

Introduction

An Embattled Discourse

What, I want to ask, is a film author? Why is it that the notion has become so central to our thinking about cinema and yet remained so fraught? The film director is recognized as the film's *auteur* insofar as she or he acts as a centering creative force, an ordering intelligence who controls and choreographs the multiple voices at work in any given production. The film author demonstrates marks of individuality, a recurring set of themes and patterns, as well as a singular way of shaping space and time. This unique manner of organizing film worlds, which French auteurist critics spoke of as *mise-en-scène*, is said to provide a distinct vision, indeed a distinctive world view.¹ "The auteurist idea at its most basic (that movies are primarily the creation of one governing author behind the camera who thinks in images and sounds rather than words and sentences)," Kent Jones recently argued, "is now the default setting in most considerations of moviemaking, and for that we should all be thankful. We'd be nowhere without film auteurism, which boasts a proud history: the lovers of cinema did not just argue for its inclusion among the fine arts, but actually stood up, waved its flag, and proclaimed its glory without shame."²

Although there were noteworthy earlier pro-auteur mobilizations by European film critics and filmmakers, auteurism gained its definitive form and focus as the *politique des auteurs*, a polemical method of criticism practiced by contributors to the *Cahiers du cinéma* during the mid-1950s. Imported from France and transformed by Anglo-American film critics into the so-called *auteur* theory, the *politique des auteurs* would become highly resonant, shaping the ways in which cinema is appreciated, criticism is framed, and careers are established. Indeed, the notion of the *auteur* would assume an auratic luster. Both suggestive and influential, it would nonetheless cause occasion for sustained debate. Despite serious misgivings about the concept's ability to account for the collaborative nature of film production, self-branding, and marketing, or alternative modes of

production both within and outside the film industry, film theorists and historians have not been able to dispense altogether with the figure of the author.³ Although the question of the “author” constitutes a site of ongoing controversy, the notion remains an inordinately resilient category. Auteurism still retains a great amount of cultural capital, even in the wake of discourses that have declared the author dead and superseded by cine-structures, texts, and readers.

Accounting for modes of authorship associated with Hollywood cinema, Stephen Crofts emphasizes the use value this concept enjoys across a wide range of institutions, from film production and distribution to film criticism and academic film studies.⁴ Throughout its long history, auteurism has prompted waves of criticism; the appearance of new cinemas, new filmmakers, new discourses, and new social conditions has repeatedly given rise to interventions that urge us to question this paradigm. Mindful of the entrenched status of authorship in discussions about cinema, we would do well to “locate the rules”⁵ that formed this concept, to recall the conditions that brought about its triumph, as well as rehearse the arguments that have challenged it. Given its highly persuasive presence over many decades and still now in the age of digital media, it makes sense both to review and reassess its considerable legacy. That is the project of this book.

Reconsidering film authorship in ways that might allow us to work beyond the uneasy face-off between conceptual discomfort and critical consensus, this study pursues three main endeavors. First, it interrogates the ideas that have dominated discourse on authorship: the authority of the filmmaker, the celebration of genius, and the affirmation of an inimitable style generally referred to as *mise-en-scène*. It then extends the discourse of authorship beyond the veneration of directorial style by scrutinizing and laying bare the dynamics of the director’s status as a professional and a worker; by broadening the discourse of authorship beyond the dominant paradigm of singularity, this study probes the workings of communities of authors and examines them as “communities of the senses” to use Jacques Rancière’s term. Beyond that, this book confronts the two most dramatic challenges to discourses of film authorship: claims regarding the “death of the author” (and the implications of these claims for our understanding of film authorship) and the so-called “end of cinema” thesis that laments how personal filmmaking—which is to say *auteur* cinema—is a thing of the past.

Taking its cue from Michel Foucault, this study scrutinizes the question of the film author within the longer Western history in which authorship figures as “a privileged moment of individualization.” Foucault urged that we examine

how the author became individualized in a culture like ours, what status he has been given, at what moment studies of authenticity and attribution began, in what kind of system of valorization the author was involved, at what point we began to recount the lives of authors rather than of heroes, and how this fundamental category of “the-man-and-his-work criticism” began.⁶

He spirited us back to the late eighteenth century, at which time a strong tie was established between “the juridical construction of authorship and the legal definition of the bourgeois conceptions of the individual and private property,”⁷ a link that would circulate in various permutations during the next two centuries and have a fundamental impact on the constitution of film authorship and its critical discourse. In order to understand the importance of this legacy, let us take a slight detour in the form of a flashback.

The Author’s Lawful Rights

In the midst of heated exchanges between dramatists and actors during the 1770s, the French playwright Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais made a heartfelt appeal to Louis XVI: “Is not the foremost of all honors, Sire, to assure to dramatic authors, by a law, the ownership of their work and the just fruit of their labors?” He requested that the King recognize *by law* the intellectual property of authors in matters of copyright and financial remuneration. Authorship should have a legal basis, argued Beaumarchais in his letter; it should not just be an empty concession, a form of lip service accorded to artistic endeavor. After the success of his *Barber of Seville* in 1777, Beaumarchais sided with other playwrights and received from the Duke of Duras permission to present a reform plan, which, after extensive negotiation on many fronts, gained approval in 1780. “It is very strange that it has taken an express law to attest to all of France that the property of a dramatic author belongs to him and nobody has the right to run off with it,” stated Beaumarchais in his petition to the Committee on Public Instruction on 23 December 1791:

This principle, taken from the first rights of man, went so much without saying for all the other property of people acquired through labor, gifts, sale, or even heredity, that it was believed derisory for it to be established in law. My sole property, as a dramatic author, is more sacred than all other kinds because it

*comes to me from nobody else and is subject to no contestation for fraud or seduction. The work coming from my brain, like Minerva fully armed with the work of the gods, my property alone had need of a law to pronounce that it belongs to me.*⁸

The debate leading to the legislation was both memorable and symptomatic. And Beaumarchais's victory would be substantial; its impact was strong and its legacy would be lasting. The law of 1791, with a few minor alterations, still regulates French copyright to this very day. It confirmed, quite dramatically, that French discourse of artistic sovereignty had crystallized at the end of the eighteenth century. This discourse figured centrally in the legal battle for the recognition of artistic creation as a professional practice, conferring upon its "makers" social legitimation and material rights. One immediately recalls John Locke's theory of property which holds that a man, as the proprietor of his own person, is also the owner of the products of his labor. As these perspectives on authorship and property over time assumed even clearer shape, a specific aesthetic category, namely originality, would acquire a crucial importance. To grant originality central significance in the appreciation of literary compositions ensured that they would be subject to their own criteria of evaluation and no longer judged by the policies used for mechanical inventions (which were subject to patents). "Literary compositions were not identified with any of their material forms," argues Roger Chartier in a study about scientific and literary authorship in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. "Their identity was given by the irreducible singularity of their *style, sentiment and language* present in every duplicate of the work. The inalienable right of the author was thus transformed into an essential characteristic of the discourse itself, whatever the vehicle of its transmission might be."⁹

Beaumarchais's petition arose from and resonated at a moment when, as Foucault observed, the social order of property within French culture had become codified. In the wake of Beaumarchais's intervention, a system of ownership and strict copyright rules gained official sanction and, as a result, a modern understanding of authorship took shape, which Foucault would later speak of as the author-function.¹⁰ The law of 1791, slightly revised in 1794, constituted a revolutionary mutation in the institution of art. For all its lasting values, it also became the site of further conflicts, among them an ongoing disagreement about the egalitarian promise of a new working field and the elitist principle of singularity and originality known as talent.

This tension between workers within the creative community and original artists would find an especially dramatic enactment in the field of cinema. The collective nature of film production, as well as its technology that relied on mechanical reproduction, made it particularly difficult to assign authorship and authority to a single individual. Early film critics who relied on interpretive models used for the other arts, especially for literature and painting, could not agree whether the rightful author should be the director or the scriptwriter, or perhaps even the producer. Banking on the privileges granted to them by the copyright law of 1794 that recognized writers as the proprietors of their creations, scriptwriters discredited directors, describing the latter's endeavors as the mere application of technique and the deployment of technology rather than the creation of original art.

As early as 1920, in the pages of *Ciné pour tous*, the critic Pierre Henry insisted that the film author is “the person who conceives the film from beginning to end and *thinks* cinematically.”¹¹ Louis Delluc and Marcel L'Herbier concurred.¹² In Germaine Dulac's film from 1927, *Invitation au voyage*, we see the director literally stake her claim to authorship, displaying her hand as she signs her name at the end of the credits. Taking a theoretical step further, Jean Epstein assigned to the filmmaker's vision the property of “photogénie,” the capacity to reveal the “inner nature of things” that are mechanically captured by the lens. Although “the lens alone can sometimes succeed” in this endeavor, Epstein wrote in 1926, “the proper sensibility, by which I mean a personal one, can direct the lens towards increasingly valuable discoveries. This is the role of an author of film, commonly called a film director.”¹³ A few years later, in 1930, in the *Panorama du cinéma*, Georges Charensol envisioned a “complete” work (that would even include films deemed to be “quite marginal”) organized according to national production and the category of *auteurs*.¹⁴ Heated debates about the rightful author would continue, but would not find resolution until much later. Interrupted by the war years and complicated by the switch of film production from the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Art and Culture to that of the Ministry of Industry, the discussion concerning copyright and authorship would assume renewed prominence after the Liberation.

Numerous professional associations and organizations, among them the SACD (La Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques), AAF (L'Association des Auteurs de Films), and SRF (La Société des Réaliateurs de Films), would wage a successful battle for legal recognition that produced new legislation enacted on 11 March 1957.¹⁵ At the same time, celebrating the postwar success and popularity of films by Jean Renoir, Charlie Chaplin, Carl Theodor Dreyer, and

Roberto Rossellini, a group of young film critics and cinephiles drafted polemical theses regarding film authorship in what became consecrated as the *politique des auteurs*. To be sure, the assessments of these critics who would become the leading lights of the Nouvelle Vague, the most prominent being Claude Chabrol, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, Eric Rohmer, and François Truffaut, did not seem at all burdened by or even aware of the professional debates raging around them in the French film community. For the so-called Young Turks, there was no doubt where authentic authorship resided. The filmmaker alone was the master of cinematic creation, using the camera to create a unique sense of time and space and, in so doing, a singular world. In this way they reiterated the claims of Alexandre Astruc's essay of 1948, "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: *La Caméra-Stylo*": "The film author writes with his camera just like the writer with his pen."¹⁶

Distinguishing *auteurs* from the lesser likes of *metteurs-en-scène* or "mere filmmakers," the young critics at *Cahiers du cinéma* formulated a "*politique des auteurs*" that raised directors to a higher power, positioning them as the organizing principle in any understanding of single films as well as any informed appreciation of film as an art. By the early 1950s, critics and spectators alike would in large measure come to think of the director as the film author. Indeed, over time the *politique des auteurs* would succeed to such an extent that the term *auteur* would almost exclusively find use in reference to cinema. The impact of the *politique des auteurs* has been so strong and compelling that subsequent history has all but overlooked, even forgotten, the numerous discussions in postwar France that gave rise to and attended it, the heated exchanges among professionals, journalists, and filmmakers regarding the rehabilitation of cinema as the seventh art and the valorization of the film artist.

The principal concern of the *politique des auteurs* was not as much the legitimation and recognition of French directors, whose superiority to the mere *metteurs-en-scène* remained uncontested.¹⁷ Hollywood studios, the often decried site of industrialized fantasy production, would become the primary ground on which the young critics would wage their campaign. In the words of Derek Schilling, they sought to revive "the romantic notion of artistic genius in a domain largely defined by economic and institutional pressures."¹⁸ In spite of constraining circumstances, the *auteurs* defended by the *Cahiers* critics were considered capable of conveying themes and obsessions in a distinctive fashion that was the equivalent of a signature. The practitioners of the *politique* formulated standards of evaluation that would assure even popular features by American directors a

place within the established arts. To grant Hollywood productions the status of art was a bold move—and a decidedly discriminating one as well. For by linking the medium’s industrial hegemony to the West’s aesthetic, the *politique* critics excluded from consideration vast stretches and far reaches of film history.¹⁹

The heyday of the *politique*, especially between 1955 and 1965, diminished any lingering sense of inferiority that cinema might have harbored vis-à-vis the other arts. In the estimation of film director and critic Olivier Assayas, the success of this enterprise was so substantial that *auteur* would come to mean first and foremost *film auteur*.²⁰ The triumph of the *politique des auteurs* provided much cause for celebration; it brought aesthetic recognition to the cinematic medium, and sealed the victory of, in Jean Renoir’s words, “the *auteur*’s fight against the industry.”²¹ But at the same time as it reproduced the romantic cult of personality and celebrated the filmmaker’s singularity and genius, its practice over the following decades became conventionalized, reducing the author to a useful, albeit predictable function within a critical and theoretical discourse. Indeed, a reciprocal relation between what determines authors and what authors determine would play a shaping role in the evolution and practice of *auteurism*.

Towards an Archeology of Film Authorship

As it celebrated individual artists, the *politique des auteurs* foregrounded the author-function, to employ Foucault’s famous category. Indeed, the film author fulfilled the role ascribed to an individual author within the modern episteme. The author’s crucial function, maintained Foucault, was to grant unity to a body of work, to provide a “means of classification,” to “differentiate” and “establish forms of relationship” between films and authors. In this way, one might say that the author-function serves to “guarantee the authenticity” of a film as well as to “characterize the existence, circulation and operation of certain discourses within a society.”²² Especially during the 1960s, in the wake of political and ideological challenges to authority that led to the events of May 1968, the place and function of the film author would come under serious attack. Among the critical interventions which argued for the irrelevance of the author, Foucault’s archeology is no doubt the most famous. In *The Order of Things*, his method presents the work of individual thinkers as entirely determined by epistemic configurations; in this dynamic, individual authors above all become functionaries of these epistemes.

Since the overarching project of Foucauldian archeology is to analyze discourses as epistemic configurations subordinate to impersonal forces, one might well assume that “What is an Author?” is no less adamantly anti-authorial than Roland Barthes’s famous essay, “The Death of the Author.” Indeed, “What is an Author?” begins with a phrase by Beckett—“What does it matter who is speaking?”—and concludes with the answer that it should not matter at all. Nonetheless, Foucault’s essay provides an incisive—and most compelling—example of why the question *does* matter. The key passage of his argument comes after a number of preliminary and schematic observations on the author-function:

I seem to have given the term “author” much too narrow a meaning. I have discussed the author only in the limited sense of a person to whom the production of a text, a book, or a work can be legitimately attributed. It is easy to see that in the sphere of discourse one can be the author of much more than a book—one can be the author of a theory, tradition, or discipline in which other books and authors will in their turn find a place. These authors are in a position which we should call “transdiscursive.” This is a recurring phenomenon—certainly as old as our civilization.²³

Foucault maintains that the principle of authorship exceeds the bounds of the body of texts bearing an author’s name. Thus the idea of an author exercising his jurisdiction over his own texts has not only been accepted in principle but is also considered to be too narrow and restrictive in particular cases. It is easy to see how in such an understanding one might well ascribe a transdiscursive status to a number of authors. Indeed, whenever an ‘ism’ attaches itself to a proper name, one might say that some degree of transdiscursivity has arisen. Nonetheless, in Foucault’s view, transdiscursive authors are not a set of exceptional individuals or schematic models. Rather, they should be seen as “founders of discursivity,”²⁴ because they “have produced something else: the possibilities and rules for the formation of other texts.” The notion of “founder” has, not without justification, earned Foucault much disapprobation, putting him in a position diametrically opposed to an archeological endeavor dedicated to uncovering the discourse’s epistemic strata. As he seeks to analyze discourses as configurations of knowledge entirely subordinate to impersonal forces, he in fact proves why it does matter who is speaking—especially if the speaker is the founder. Foucault recognizes that there is an “inevitable necessity for a ‘return to the origin,’”²⁵ but is careful to stress

that this return, which is part of the discursive field itself, never ceases to inflect our understanding.

The present endeavor, in rethinking the conceptual and historical shapes of film authorship, takes an essential impetus from Foucault's notion of a "transdiscursive" authorial position. Who, among the authors of French cinema, can claim a "transdiscursive" status and what precisely lends itself to this transposable and transmittable category? We could look at the original distinction between the Lumière Brothers' project of documenting everyday life and Georges Méliès's animated world of fantastic stories and magic tricks. But to position them as "transdiscursive" authors would require first that we ascribe to them the role of authors, which would be anachronistic, especially since they thought of themselves as inventors rather than artists. Film critics and scholars of French cinema have often reflected on who might be thought of as cinema's founders. "There have always been in the French cinema two great movements," argues the influential critic Michel Ciment, "the source Renoir, and the source Bresson. Whatever one might think or say, there are no others." Any others, he insists, come from other countries, from the United States, from Sweden, Asia, Iran, and elsewhere.²⁶

The two defining French legacies, the Bressonian and Renoirian, are well-known to film historians and cinephiles alike. Additional attempts to position other directors as points of origin have involved earlier filmmakers like Jean Epstein or Jean Vigo, or Nouvelle Vague luminaries such as Jean-Luc Godard or Alain Resnais. Bresson constitutes an obvious example, and yet is full of surprises and challenges; his career provides a particularly effective vehicle to study the dynamics of authorship, its canonization as well as its influence, within the context of French cultural history. Unlike the very popular Jean Renoir, whose retreat to Hollywood during the war generated an altogether different career that made him an ideal object of focus for *politique* critics eager to defend the American features of European film directors, Bresson appears to be a typically French artist. Bresson's formidable Frenchness, as well as the longevity of his career, enable an understanding of the various discursive formations around authorship over half a century, from the striking victory of the notion both in film criticism and copyright legislation to the internationally acclaimed crisis of the "death of the author" and the reactions that ensued in its wake. In ways that are self-evident, but also elusive, the director's estimable heritage exemplifies the essential factors that have shaped both the French film canon and the access of filmmakers to the Pantheon of French culture. The choice of Bresson has shaped the analysis of film authorship

that this book offers; another choice, say Renoir or Resnais, much less the usual suspect Godard, would without question have prompted us to take different paths and involved a quite different cast of players and constellations.

The Trans-Position of the Author

Bresson's uncompromising cinema of restraint, inordinately poignant in its style, and inflected by the artist's own interpretation and promotion as the sole creator of a visionary art, has provided an imposing model of authorship. No single phrase describes Bresson's art and life better than his own declaration: "I am a maniac of truth." His modest, minimalist style is both eccentric and exemplary, at once intense and subdued. How could someone so seemingly elitist and elusive become a French *auteur* par excellence? How do his imperatives of artistic excellence and creative singularity function within the pluralistic community of the film profession? Addressing these questions, my book examines Bresson's legacy as a transdiscursive model of authorship. Within such an approach, the notions of style and signature, so central to classical auteurism, might seem insufficient, related as they are to a conception of the film *auteur* as an indivisible entity. Authorial signature and style often serve to justify the artistic status of individual filmmakers, but such a circumscribed focus occludes our appreciation of artistic communities and their historical determinations.

From the extended list of filmmakers working in the wake of Bresson, I will particularly focus my attention on Jean Eustache and Maurice Pialat. One might argue that they should be accompanied by the likes of Jacques Rozier, Philippe Garrel, Bruno Dumont, to name just a few of those who might be said to share Bresson's attitude towards the medium. Had this study aimed to gather all the Bressonians and to account for their work, the scope and shape of this book would have increased exponentially. My interest here, however, is not encyclopedic. Above all I want to see how a community of Bressonians might be constituted and how it can work, or, as Jean-Luc Nancy brilliantly put it, can become "operative."²⁷ Within this community, as well as in the history of French cinema, Eustache and Pialat have played an influential and to this day not adequately appreciated role. They presented far different and decidedly more unsettling images of French life than their renowned counterparts such as Alain Resnais, François Truffaut, and Jean-Luc Godard. The cinemas of these Bressonians arose outside of, and in

crucial ways despite, the Nouvelle Vague, while nonetheless confronting the political and economic imperatives of French cinema. In order to find a place in the history of French authorship for these figures, whose remarkable films are both striking and haunting, we need to consider their precarious operating base and tenuous professional status.

With this in mind, my book revisits the terms “signature” and “style” and theorizes them as dynamic concepts enmeshed in both aesthetic and political formations. Rather than the mark of an individual, style, in this assessment, has in fact the potential, indeed the property, to differentiate cinema from the other arts, granting it autonomy, but also emphasizing the consequences of such differentiation, especially in the creation of new aesthetic values and communities. Style is not only a filmmaker’s unique vision, but a modality bound to the community of the senses. Bresson’s clear vision of what cinema should and could be provides us with a striking example of the new art’s autonomous place next to and among the arts of painting, literature, and theater. In addition to his formal prowess, Bresson’s legacy has taught generations of filmmakers moral lessons in maintaining the integrity of the cinematic art.

Following Foucault’s cue and providing a more specific elaboration of the larger dynamics at play here in the form of a case study of “Bressonianism,” this project examines the ways in which filmmakers position themselves in relationship to their “master” and to their peers and form communities bound by a shared formal and moral attitude towards the medium. What I will be referring to as the “maniacs of truth” constitutes such a community. Neither a school nor a movement, it is rather a rubric that unites filmmakers and spans generations. Driven by a fierce embrace of filmmaking as a personal and professional vocation, the directors I will be discussing remain uncompromising in their pursuit of film as a form of truth-revelation. That pursuit, however, is complicated and conflicted; it would be better defined by the “manic” commitment to truth than by any actual truth possession. The “mania of truth” is an ethos and, in crucial regards, also a pathology.

Authenticity and truth are terms often invoked in discussions of Bresson and comparisons of his work with that of filmmakers who defer to him, like Eustache and Pialat. “Despite their very different approach to actors and to the act of filming, Pialat was no less obsessed with authenticity than Bresson,” writes Marja Warehime in her monograph on Pialat. “Yet where Bresson aimed to arrive at truth through the discipline of rehearsals,” she presses on, “Pialat worked more instinctively.”²⁸ In developing a highly personal approach to filmmaking, the two

film directors, argues Warehime, are linked by “an obsession with a particular kind of cinematic truth, each representing a different kind of absolute.” Here, as in much auteurist discourse, these terms remain taken for granted as signifiers of profundity and deeper meaning without being clearly defined or carefully questioned. What, after all, is truth or authenticity? Such usages resemble what Theodor W. Adorno has called the “jargon of authenticity,” a mode of discourse that employs a “Wurlitzer organ of the spirit” to extol existential adventure and imbue it with metaphysical authority and grant it cultural currency.²⁹ Clearly, authenticity and truth are slippery terms, especially when they lack a historical ground and a concrete point of reference. That these categories so frequently appear in auteurist discourse at the very least confirms the power and authority ascribed to them and, for that reason, provides a good reason for us to consider their use with care and caution. This book does not celebrate the discourse of truth, but rather tries to comprehend its operations and its consequences. In this sense, the study offers neither a general overview of film authorship, nor a circumscribed case study of an individual film author. Rather, it provides a conceptual model for a communitarian understanding of film authorship.

The demystification of truth has motivated my endeavor to elucidate the constitution of discursive formations of authorship and to lay bare the complex mechanisms that led to the promulgation of *auteur* theory in film criticism, film studies, and film spectatorship. This book’s methodology might be described as archeological: it aims to uncover the various layers that led to the constitution of the author as a function of the work. The author-function, writes Foucault, “is not formed spontaneously through the simple attribution of a discourse to an individual. It results from a complex operation whose purpose is to construct the rational entity we call an author.”³⁰ Although these complex operations vary according to “the period and the form of discourse concerned,” he continues, “there are nevertheless transhistorical constants in the rules that govern the construction of an author.”³¹ The present book locates precisely these rules and in this sense traverses crucial aesthetic dimensions of French film authorship while paying equally close attention to its socio-economic, political, and legal determinants.

Postwar discourses on authorship stressed individual volition while downplaying the collective character of film production, exhibition, and reception. The inextricable bonds between vocational concerns and professional constraints, long considered to be of central importance within French understandings of authorship, figured less notably in the Nouvelle Vague’s conceptual renegotiations.

The agency of the author, a key element within cinema's own legitimation as an art, seemed in this construction to function outside of—or apart from—film's institutional operations, particularly in regard to economic and legal factors. Indeed, previous film scholars have repeatedly overlooked the seminal French copyright law of 1957. Still in place today, this law grants the “*droit d'auteur*” not only to the film director, but also to the producer, scriptwriter, and sound track composer. Any understanding of authorship in France, my book argues, must take into account the economic, legal, and political considerations that are essential factors in its constitution.

My approach dwells on the attributes that made *auteurism* so controversial: the very notion of cinematic style and its reliance on the vague term “*mise-en-scène*,” the anti-historical, anti-social, and anti-economic penchants that put the *auteur* in an ivory tower and films in a dusty Cinémathèque, the opposition between *auteurs* and *metteurs-en-scène*, the notion's failure to transcend the pamphlets of a critical discourse and give rise to an aesthetic theory, and most especially the contradictory destiny of a revolutionary concept carrying a promissory democratic flag only to become an elitist discourse with an international reach.

Although scholars of French film have in recent years reconsidered the many myths attending the *Nouvelle Vague*,³² the legacy of the *politique des auteurs* has yet to be reevaluated in the light of expanded discussions in aesthetics, epistemology, and sociology. In this book, the essential questions about film authorship—originality, signature, *mise-en-scène*, and the question of truth in artistic matters—are examined from philosophical, socio-economic, and legal perspectives. The study ponders in particular the interplay between the singularity of individual filmmakers and the plurality of the professional community, talking about film authors not as solitary geniuses but as working artists.

While the conceptual questions at the heart of this study are informed by discourses of film authorship, they also derive from a sweeping view of French film history and my deliberate choice of certain films and filmmakers to the detriment of others. Strongly aware of the numerous factors that affect the work of filmmakers, I want to avoid the commonly travelled roads and to traverse other routes that might afford us a wider view. From a methodological point of view, sociological perspectives regarding the conditions of authorship and professional organizations complement the examination of the discursive formations that led to the legitimation of the director as the film author, both aesthetically and legally.

The first and last chapters are especially concerned with elaborating these determinants and drawing more general conclusions about authorship as a function of both creative endeavor and material circumstance. In addressing key concepts in the study of authorship, this book relies on close analyses of exemplary films. The materials under discussion reflect significant factors in previous assessments of film authorship—authorial signature and style (chapter 2), legacy, originality, and influence (chapter 3), the crisis of authorship or the so-called “death of the author” (chapter 4), and responses to critical discourse proclaiming “the end of cinema” (chapter 5)—and reenact the evolution of the category of authorship from celebration to crisis.

The Road Ahead

The opening chapter employs Robert Bresson as a point of reference in the study’s reflections on the history of French film authorship. His long career (1934–1983) inspired great veneration among the country’s filmmakers and filmgoers, and later international cineastes. This chapter augments existing scholarship on Bresson’s work, paying careful attention to the social, economic, and legal conditions of film authorship that informed his career. Caught between the liberal arts (scriptwriting) and the mechanical arts (photography), French cinema waged a long struggle for both cultural regard and legal legitimacy. Subject to antiquated authorship laws dating back to 1794, French filmmakers applauded new legislation in 1957 that nominally recognized the filmmaker as *auteur*. This breakthrough, however, would prove to be at best a partial victory, for attempts to implement the new law would catalyze challenges on a variety of fronts. Reflecting this history and its vicissitudes, Bresson’s career—from his artistic elitism to his professional commitment, from his quest for a personal style to his prominent role in the 1958 defense of the Society of French Auteurs—provides a compelling instance of self-conscious film authorship equally informed by creative impulses and driven by political determinations. Bresson’s track record as a film activist complicates the framework of the Nouvelle Vague’s *politique* and compels us to reconsider it in light of a larger archeology of authorship in post-Liberation France and well into the 1960s.

The second chapter turns to the aesthetic categories that served to consecrate auteurism, and reconsiders them in the light of active tensions between individual vocation and membership within a community of artists. In their early writings,

auteurist critics claimed that what distinguishes an *auteur* is the ability to think in audiovisual terms, a capacity they deemed to be the mark of elevated style in contrast to the mere mechanical exercise of technique. Like the careers of many recognized filmmakers, Bresson's offers a privileged object for the investigation of critical categories like style, technique, cinematic writing, and montage. In particular, his example allows an opportunity to understand these categories in their ardent endeavor to free cinema from the influence of theater and literature. Why is Bresson's "transdiscursive" position more transparent than that of other filmmakers? Using the tools of aesthetics, my demonstration turns to the arguments of the philosopher Jacques Rancière. In *Les Écartés du cinéma* (*The Intervals of Cinema*), Rancière suggests that Bresson's cinema constituted more than a singular style, indeed that it provided a new "distribution of the sensible." For Rancière, Bresson envisioned the cinematograph as an experience that might offer individual citizens and their communities both a new world of art and a new sense of life. Within this specific approach, the second chapter focuses on three aspects that render Bresson's style singular and exemplary: his project of literary adaptation that negotiated cinema's autonomy in the artistic field; the signature iconography of his expressionless, unaffected *models*; and the spare economy of his cinematic means, particularly in his use of ellipsis.

Film critics and scholars have raised Bresson to the status of a saint, in the words of one critic, the "father of this land we call the Cinematograph."³³ He is praised not only for the invention of a new, original, and powerful filmic form, but also for providing a point of departure for a distinct cinematic tradition, for creating the very possibility of this tradition. Bresson's legacy and influence, reflected in the indelible traces he has left in the history of cinema, play as much a role in his creative position as in his actual films. Focusing on the prominent French directors Jean Eustache and Maurice Pialat, the third chapter examines Bresson's remarkable influence on the world of cinema and how the reverence for an *auteur* role model legitimates the new creators in their own quests to become singular artists. What unites these filmmakers and indeed links them to Bresson is their understanding of filmmaking as an existential necessity. As *auteurs*, these remarkably difficult and fiercely uncompromising figures at once seek to maintain their personal singularity while nonetheless sustaining their predecessor's legacy. They attempt to become Bresson's equals in terms of film style and aesthetics, both acting in accordance with his example and yet, in crucial regards, acting out against it. The Bressonian iconography of Eustache's films includes an anti-

Bressonian dramatic structure, while Pialat's use of ellipsis outdoes and, in the process, undoes Bresson's inimitable narrative fragmentation. In adapting Georges Bernanos's *Under the Sun of Satan*, Pialat writes his way into French film history, at once with and against Bresson. The impact of these two directors, who are often mistakenly seen as extensions of the Nouvelle Vague, is unthinkable without Bresson's example, both as an artistic legacy and a creative burden with which each director reckoned in different ways. These exemplary instances provide novel case studies of French film authorship in the wake of Bresson.

The first three chapters examine the discursive formation of the film *auteur*, from the making of the author to the negotiation and recasting of authorial legacy. They elucidate the factors that determine how individual filmmakers are raised to the status of *auteur*, as well as the dialectic between individual originality and collective artistic endeavor. This discourse of *auteurism*, as we know, would play—and still does play—a central role in the creation of film studies curricula, the writing of *auteur* monographs, and the programming of film festivals. For that reason, film scholars faced significant challenges when the “death of the author” was declared by leading theorists in the late 1960s and had a seismic impact on subsequent discussions within the humanities and social sciences. The demise of the author would figure within a larger crisis of a cinematographic medium deemed to be essentially visual; it would also impact on larger discussions about the denigration of vision.³⁴ The Bressonian tradition plays an important role in these conversations, for his defense of cinema as “the art of the image where one must lose the notion of image”³⁵ inspired what Eustache declared to be his anti-*auteurist* project, one that Pialat embraced as well. In the wake of the author's loss of authority and power, Eustache deliberately installed the narrator as the master on the set. This replacement was motivated by an ethical impulse and a sense of duty: the narrator could articulate the “truth” while the image could not help but conceal it. In order to account for this major negotiation of the moral dilemma created by the absence of the author and allow for a related but in crucial ways different perspective, the fourth chapter will position Eustache's late films vis-à-vis another cinematic project preoccupied with ethics, that of Eric Rohmer.

Responding to *auteurism*'s penchant for ocularcentrism, filmmakers like Eustache and Rohmer drew on an important Bressonian legacy: the director's singular negotiation of sound and silence. Both make elaborate use of dialogue and diegetic sound to accentuate their narrators' duplicity and dissimulation, employing the spoken word to quite different ends. Eustache sees language as the

only possible recourse in the face of the image's corrupted access to truth and knowledge. Rohmer's moral tales transform speech into a diversion from and a supplement to the camera's capacity to show things as they are. Often described as literary in its constitution, Rohmer's cinema challenges the possibilities of language and sound as well as the most hallowed premises of *mise-en-scène* criticism, reassessing the role of literature in the making of the film *auteur*. Both directors feature narrators afflicted with doubt, ignorance, and falsehood, and inscribe them in their films' formal framework. The moral weight of these projects lies in their appeal to the audience and the opportunity granted to viewers to find truth within the maze of the narrators' prevarications. While Eustache succumbs to despair and humiliation, questioning cinema's ethical values, Rohmer trusts in the power of the image and grants to it an ethical authority; truth, he submits in the venerable *Cahiers* tradition, is recorded by the eye of the lens, and that lens is objective.

Bresson's extreme artistic singularity ensured his status as *auteur* within and beyond the realm of the *politique des auteurs* that as a rule privileged directors working in the American studio system. Capitalizing on the romantic notion of the film *auteur* as genius, saint, or hero, classical *auteurism* paid far less attention to the undeniable fact that their hallowed *auteurs* were also professional artisans. The fifth chapter illustrates the fraught and contradictory legacy of the artist-artisan opposition in the larger discourse about the "end of cinema." European cinema at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s seems to perform a sacrificial model of the artist; film narratives are organized around characters of struggling individual artists who are subject to financial constraints. Relying on the specific case study of Cannes's official selection of 1991, I will examine two key French features in that year's competition, Maurice Pialat's *Van Gogh* and Jacques Rivette's *La Belle Noiseuse*. In quite different and very striking ways, both Pialat, the often-embattled employee of Gaumont, and Rivette, the Nouvelle Vague exponent, reflect on the question of art appreciation and the place of the artist in the working world. Their two productions enhance our appreciation of the ways in which *auteurs* are also workers and subject to the laws of the market, as well as members of professional communities.

While film scholarship positions *auteur* cinema in striking contrast to the dominant sphere of commercial film production, the relationship between art and the market requires more nuanced conceptual models. By probing the professional identity of the artist, these two films reveal how artistic endeavor inhabits various

sectors of the working world. Engaging with recent sociological research, this chapter elaborates the identification of the artistic activity with the “*métier*” whose exercise is deeply individual, as well as the profound professional inequality that governs the work of artists. Rivette’s and Pialat’s films afford us a deeper appreciation of the intrinsic link between film authorship and a notion of art as an “expressive” pursuit that issues from and figures within the realm of labor.

While recent publications devoted to film authorship have provided useful overviews of the subject, this book seeks to be at once broader and, in its use of paradigmatic examples, more focused.³⁶ It is broader in that it incorporates into the study of film authorship more careful attention to the socio-economic determinations of a society facing successively the Second World War as well as the anti-bourgeois (and anti-auteur) revolution of May ‘68. It is also broader insofar as it apprehends the continuity between film authorship and other discourses of the author-function, from discussions that go as far back as the eighteenth century to others that reach into the new millennium. Although English-language film scholarship includes a number of estimable studies on Bresson, as well as several monographs on individual directors like Rohmer, Rivette, and Pialat, the work of Eustache has been woefully overlooked, all the more since access to his films has been blocked by his heirs. Despite their undeniable international cachet as *auteurs*, maverick filmmakers like Eustache and Pialat have not received the penetrating analytical attention that their rich and stirring work deserves. This book reconsiders their accomplishments, engaging with their films and putting them into dialogue with the works of more critically acclaimed contemporaries such as Rivette and Rohmer in order to find useful points of comparison and contrast as well as to appreciate significant moments in the history of French film authorship. Throughout I review critical commonplaces and problematic constructions within this singular history.

While it revisits the formation of modern French film authorship, both historically and conceptually, this book does not propose a counter-model of authorship. Nor does it offer a comprehensive history. Rather, it reviews an important legacy of thinking about authorship and provides much-needed additional augmentation, especially in regard to the relations between the singularity of the individual filmmaker and the plurality of the professional community. In examining a “situation” of what I call Bressonianism, my book negotiates larger conceptual stakes within the framework of a concrete case study.

Notes

1. This account follows John Caughie's presentation in *Theories of Authorship* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).
 2. Kent Jones, "Critical Condition: From the *Politique des Auteurs* to the *Auteur* Theory to Plain Old *Auteurism*. How Clear of a Picture of Actual Movies Are We Receiving?," *Film Comment* 50.2 (March–April 2014): 40–41.
 3. In this regard, a marked tension between film criticism and film theory has continued and catalyzed some refreshingly novel contributions to authorship studies. See Dana Polan, "Auteur Desire," *Screening the Past* 12 (March 2001). Recent endeavors, such as Tom Gunning's magisterial monograph on Fritz Lang's films, seek to counter the *politique's* hagiographic discourse with the "more progressive assumption that meaning is made by readers and viewers in an ongoing interaction with texts whose energy should not be frozen by being referred back to an authoritative source." See Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 3.
 4. Stephen Crofts, "Authorship and Hollywood," in *American Cinema and Hollywood: Critical Approaches*, ed. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 84–98.
 5. Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?," trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 114.
 6. Foucault, "What is an Author?," 124.
 7. Roger Chartier, "Foucault's Chiasmus: Authorship between Science and Literature in the 17th and 18th centuries," in *Scientific Authorship: Credit and Intellectual Property in Science*, ed. Mario Biagioli and Peter Galison (New York: Routledge, 2003), 13.
 8. Maurice Lever, *Beaumarchais, A Biography*, ed. Jean-Pierre Thomas, trans. Susan Emanuel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 180. Cited from the "Petition to the National Assembly," a statement against the usurpation of the authors' property by theater directors, presented by Beaumarchais to the Committee on Public Instruction on 23 December 1791 and published shortly afterwards.
 9. Chartier, "Foucault's Chiasmus," 17–18.
 10. See Antoine Compagnon, *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur? Cours de M. Antoine Compagnon* (Cours de Licence LLM 316 F2, Université Paris IV–Sorbonne, 37–39: <http://aphelis.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Compagnon-Auteur.pdf>).
 11. Pierre Henry, "L'Évolution de l'art de l'image animée," *Ciné pour tous* 55 (17 December 1920): 5–6.
 12. See Christophe Gauthier, *Cinéphiles, ciné-clubs et salles spécialisées à Paris de 1920 à 1929* (Paris: AFRHC, 1999), 289.
 13. Jean Epstein, "On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*," trans. Tom Milner, *Afterimage* 10 (1981): 23.
 14. Georges Charenso, *Panorama du cinéma* (Paris: Éditions du Sagittaire, 1930).
 15. See the text of "Loi sur la propriété littéraire et artistique, Loi du 11 mars 1957:" <http://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/fr/km/km003fr.pdf>.
 16. Alexandre Astruc, "La Naissance d'une Nouvelle Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo," *L'Écran Français* 144 (30 March 1948): 22.
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17. See for example François Truffaut, "Crise d'ambition du cinéma français," *Arts* (30 March–5 April 1955). Truffaut suggests four categories to classify the French filmmakers in 1955: 1) the ambitious (*Ambitieux*), a mere 17 filmmakers, among them only half the writers of their own scripts; 2) the semi-ambitious (*Semi-ambitieux*) in number of 15, having made 52 films in ten years; 3) the honestly commercial (*Commerciaux honnêtes*), 27 with 190 films shot in ten years; and finally 4) the 30 deliberately commercial directors (*Délibérément commerciaux*) who "executed" 247 films in ten years.
18. Derek Schilling, *Eric Rohmer* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 79.
19. *Ibid.*, 78.
20. Olivier Assayas, "Que d'auteurs, que d'auteurs! Sur une politique," in *La Politique des auteurs: Les Textes*, ed. Antoine de Baecque and Gabrielle Lucantonio (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 2001), 172–75.
21. Quoted by the French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin during the closing ceremony of the conference "Le Cinéma à venir," at Cannes on 10 May 2000: <http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/003001179.html>.
22. Foucault, "What is an Author?," 119–24.
23. Foucault, "What is an Author?," 131.
24. This is a category that has emerged in the modern episteme, and more particularly in the nineteenth century.
25. Foucault, "What is an Author?," 132–33.
26. Michel Ciment, "Editorial: Bresson et Kubrick," *Positif* 468 (February 2000): 2: "Il y a toujours eu dans le cinéma français deux grands courants, la source Renoir et la source Bresson. Quoi qu'on en pense ou en dise, il n'y a pas eu d'autres. Le reste vient d'ailleurs, d'Amérique, de Suède, d'Asie, d'Iran, etc., et cela risque de continuer encore longtemps, même si Godard, Resnais, Pialat commencent peu à peu à constituer eux aussi des pôles magnétiques assez puissants."
27. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. and trans. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
28. Marja Warehime, *Maurice Pialat* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 11.
29. Theodor W. Adorno, *The Language of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 17. See Scott Durham, "On the Authenticity of Jargon: From Barthes and Adorno to Godard," *The World Picture* (2008).
30. Foucault, "What is an Author?," 127.
31. *Ibid.*
32. In this sense, see particularly Geneviève Sellier, *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema*, trans. Kristin Ross (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Richard Neupert, *A History of the French New Wave Cinema* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002); Jill Forbes, *The Cinema in France: After the New Wave* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992).
33. Thierry Jousse, "Bresson souffle où il veut," *Cahiers du cinéma* 543 (February 2000): 30–31.
34. See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).
35. See Robert Bresson, "Entretien avec François-Régis Bastide," *Le Masque et la plume*, 30 April 1966, reprinted in *Bresson par Bresson: Entretiens (1943–1983)*, ed. Mylène Bresson (Paris: Flammarion, 2013), 165.

36. In addition to edited volumes gathering seminal essays, recent studies have updated the scholarship on film authorship. C. Paul Sellors, *Film Authorship: Auteurs and Other Myths* (London: Wallflower, 2010) and Sarah Kozloff, *The Life of the Author* (Montréal: Caboose, 2014) justify the relevance of the concept of film *auteur* and supply an overview of the most important moments in the concept's development.
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