**Do Critics Need Authors?**

Cecilia Sayad

A common feature in debates about criticism in the internet era is the notion of *crisis*. This crisis would result from the proliferation of new forms of critical writing and venues for movie reviews. And it is often articulated in terms of the critic’s presumed loss of authority—and a related question about the importance and the feasibility of criticism as a profession: as a remunerated activity, and a full-time job. Yet the question of the critic’s authority and legitimacy is not new. It can actually be traced back to the first attempts to define film as an art form. In this paper I argue that the challenges posed by the transformations that came with the digital age do not *create* a crisis, but re-contextualize a “crisis” that has always shaped the writing of film criticism.

But I focus on one particular aspect of this crisis—namely, the relationship between the figures of film critic and film author. The authority crisis of our day results from a supposed “democratization” of film criticism, which sees two kinds of entities competing with the critic: one is the big studios with their aggressive marketing strategies, and the other the non-specialized blogger. But today’s concerns about a presumed democratization of film criticism raise the same questions about the critic’s authority, reach and function that arose from the very notion, which appeared many decades ago, that there is such a thing as a film author.

I will refer to historical debates in criticism in the hope that they will shed some light on the current debates about a presumed “death” of the critic. For the sake of brevity, the historical examples I will quickly draw from today will be the forms of cult and camp criticism of the 1940s-50s and early auteurism (50s-early 60s). For the purpose of this presentation I will focus on the 40s through the early 60s as periods in which critics were in charge of either assigning meaning to authorless texts or attributing artistic value to the directors they would call auteurs.

When I ask, with the title of my paper, if critics need authors, I’m pointing not only to the challenges, but also to the contribution that the film author has made to the configuration of the film critic. I here posit the two not always as opposite, but also as complementary figures.

I would like to begin with a material example of the intricate relationship between film critics and authors. It is a statement published in the “brief notes” section of the *Cahiers du cinema* in April 1957*.* It reads: “The *Cahiers du cinéma* thanks Alfred Hitchcock, who has just shot *The Wrong Man* exclusively to make us happy and prove to the world the truth of our exegesis.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

I should say that this issue of *Cahiers* has actually made history—not because of this unashamedly auteurist statement, but for publishing André Bazin’s “On the *politique des auteurs,*” where he warns that auteurism risked promoting “an aesthetic personality cult.”[[2]](#endnote-2) The *Cahiers* critics’ provocatively (or naively) narcissistic statement about Hitchcock appeared in the context of a critical struggle to justify a taste for Hollywood pictures deemed at best politically alienated and at worst conservative, and it suggests the critic’s desire for confirmation of their theories, a confirmation sought in the author. But this statement also reframes Bazin’s concerns as it begs the question of whose personality was actually being turned into the object of cult—that of the author or that of the critic?

I will get back to this question later. But I would first like to juxtapose the *Cahiers* note to a contemporary example: a claim made by Nick James, editor of *Sight & Sound*, in an editorial published just last year. James says: “films were better when filmmakers felt themselves obliged to be a part of a conversation about cinema that took account of critical thinking.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

This longing for either unison in critical and authorial discourses or for constructive debate between the two also reminds us of the fact that these figures inevitably compete with each other. The tensions between author and critic are as old as the terminology that defined them as separate entities. It is then worth considering the role that an intending author has played in film criticism. Now that viewers’ comments and internet forums seem to have shaken the professional foundations of criticism, it is worth asking if the reliance on authorial discourse seen in the *Cahiers* note and in James’s editorial is a sign of a crisis of confidence on the part of the critic or if it is, on the contrary, a symptom of his or her sense of authority—as well as autonomy.

The history of film criticism shows opposite movements towards the embracing and the dismissal of the idea of a film author. From the moment directors were singled out as distinctive voices in the collective production of film they have taken center stage in discussions about the role of critics. It is not just that the recognition of film artistry could potentially elevate the work of the critic. The presence or absence of a self-expressing subject is also central to our understanding of what film is, and consequently to the very function of film critics.

Hollywood is as central to the beginnings of film criticism as it is to the current discourses on the crisis that assails this profession. The very studio system that in the eyes of many could potentially forgo the critic to rely principally on publicity and marketing[[4]](#endnote-4) was in the past the source of inspiration for different critical trends: one that saw critics as the mediators of *mass* culture, represented by vanguard criticism (by which I mean cult and camp criticism), and another that saw critics as interpreters of *art*, represented by the auteurists. The cult criticism practiced in the 40s and 50s stressed the critic’s capacity to select objects that either were produced by Hollywood but had little merit or that simply lay outside of the industry. Camp criticism, in turn, privileged “poorly controlled texts.” Greg Taylor says that such “texts” proved “more rewarding than the tightly managed artwork” both for a critic and an audience wishing to appropriate the film reviews for their own use.[[5]](#endnote-5) On the other hand, the *politique des auteurs* that would appear a few years after Manny Farber or Parker Tyler started writing film criticism, would have the power to select those filmmakers deserving of the auteur designation, and then seek their voice, first, in what Antoine de Baecque called a *politique de l’entretien* [an interview policy], conversations in which, in his words, “the I of the critic” sought “the I of the creator,”[[6]](#endnote-6) and then through the identification of thematic and stylistic elements that would reoccur in the whole of the director’s works.

The cultural status of film is central to both vanguard and auteur criticism. Early auteurism shook the system by daring to liken popular entertainment and high culture, leveling low and high arts (equating Hitchcock with Aragon); but the cult and camp criticism that preceded it celebrated precisely the distance between these cultural spheres, and chose the low art over the high art. Their divergent takes notwithstanding, both auteurists and vanguardists placed the critic at the center of the construction of meaning: in the case of auteurism by mediating between an intending artist and the audience; in the case of vanguard criticism, by sizing criticism for the expression of the critics’ own worldview. No matter how different the critical understandings of the role of authors may be, the critic’s function has always somehow been shaped by this figure.

Worthy of note is the fact that the early auteurists’ reliance in what authors had to say about their works did not preclude them from using criticism as a form of self-expression. The *politique des auteurs* was openly passionate and subjective. Take for example Truffaut’s article titled “Aimer Fritz Lang” (To Love Fritz Lang), published in January 1954, which promotes an unconditional devotion to Lang. I quote: “We must love Fritz Lang, salute the opening of each of his films, rush to see them, watch them time and again, and impatiently wait for the next one.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Critical subjectivity is evident also in Fereydoun Hoveyda’s article for a 1961 issue of *Cahiers* stating that, “The critic talks as much about the film he saw as about himself.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

Which brings us back to Bazin’s warning against the risks of an “aesthetic personality cult.” But whose personality: the author’s or the critic’s? The point of my paper is to show that the two are almost inextricable. Take for example, the practice of team formation: the Hitchcocko-Hawksiens,the Mac-Mahon group, the “Hustoniens’ in France. Two of these groups might be named after directors, but membership was dictated by critical alliances; after all, what these “teams” designate is critical taste.

I’ll dwell a little longer on the question of taste. We know that the academic critique of auteurism was informed by considerations about two factors: film’s collective mode of production on the one hand, and on the other the structuralist and poststructuralist questioning of a subject’s ability to express themselves. But when it comes to criticism the attacks on auteurism boiled down to questions of taste. In Penelope Houston’s challenges to the politically “uncommitted” approach that characterized the *Cahiers du cinéma*, she blames it partly on the magazine’s preferences, saying: “A lot of this comes from the *Cahiers du cinéma,* along with the list of admired directors. And it is this list itself, as much as the way in which films are discussed […] that underlines fundamental divergences of viewpoint.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

As early as 1960 Richard Roud had warned that “it was only a question of time before [the *Cahiers’*] system of rationalizing personal quirks and fancies should produce such a crypto-fascist and slightly nutty approach to the cinema.”[[10]](#endnote-10) In her legendary attack to Andrew Sarris’s transposition of the *politique* to American soil Pauline Kael challenged the auteur theory as harshly for its “intellectual diddling” as for its habilitation of what she called “mindless, repetitious commercial products—the kind of action movies that the restless, rootless men who wonder on 42nd Street and in the Tenderloin of all our big cities have always preferred just because they could respond to them without thought.”[[11]](#endnote-11) In the end, the author was clearly at the origin of the divisive question of taste, in a culture that differentiated between Hitchcocko-Hawksiens and Hustoniens. It was not just directors, however, that led such polarizations. Personal preferences have also called for the affiliation with critics, opposing, for example, “Paulettes” to “Sarrisites.”[[12]](#endnote-12) The critic’s name can be as subject to the practices of cult as the name of the author—Bazin’s warning against the “aesthetic personality cult” can finally be said to *also* apply to the realm of criticism.

Over half a century has passed since Bazin’s admonition, and the film author is still central to academics and critics—both in publications devoted exclusively to film and in the daily press. Take, for example, Peter Bradshaw’s review of Guillermo Del Toro’s *Pacific Rim* (2013) in the *Guardian* on 12 July 2013. This review, like the historical examples examined in this essay, refers to an auteur working for the studio machine. It would not be too farfetched to attribute Bradshaw’s expectations to auteurism when he notes that it is “Only when Ron Perlman (star of the *Hellboy* films) shows up in a cameo do you remember that this is, at least notionally, a Guillermo Del Toro movie.”[[13]](#endnote-13) What is expected it not only consistency, but that the Mexican auteur’s work should mirror his inner life, something that is evident in Bradshaw’s speculation that, “Maybe director and co-writer Del Toro took this job in a detached, impersonal spirit and it can’t fully be considered one of his films in that authorial sense.”[[14]](#endnote-14) The implication is that genuine expression produces better results.

Indeed, the centrality of directors not only in the critical discourse but also in the organization of retrospectives, festivals, and film studies courses, shows that the author is a strong reference. It is also true that the author has been constantly refashioned: being first imagined as a genius against the system, then as structure, marketing strategy, or a performer of sorts. While it is the auteur’s mutability that has protected this figure against extinction in the realm of theory—it is because the author mutates that it can survive—in practice its endurance among critics and viewers is proof of the need to trace films back to a palpable source—a real human being. No matter how conscious we are of the intricacies of film production, we “long” for the auteur, as Dana Polan argues in “Auteur Desire” (2001)—something to be blamed on what Polan terms “the obsession of the cinephile or the film scholar to understand films as having an originary instance in the person who signs them.”[[15]](#endnote-15)

Even if we agree that the director’s contribution is neither exclusive nor uncorrupted, that intentions might be inaccessible and that originality is a romantic fallacy, the auteur remains very much a central part of criticism. In last year’s editorial by Nick James, which was written on the occasion of his attendance to a film festival in Bari, he praised the direct communication between filmmakers and critics at the event. James nostalgically remembers a time of “respect for film as a culture that involves conversation between makers and critics,”[[16]](#endnote-16) a conversation similar to thedialogues that configured a *politique de l’entretien* at *Cahiers du cinéma.*

What is interesting in James’s editorial is that he sees the critic and the auteur as codependent—as if the survival of a thinking film culture depended on the dialogue between these two figures. He says, “auteurism has also waned because the sort of casual contact between filmmakers and critics … is slowly being erased from film life.” The crisis in criticism springs from a fear that the critic may be disposable, no longer necessary to give us access to the film or to the author—whose presence via personal websites, Twitter accounts or blogs could potentially forgo both professional critics and mainstream media. But what James seems to long for is a different kind of authorial presence in the media, one that reveals the author as a thinking entity rather than a media “character.” Referencing Alain Badiou’s notion that “films represent the thinking process to such an extent that they can be said to ‘think’ themselves,” James wonders [and I quote]: “should critics be a part of the conversation that creates the ‘thinking’ film?”[[17]](#endnote-17) In light of the interviews with directors that continue to be printed on the pages of *Sight & Sound, Cahiers du cinéma, Film Comment*, and other publications, James’s question can be perceived more as the symptom of an existential crisis in criticism than a response to a change in practices.

Critics will forever disagree on specific auteurs (Woody Allen and Clint Eastwood, for example, seem to enjoy more prestige in France than in the United States or Britain), but in the twenty-first century the controversial questions in criticism have moved away from individual auteurs to tackle the “deaths” of the critic *and* of film itself. Directors no longer polarize critics with the same intensity that they did in the 50s and 60s. Yet there is no question that the auteur is very much present.

These historical examples show that the film author was pivotal in the critical journey to culturally validate film as either art or mass entertainment, as well as to assert tastes. In trying to account for the role of authors in the construction of meaning, critics were also defining their own place in film culture: as either interlocutors or appropriators of authorial voices. In 1961 the *Cahiers du cinéma* devoted a special issue to criticism, and presented 38 professionals with a questionnaire that sounds very familiar to contemporary ears, asking, among other things, “Do you consider that the criticism of cinema should be carried by people more or less specialized than their counterparts in the areas of literature, arts, music, gastronomy, etc.?”[[18]](#endnote-18) So the challenges to the critic’s expertise and professionalization predate the internet by decades, after all.

Do critics need authors? Auteurists did need them as interlocutors and as validation of film’s cultural status; vanguardists, on the other hand, needed to signal the author’s absence in order to validate film’s mass entertainment, industrial value. But all critics need authors as models; as models for survival; as figures that mutate and reconfigure themselves to resist the threat of extinction. The crisis in criticism, as the above examples have shown, is permanent, and it is its requirement for adaptation that keeps things alive: authors and critics alike.

1. *Cahiers du cinéma* 70 (1957): 40. Antoine de Baecque has also reproduced and discussed this note in Antoine de Baecque, *Cahiers du cinéma: Histoire d’une revue,* Vol. 1 (Paris: Editions Cahiers du cinéma, 1991), 87. Unless stated otherwise, all translations from the French are mine. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. André Bazin, “On the Politique des Auteurs,” *Cahiers du cinéma* 70 (1957): 2-11. Reprinted in *Cahiers du Cinéma. The 1950’s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave,* ed. Jim Hillier, trans. Peter Graham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 53. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Nick James, “A Culture of Talk,” *Sight & Sound* 23.5 (2013): 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For a discussion about the current importance of criticism to the commercial success of movies, see the *Variety* poll “Are Film Critics Really Needed Anymore or Is It a Washed-Up Profession?,” 25 April 2007, accessed 22 June 2013, <http://variety.com/2007/scene/people-news/are-film-critics-really-needed-anymore-or-is-it-a-washed-up-profession-1117963778/>; and Yago García, “Singuen influyendo las críticas de cine?,” 8 June 2013, accessed 13 June 2013, <http://cinemania.es/noticias-de-cine/siguen-influyendo-las-criticas-de-cine>. I would like to thank Nuria Triana Toribio for sending me this article. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Taylor, *Artists in the Audience*, 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 127. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. François Truffaut, “Aimer Fritz Lang,” *Cahiers du cinéma* 31 (1954): 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Fereydoun Hoveyda, “Autocritique,” *Cahiers du cinéma: La critique* (1961): 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Houston, “The Critical Question,” 163. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Roud, “The French Line,” 171. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Kael, “Circles and Squares,” 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Thomas Doherty, “The Death of Film Criticism,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 28 February 2010, accessed 24 June 2013, [www.chronicle.com/article/The-Death-of-Film-Criticism/64352](http://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Death-of-Film-Criticism/64352). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Peter Bradshaw, “Monster mush,” *The Guardian – Film*, 12 July 2013, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Dana Polan, “Auteur Desire,” *Screening the Past*, 1 March 2001, accessed 22 May 2012, http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/firstrelease/fr0301/dpfr12a.htm. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. James, “A Culture of Talk,” 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See “Enquête,” *Cahiers du cinéma* 126 (1961): 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)