmmaking contain some interesting comparisons and contrasts. Both men are widely considered to be among the auteur directors of the cinema. Hawks was said to be "both bemused and gratified" by the attention his work received when re-evaluated in line with *la politique des auteurs* but he considered himself to be a storyteller, as opposed to an artist of any kind, and did not believe his films should be considered as pieces of art (McBride, 5). Scorsese is a director who is more conscious of being an artist or auteur filmmaker owing to his academic training in the study of cinema before he began to make films.

Hawks worked predominately in the Hollywood studio system and produced

films that consistently performed well at the box office but were often ignored by critics of the time. Because Hawks regularly produced the films that he directed he enjoyed a greater level of creative control than most of his peers. In this respect he was practically an independent working within the studio system and was never tied down to any one studio for very long. Hawks' films were not confined to a particular genre and ranged from westerns, *Red River*, to sports dramas, *Red Line 7000*. Although, as Peter Wollen suggests, Hawks's films exhibit "the same thematic preoccupations, the same recurring motifs and incidents" which are "achieved by reducing the genres to two basic types: the action adventure and the crazy comedy" (Braudy and Cohen, 567).

In contrast, Scorsese started making films after the break up of the studio system and has often made films outside of the mainstream, which have not always been box office successes, but have regularly been praised by critics. In his early work, Scorsese belonged to a group of young directors, known as the movie brats', who were given an unprecedented amount of creative and artistic freedom which was far removed from the strict control of the studio system. Although the amount of control that Scorsese enjoyed with his first films, from *Mean Streets* to *Taxi Driver*, has since been reduced working on the fringes of mainstream Hollywood he has mostly maintained his creative freedom. Like Hawks, Scorsese has worked through a number of different genres. These are often "revisionist versions of a genre" that Scorsese has redefined from the classic types made by directors such as Hawks (Connelly, 126).

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Filmography

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Howard Hawks

El Dorado (1967)

Rio Bravo (1959)

The Big Sky (1952)

I Was A Male War Bride (1949)

Red River (1948)

The Big Sleep (1946)

To Have And Have Not (1944)

Only Angels Have Wings (1939)

Bringing Up Baby (1938)

Martin Scorsese

The Aviator (2004)

Gangs of New York (2002)

Casino (1995)

Goodfellows (1990)

The Last Temptation of Christ (1988)

The King of Comedy (1983)

Raging Bull (1980)

Taxi Driver (1976)

Mean Streets (1973)