

The Cahiers Du Cinéma: From Literary Influences to Filmic Legacy

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For the past decades, film studies and critics have relied on the notion of auteur, specifically regarding the director. Although the notion has now become a landmark in analyzing bodies of filmic works, the purveyors of this now-crucial concept helped reshape the understanding of auteur and apply it to cinema. The group of young French critics who created the *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1951 thus expanded the sphere of influence of authorship, providing new artistic validity to filmmaking and granting certain directors privilege that was normally bestowed on literary authors, whether novelists, poets or dramaturges. These critics helped anchor cinema as more than entertainment and presented it as a form of art, similar to literature, from where the notion of auteur emerged.

One crucial element pertaining to the *Cahiers du Cinéma* is the culture to which it came to life. Filmmaking had become an international affair and practice by the middle of the twentieth century, but France stood out as a nation with a longstanding tradition of discussion and celebrating authorship. So, what in France inspired the new developments of authorship? What was present in the culture, and eventually in the institutional legal landscape, that made France such a fertile ground for the evolution of filmic authorship? Such questions lead to the examination of both cultural and legal aspects of the notion of auteur in France, as it served the *Cahiers du Cinéma* to transform it with long-term legacy. The first possible reason for this pivotal evolution can be found in the tradition of literary authorship, which had been established between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The second potential explanation relates to how the legal institutions pertaining to filmmaking quickly began to embrace the change of mentality supported by the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, thus building new grounds and frameworks for cinema to reach new recognition in its artistic endeavors.

The Heritage of Literary Authors

While France certainly does not hold the monopoly of literary history, its culture provided amenable ground for its authors to claim distinct status on a legal level prior to the twentieth century. The notion of auteur, which the *Cahiers du Cinéma* eventually developed to apply to filmmaking for certain directors who displayed a recognizable and qualitative voice throughout their careers, finds its origins in the French literary landscape. The period of the Enlightenment brought significant changes in the way people approached life and philosophy; the arts, including literature, was no stranger to its implications. Dramaturges led by Beaumarchais, a prominent theatre figure of the eighteenth century, became a founding rock for what has become a strong tradition of authorship, auteur's rights, and their vision for recognition. He strived for others to embrace his views of what rights an auteur should possess and retain. A compelling aspect is that Beaumarchais was set on fighting for his financial compensation in the first place¹ which makes sense in how authorship would eventually become a notion used for certain cineastes, recognizing how filmmaking can be both an industry and an art worth of recognition. Admitting and embracing how artistic creation is not antinomic with financial elements, as it is often assumed that many artists live solely off their craft, is intrinsic to examine the notion of auteur and see how legal framework played a significant role in what the creators of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* were able to accomplish.

Like the mid-twentieth century group of young critics, Beaumarchais and the peers he led fell into a category of authorship that delved into a more collegial form of art. It was not a group of novelists that began this establishment of auteur's rights and legal recognition, but dramaturges. Their efforts support how authorship can have its place even in a form of art that requires team work, although these ideas have since moved from the original and foundational text with dramaturges in theatre to a certain idea of directorial voice in filmmaking, rather than placing the screenwriter as a possible true authorial voice. As examined later in the second section, the importance of a screenwriter and his or her relations with authorship nevertheless remains more complex than this. Yet it does not take anything away from how even back in Beaumarchais's time there could be an idea of auteur that did not necessarily require an artist to purely keep their work in printed and purely literary form. On the contrary, Beaumarchais's initiative to gather fellow dramaturges in 1777 and establish the seeds of what would be renamed the *Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques* in 1829, a bastion of auteur's legal rights and protection, which still exists in France and continues to be fully involved in discussions of authorship. A striking element is that when the auteur's status was recognized by the state in 1791, it was the first legal text of the kind across the world, confirming not only Beaumarchais's innovative ideas but France's innovative acceptance, possibly because of the deep change in its society with both the Enlightenment and the French Revolution².

Another point of interest that brought Beaumarchais to fight for his auteur's rights and monetary compensation was the prestige given to the *Comédiens du Français*, the actors who performed his plays, and their overall disregard to how to compensate the auteurs who gave said actors the opportunity to do their work as theatre comedians. While different from the star system and how the studios worked, the ambivalence and power play between auteurs and performers shows a recurrent pattern in this history of authorship. When the *Cahiers du Cinéma* examined the validity of some directors as cinematographic auteurs, especially those working in Hollywood, it was common to recognize movies through the production source, which was most often a studio or in few cases an independent producer like Selznick; or recognition would manifest from a film's star actors and actresses. It brings up the question of performance and especially the "faces" of both stage and film creations, and how they work regarding their auteur: could they have existed without said auteur, who fashioned the final version of a given text to represent it the way most accurate to their personal artistic vision? Whether in the shape of a play or feature film or its worth of critical or legal recognition, artistic vision thus stands as a foundational aspect of the notion of auteur, both in the eighteenth century with the groundwork of what would become the *Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques*, and in the reevaluation of certain directors' importance established by the *Cahiers du Cinéma*.

Comparisons between theatre and cinema may appear natural despite their differences, notably due to how both arts involve auteurs and a collection of work to bring a project to life. Yet the *Cahiers du Cinéma's* investment in exploring new possibilities for authorship to exist in a creative industry that had strong entertainment roots was likely able to emerge from a succession of steps to provide well-earned privileges to auteurs across different literary traditions, not only from Beaumarchais's battle to establish the *Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques*. Once again, literary traditions and thus auteurs of various kinds had existed across multiple countries, but giving focus on the notion itself and allowing its beneficiaries to be recognized for their just contributions to a rich artistic culture became vividly anchored in France. Struggles to change mentalities and influence the legal framework happened on multiple occasions.

The nineteenth century saw the emergence of another organization that still exists today, the *Société des Gens de Lettres*. This was originally proposed by illustrious literary realism author Balzac after reflecting on the needs of novelists. Serial publication of novels in journals was common practice at that time, and the idea to properly compensate novelists for their works was notably supported by notorious editors like Desnoyers. In 1838, the *Société des Gens de Lettres* was officially established and eventually considered of public interest in 1891, a century after the *Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques* became a worldwide first in terms of legal texts defending auteurs' rights. Like its predecessor, and later like the *Cahiers du Cinéma's* intellectual initiative, the organization stemmed from a group effort. What is just as significant is that, as with the young French critics rethinking auteur in a cinematographic sense, none of the original members of the *Société des Gens de Lettres* were yet forty-years-old³.

Thus, it posits the question not so much of a rebellious youth, but rather of how new generations can rejuvenate older ways of thinking and doing, stirring society and culture in new directions such as intellectual, artistic, and legal. This "élan de la jeunesse" has proven for several centuries to drive reflexive pursuits on the notion of auteur. An interesting element is that the organizations that emerged during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were more concerned with immediate and practical issues to be resolved, which was likely due to them being auteurs themselves and in dire need of new legal protection for their art endeavors. The *Cahiers du Cinéma* presented a more reflexive approach that took into account directors, especially those based in Hollywood who had been working for several years if not decades. The desire, especially seen in Truffaut as he exposed his "politique des auteurs" to anchor analysis in literary ideas and concepts, showed "how the politics of auteurs inscribes itself in a proximity of creation rather than in a rereading of critical texts of reference."⁴ Such elements support the notion that the *Cahiers du Cinéma* benefited from the tradition of discussion of authorship which had paved the way before its publication. Although many of the young French cinema critics eventually became directors, even auteurs, themselves, the beginning of their journey allowed them to distance themselves from their target of interest without the sense of emergency to change things in a pragmatic way. This helped them better construct their intellectual vision of what a film auteur encompassed.

Because of that, it is possible to postulate that the contributors of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* were doubly innovative. Not only did they transpose the notion of auteur to a new medium which had fewer obvious literary qualities than its distanced predecessors of theatre and novel, but they also turned the tables with how they began their auteur journey by exploring it from a critical point of view before fully defining what an auteur was. What is more, their rethinking of authorship, and later their development of the New Wave movement to renew filmmaking, occurred outside of formal academic settings, despite the fact that France already had two national schools dedicated to filmmaking: the *Institut des hautes études cinématographiques*, which was created in 1943 (and became the *Fondation européenne des métiers de l'image et du son* in 1981), and the *École nationale supérieure Louis-Lumière*, created in 1926.

Redefining authorship as the *Cahiers du Cinéma* did brings up the importance of how the arts and its critics do not have to take place within the boundaries of an established system. It also shows that while formal training and education can prove extremely valuable, they are not the sine qua non when it comes to the equation of creative and critical thinking. As Baecque recalls, "The future contributions to the *Cahiers du Cinéma* built their love of cinema in rupture with both the traditional academic *cursus honorum* and political activism."⁵ The interrelations between art, critic, scholarship, and professional, if not industrial, crafts have run deep for several centuries. This brief comparative analysis of three different epochs of the history of authorship in France shows that creative authority was central in defining authorship, even when the writing aspect was translocated, seen with the idea of certain directors as auteurs, per the *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Their approach was to remain text-based, and focus on how an author should be recognized. Yet they considered the film itself as the text, instead of its script, which was an innovative position at that time. It makes sense, not only because there has to be one leading voice in a collaborative project, but also because in terms of text, filmmaking always relies on adaptation, with the director possibly in charge of the main translation by bringing the script from purely verbal to audiovisual representation. And in the case of adaptation, multiple writers intervene in the crafting of the script, but once again the director eventually encapsulates it to match their personal vision of how it should look on screen.

Embracing the "Septième Art"

The literary traditions in France that provided suitable ground for authorship to flourish in terms of recognition reached new levels and fields thanks to the *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Beyond the critical and artistic repercussions on how certain directors had a strong enough voice to be considered auteurs, they also paved the way for additional evolution of authorship in multiple arts, including cinema, commonly referred to in French as "le septième art" (the seventh art). For example, Godard compared a Hitchcock film to both an Aragon book and a Chateaubriand novel in 1959, thus confirming cinema's letters of noblesse. Reflections on authorship in France has continued to occur so that the notion of auteur could expand across different creative fields, even when industrial and craft-related practices differed both within the domestic field but also from an international standpoint.⁶

A major change introduced a few years after the early development of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* was the introduction of a legal text which granted a film director the status of auteur.⁷ This introduced a very special status for directors, who could then be recognized as auteurs due to their specific voice and artistic vision and benefit from such privilege more from a critical standpoint, which can include professional awards. In France, the director as auteur is inscribed in legal texts.⁸ Of course, it doesn't necessarily mean that all critics would consider all directors producing a French film an auteur, especially since the dichotomy between popular cinema and true "cinéma d'auteur" is often brought up in critical, academic and professional circles. Ironically, not rooting the notion of filmic auteur into a legal status may allow less bias when deciding which director may or may not be an auteur. In that regard, the legal framework in which French cinema operates may see all directors as auteurs but the reach of their legacy may vary.

Yet the rare dual contract, as auteur and technician, a director working in France benefits from, promotes an

idea of intellectual rights, which an auteur cannot lose.⁹ This code of intellectual property in France has significant ramifications in the arts, whether prose fiction, theatre plays, or movie scripts. The director having a dual contract may also be due to the strong tendency to have a screenwriter/director at the helm of a film production. While many screenwriters are not directors and vice versa, the myth surrounding the auteur director in France stems from auteurs who are both. It may also be why the practice of a "director's cut," where the director has the poetic license to alter the editing of a film contrary to its original theatrical release, is more commonly applied to Hollywood and very rarely to French features. Berthomé notes that this concept appeared before the fifties but that it was only at the end of the decade that "it became possible to affirm the hypothesis of multiple coexisting versions of a same film, with one earning its legitimacy due to conforming to the director's choice."¹⁰ That points once again to a strongly auteur-based view of directors in France.

The fact that auteurs, including screenwriters, cannot be robbed from their intellectual rights may cause judicial problems if a movie or other adaptation is considered too extravagant or risqué for the auteur. For the most part, it doesn't hinder creativity for all parties involved, whether a screenwriter adapts a preexisting work, and a different individual takes on the role of director. This law is mostly meant for any auteur to retain rights to alter their original work and reevaluate it if they see need to do as such, or create other works directly tied to it. An interesting practice regarding French authorship in cinema is the common practice of the director to go pick up the César Award (the national equivalent to the Academy Award) for Best Film, while the producers are not commonly included in the process. It is different from Hollywood where the producers are most often the professionals receiving the Academy Award for Best Film, cutting a clearer distinction between Best Film and Best Director. It is also important to note that a director may receive up to three César Awards, although this is a rare occurrence. There is the possibility their film receives Best Director, Best Film and Best First Film. Only a handful of directors have performed such an artistic feat, but Gallienne is the most recent for his 2013 film *Les Garçons et Guillaume a Table!*

With intellectual property commonly referred to as auteur's rights in France when it comes to artistic and creative fields, it could be tempting to say that France lowers the bar or dilute the idea of auteur. Yet the way the French view of authorship and intellectual property open the floor for extensive thinking, especially as arts and technology grow in many new directions, permits professionals, critics, scholars and artists to discuss old and new implications. It is also important to remember, as Moine points out, that one should "affirm that an auteur's personality and singularity can only be expressed and recognized as such in the specific conditions of their context."¹¹ Thus, authorship happens within a system both creative and industrial in the case of cinema. It is why, in a fast-evolving artistic and industrial landscape, being able to reassess what authorship means in cinema when lines become blurry helps to foster discussion and make legal decisions for how to best protect intellectual property. With its highly collaborative nature, finding the true voice of authorship being a film has become easier since the work done by the *Cahiers du Cinéma*.

The development of existing (including the 1847-established *Société des auteurs, compositeurs et éditeurs de musique*, which focused on musical authorship) and the emergence of more recent (like the *Société Civile des Auteurs Multimedia* in 1984) auteur-oriented organizations that seek to promote and preserve authorship and its rights also helps to ensure all creative platforms receive enough attention on that important subject. It is also important to note that France as a country has supported the arts, including cinema, and has increased its public funding whether for national institutions such as the *Centre National de la Cinématographie* (created in 1946 and renamed *Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée* in 2009 to reflect the inclusion of animation features besides live action projects), several film schools, and public universities offering degrees in Film Studies. This idea of supporting cultural and creative industries, as well as maintaining a rigorous artistic quality embodies the "exception culturelle française" (French cultural exception).

The idea of public investment and legal framing does not have restraining purposes in France; on the contrary, it helps foster great artistic growth, and thus is a direct proponent of authorship, including in cinema. While there was previous public engagement in the cinematographic field prior to the significant reevaluation of the notion of auteur by the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, their importance as critics and agents of change participated to the evolution. They remain a strong academic landmark in both professional film schools and film departments in universities. Their work on the notion of auteur is central to their legacy and helps future filmmakers and scholars understand the need for a director to develop a specific voice to distinguish themselves from the plethora of films produced every year in France, which remains one of the most prolific countries along with the United States and India.

The "septième art" occupies a solid place in the artistic and cultural spheres in France, notably shown by prestigious festival of international renown such as Cannes and Deauville, but also the national César Awards, which were created in 1976 to celebrate international artists from the film industry, whether through their direct collaborations to a French project or as an honorary distinction with a "César d'honneur." Celebrating artistic talent, including pertinent auteurs through this national award ceremony may be considered a consequence of the work done by the contributors to the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, including but not limited to the number of its critics who eventually remodeled French filmmaking with the New Wave. Several of them were laureates, including Truffaut's groundbreaking record with *Le Dernier Métro* (*The Last Metro*) being nominated in all categories in 1981 and winning ten awards, as well as Godard being twice recipient for a César d'honneur. Yet other significant contributors like Chabrol, Rivette, and Rohmer never won a César for best director, despite nominations and their critically-established significance. While this caused some controversies regarding the César Awards, it also reminds one of the strong pool of auteurs from which cinema can benefit and how jurics can have varying opinions making it difficult to reach a consensus. It proves that even with clear criteria for qualities of a "true" auteur, there is still room for subjectivity and personal inclinations, which is an important element of experiencing art, including cinema. That personal preference and how to deal with subjectivity was an aspect of critical work that the *Cahiers du Cinéma* had to establish and revise over time as to approach it in what they considered the most appropriate and truthful way possible.¹²

Another cornerstone of French authorship in cinema is the label "Art et Essai" which was introduced in 1991 through the Décret 255 from October 31, and later removed to be integrated within the legal text of the "Code du Cinéma."¹³ It applies to theatres, which aim at supporting more independent filmmaking that may not normally benefit from extensive exposure in larger theaters and multiplexes. The theatres must answer to specific criteria to ensure they retain the Art et Essai label¹⁴, as it is helmed by a commission from the *Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée* with a yearly evaluation. Although they can show more popular and commercial films, they are obligated to devote most of their programming to films that promote high quality in cultural, artistic, or innovative material. The films presented are not limited to French productions, which tie back into France's interest in authorship outside of its borders, whether it was the *Cahiers du Cinéma* reconstructing the notion of auteur to apply it properly to worthy directors, or support the production and distribution of foreign movies in the country.

The Art et Essai label shows that filmic authorship is a notion that may begin with a director but benefits from support beyond the production, and can even allow an auteur to meet with the public. Authorship has many ramifications from creation to exhibition, whether through publishing, public or recorded performance, or screening. Approaching authorship as a complex spectrum, while keeping the auteur at the core of its definition, helps keep the discussion alive and adjust definitions and legal protection current as art and technology expand into new forms.

Conclusion

The critical and scholarly work accomplished by the *Cahiers du Cinéma* permitted cinematographic auteurs, in the persons of directors with a recognizable and consistent voice, to add to a more literary-based tradition of authorship. Upon examination of how far and deep this tradition runs in France, all the way back to, it is obvious that the country has been a most fertile ground for a long time. From the dramaturges in the eighteenth century, through the nineteenth century novelist and composers, to the current cinema directors and new media creators, the journey to establish and recognize the critical and legal frame for auteurs to flourish has not been an easy or constant one. Indeed, it has instead been one with several struggles to change mentalities and change legal texts, whether through the establishment of new ones or changes made to preexisting ones. The contribution of the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, especially with the "collaborative dynamic" that went from establishing the publication to "invigorate a Wave,"¹⁵ is undeniable in terms of film studies and industry, and both have participated to the groundwork whose repercussions support cinema up to this day. Their significant ideas appear as a strong step within a broader intellectual and artistic history in France, which provided nurturing conditions for new reflections. Not only was France an international precursor in auteur matters, but it has proven to continue to be, including when it comes to cinema. The country is dedicated to celebrating auteurs; not only national but also foreign, putting quality and unique voices above a purely industrial and economical system. Thus, the French critics from the *Cahiers du Cinéma* appear as being both products and agents of the longstanding authorship tradition in France.

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