FILM AS ARTISTLESS ART*

I want to talk about film as an art form, that is, as a medium in which works of art can be made. Here are ten examples of films I take to be works of art:

- Orson Welles, *Citizen Kane* (1941)
- Martin Scorsese, *Taxi Driver* (1976)
- Jean Renoir, *Grand Illusion* (1937)
- Robert Altman, *Nashville* (1975)
- Charlie Chaplin, *Modern Times* (1936)
- Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner* (1982)
- Ingmar Bergman, *The Seventh Seal* (1956)
- Quentin Tarantino, *Reservoir Dogs* (1992)
- Stanley Kubrick, *A Clockwork Orange* (1971)
- Federico Fellini, *8-1/2* (1963)

Your list and mine may well differ, but that disagreement doesn't show that films are not works of art. Instead, it raises the question which ones are. We can of course have great fun with this—making up lists of the "best" films of all time (think of how silly that would sound with Renaissance painting!); deploring the "massification" (to use Noel Carroll's lovely word) of movies; trying to figure out what makes a good film good, whether by fashioning necessary and sufficient conditions or finding paradigms; and so on. But none of this is what I want to talk about.

Instead, I want to concentrate on a theory about film—in many ways a very American theory, though originally imported from France—that I take to be (*i*) the dominant conception of film as an art form, at least in North America; and (*ii*) wrong. Or so I shall argue.

Go back to the list of films. If those films or others are works of art, then it seems to follow that they have artists standing behind them. This inference seems trivially true. Something might indeed be beautiful without being a work of art (think of sunsets), but a work of art must, it seems, be a non-accidental production. By "non-accidental" I mean to rule out purely natural productions, unintended results, or byproducts.[1] We can quibble over exactly what this includes and excludes, but for now all we need to agree on is that artworks are, in some sense of that slippery term,

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[1] This rules out of court the famous question raised in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "If a man hacking in fury at a block of wood, Stephen continued, make there an image of a cow, is that image a work of art? If not, why not?"

intentional products of human activity. Well, if this line of reasoning holds—that is, if we can deduce the existence of artists from the existence of works of art—then we can immediately raise the question: Who are the "film artists" associated with films that are works of art?

We can get a handle on the answer to this question by looking at some of the other arts. In the case of literature, say, the artist who stands behind the work of art is its author: Dostoevsky for *Crime and Punishment*, Pynchon for *Gravity's Rainbow*, Melville for *Moby Dick*. In photography we might think of Ansel Adams or Edward Steichen or Robert Mapplethorpe. In painting Picasso, or Da Vinci, or Pollock, or Michaelangelo. Music is a bit more complicated, but only a bit: a symphony is clearly the artistic product of its composer (say Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony), although the performance of this artwork demands and leaves room for further artistic and technical skills. That's generally true of 'performance art': think of ballet (choreographer and ballerina), for instance. It looks as though we can identify the artist for a kind of art form as the person who brings it into being, who makes the artwork what it is (by engendering aesthetic properties in the relevant medium).

Who, then, is the artist standing behind the film as an artwork?

Look at the list of films again. They're identified by year, title, and. . . why, the *Director*. Of course! And that seemed natural, didn't it? After all, it's the Director who is in charge of things on the set, who "directs" the activity of the actors, the cinematographer, the set designer, and so on. If anyone, it seems, could be in a position to weld all this activity into an aesthetic whole, it should be the Director.

And there you have the germ of what is usually called the "auteur theory." Originally formulated in 1950s France, by Truffaut among others, it was imported into the USA by Andrew Sarris and adopted wholesale by most film theorists as the correct way of thinking film as art, namely by identifying the Director as the artist behind the film, much as (say) Goethe is the author of *Faust*.[2] In its full form, the auteur-theory identifies the Director as the artist in the creation of film as art; his distinctive artistic contribution should be sought in what he "adds" to the film beyond merely "putting picures to a story" (the unartistic hackwork of the mere *metteur-en-scène*); Directors who are artists have a characteristic "signature style" that can be identifed across many films and genres—rather as Picasso is

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[2] That comparison is instructive: Goethe is none the less the author of *Faust* for having picked up the story from elsewhere, as a Director may take over the screenplay from another—to take two examples from the list: Kubrick taking Anthony Burgess, and Scott taking Phillip K. Dick.

Picasso, whether as a cubist or in his Blue Period.

This theory, or a version of it, has been, I think, the prevailing orthodoxy in North American film studies ever since it was introduced. And rightly so: it is theoretically simple, but quite fruitful. Indeed, of all things for a philosophical theory to do, it spawned experimental research, or at least what passes for experimental research in aesthetics. After all, it seems to have (moderately) "testable" consequences: pick a Director, look at the films he has directed, and see whether there are any individualizing aesthetic features to be found. If so, and if they surpass the norm of achievement, then we have a Director who is at least a candidate for the coveted title of Artist. It's easy in some cases: Welles, Chaplin, Renoir. But the auteur-theory also rescued various directors who were not, at the time, appreciated as artists, but rather seen as competent Hollywood hacks: John Ford and Alfred Hitchcock, to name two. (One of the terrifically influential works of American auteur-theory was Robin Wood's biography of Hitchcock, devoted to proving that he had a distinctive aesthetic style that permeates his films, and reaches artistic heights in several of them.) The auteur-theory has so seeped into popular culture that we don't blink twice at (say) the concept of a "Director's Cut" of a film.[3] In the case of *Blade Runner*, that version having simply displaced the earlier theatrical release entirely. But of course: *this* version is the one I wanted to release, says Ridley Scott the Director, but They—the They in charge of (crass) moneymaking—wouldn't let me. But art finally wins over money, and so we have the Director's Cut; we are the better for it. Likewise, the auteur-theory explains perfectly our outrage over the treatment of Welles's follow-up to *Citizen Kane* (the "greatest movie ever made"), namely *The Magnificent Ambersons*, which was edited directly against Welles's instructions: something we now see as on a par with, say, Alan Douglas's treatment of the Hendrix tapes. The auteur-theory seems to be well-verified and well-motivated.

There's just one problem. For all its virtues, which are many, it's wrong.

The "empirical" consequences described above were hardly blind-tested against other samples. Furthermore, there are other consequences not welcome: take the film *Come and Get It* (1936), where one Director was fired and another took over, both Directors who are Artists: William Wyler and Howard Hawks. Yet it continues to be a matter of debate who was re-

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[3] To see just how natural the auteur-theory is, imagine an alternative: the "Cameraman's Cut" of a film. In the case of Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* there was a re-release based on a new sound mix, but the claim that was made was that the sound was now mixed in accordance with Welles's intentions, so it really is something like a "posthumous Director's Cut" rather than a "Soundman's Cut."

sponsible for given parts of the film. Now it might be objected that this example only shows that Directors need not always produce art that is personal and identifiable in terms of their vision—although this sounds strange if we think of, say Picasso; but let that pass. To refute the theory what we'd need is a well-confirmed counterexample, that is, to identify at least one film masterpiece where the Director was of little or no consequence. Are there such? Sure!

But I think we can argue against the theory on more basic grounds. So forget the consequences; let's look for a moment at the "reification of the role" the auteur-theory accepts. Why is the Director the artist? To mention just two other roles that are vital to the film, how about Screenwriter and Cinematographer? Consider *Citizen Kane*: Welles at best deserves co-authorship of the screenplay with Herman Mankiewicz, and the legendary "deep-focus" technique used so effectively in the film was the work of cameraman Gregg Toland. In the absence of either, there would be no movie, or at best a pale shadow of the artwork we have. Why identify Welles as the Artist, rather than Mankiewicz or Toland? More generally, since the Director is only as good as his material (Screenwriter) and how it is shot (Cinematographer), why give pride of place to the Director? (By assiduously reading credits I've discovered, for example, that I rather like a lot of the screenplays generated by David Webb Peoples, who did *Blade Runner* and *Unforgiven*.)

Here's a case for the Screenwriter: he's like the composer. Nobody would think of privileging the conductor over the composer. Grant that the composer needs some technical and artistic efforts by others to realize his vision; still, his contribution is that on which all else is based. (For mainstream narrative film, that is, which is all I'm concerned with here.)

Here's a case for the Cinematographer: whatever you think of the storyline and the acting, the unique charateristic that makes film *film* and sets it apart from other artforms where you have stories and acting and so on (radio drama or theater), is the cinematography: the visual images by which the story is presented.

The usual reply given to this challenge is that it is the Director who has the final say in making the film. Welles decided to go with Mankewicz's script, Welles made use of Toland's deep-focus technique, and so on. Hence we single out the Director as the Artist because he's the one who allows the others to have influence at all.

To make this reply is to see how weak it is! On the one hand, grant the claims about the Director; it seems that we should, in all honesty, conclude that we have at best a joint artistic venture. Even if the Director enables

the Screenwriter and the Cinematographer to be effective, what they effect is an artistic contribution. Imagine the parallel claim put forward in the case of a novel: "Sure, he used drafts from hired subordinates, but he signed them in the end!"[4] Of course, it isn't clear that we should grant the claims about the Director in the first place. In practice, some nearly get behind the camera themselves and others don't; some have in hand in the scripts and others don't; and so on.

Yet there's a deeper conceptual problem here. This reply wants to identify the artist behind the artwork by asking about who exercises effective control over the final product. But there's no reason to think that who has power (a functional notion) should readily map onto a given role in production (a role imposed by the technical division of labor).

If we take this last point seriously, we might decide to preserve the heart and soul of the analysis by giving up the rigidification of the Director. Instead, let's say that the artist of the film is the person or persons who exercise effective control over the aesthetic properties of the finished product.

Two points. First, this doesn't address the concerns above about collaborative aesthetic achivements. Second, I don't think this will work, because the notion of "effective control" is just too ill-defined to be of any use. Three examples may help. First, think of *Blade Runner.* Here the theatrical release—the "final cut"—was made under instruction from the film's producers, who had given advance screenings of a very rough cut and were alarmed by the results. They had a direct influence on the aesthetic properties of the released film. Were they its artists? No way! Or think of *A Night at the Opera.* The Marx Brothers, on the advice of producer Irving Thalberg, pioneered a technique of "road-testing" their comedy routines. They rewrote gags, altered sketches, tried out their timing and delivery, on the road. Are the audiences to which they played, who "controlled" the aesthetic (comic) properties of the final version, the artists? Finally, think of one of the key features of contemporary film, which is the domination of content by film stars ("a Julia Roberts film") written into their contracts (certain percentages of "face time" on the screen and so on). Are now the actors the artists? (They may be artists, and some may be as recognizable film to film as directors: think of Humphrey Bogart, or Woody Allen, for instance.) Julia Roberts has a lot to do with the successes of the films in which she stars, but it seems quite wrong to identify her as the artist that

[4] Something like this claim *was* put forward by Jerzy Kozinski when it became known that he outlined parts of his novels and had others draft the text. It met with ridicule widely.

gives the film its artistic merit.

So there is no role we can plausibly identify with the artist of the film, and no obvious functional property we can point to as picking out the artist. Even in its generalized form, the auteur-theory doesn't do the theoretical work it was designed to accomplish. What do we do now?

The answer I'll defend here is that film is (or can be) artwork that is produced collectively—more exactly, that it is something I'll call a "corporate product," for reasons we'll get to in a minute. Film is more like opera, more like architecture, more like theater, than it is like the novel or the symphony.

We need directors, cinematographers, actors, screenwriters (and script doctors), postproduction technicians, set designers, and so on, for any film. The failure of any one of these can cause the film to be an aesthetic failure. A great script can't rescue bad acting, and poor editing can make a hash of the best movie. The Director may be important (although this remains to be determined), but he's like the architect. Think of these other arts, not of the misleading model of one artist per artwork. Then we can kick the prop away from the auteur-theory. (Even the unity of the artwork doesn't require that there be a single artist.) Films are corporate products—in part of necessity, given our technology—but no less artworks for all that.

There are really two points lurking here. The first is a claim about group productions (as opposed to individual productions). The second is about artworks and their relation to their producers.

First point first. By 'group production' I really just mean any case in which more than one person has a direct causal role in bringing about the final product. Now this isn't the same as what Ian Jarvie calls the "Committee View" of how movies are produced. On the Committee View, we think of a movie being created on analogy with the way a committee might produce a report. Although the secretary is the one who actually writes up the report, it really is the product of the conclusions the committee has come to, not just the secretary. Indeed, members of the committee might disagree about what to recommend in their report, and not everyone on the committee needs to—or ever does—see eye-to-eye about what to put in the report. But these local disagreements are compatible with the final report being a product of the committee.

Well, this analogy is appealing, but I think it's way too narrow in its account of the kind of interaction that takes place. Here's a very different model of joint cooperative production: a musical group (say), where there is no "secretary" (someone to whom notionally to attribute the work), and the members each make individual yet different contributions to the final

product. I want a more general notion of how people can interact, one flexible enough to include non-committee models of production. Thus corporate production.

Unlike a committee, the people involved in corporate production might cooperate in making the product, or they might not: think of a screenplay that passes through different hands before a draft is ready for filming [*Blade Runner*: Dick, Fancher, Peoples], or a new director brought in to replace one who was fired in the course of shooting [*Come and Get It*: Hawks and Wyler]. When they cooperate, they might be doing the same sort of thing [the gaffer and the set designer hammering out the 'look and feel' of the surroundings], or different things that are related [Coen Brothers: one directs and the other shoots], or different things that are really quite different [best boy and the postproduction sound dubbing]. More to the point, they can agree or differ in varying measures, both about individual details [how should this shot be filmed?] and about their "visions" for the film [who is the real hero? is this scene ironic?]. There can be different parts of decision-making devoving on different roles, which may be occupied by one person or many or one-at-a-time one after the other; power can be distributed in all sorts of ways. I call it "corporate" production because in general that's all there is to say about it! Think of the group efforts involved in corporate products: the many varied roles that went into Microsoft's production (say) of its web browser, or for that matter the benign managerial style of the open-source community's developing a new Linux kernel. Or how Daimler-Chrysler designs a new car. And so on!

There is some point in calling it "corporate" (even if not always "collective"), though, since there are things people do together that don't fit this model. Presumably unintended effects, even if invisible-hand style phenomena, do not: we don't corporately produce air pollution, though it is a collective byproduct of our individual and uncoordinated actions. (It's really hard to draw these lines!) Likewise, we engage in warfare, but that's not a *joint* effort, even if each side is correctly understood as engaged in a collective effort; it's more like the sum of two distinct joint efforts, and indeed a case of zero-sum interaction wherein traditionally my gain is your loss and conversely.

The first point, then, is that film production—even if the technical division of labor forces certain roles upon it—can and should be understood as a form of corporate production. Not every film need be produced the same way: the roles may differ, the occupants surely will and indeed the occupation of roles likewise, the distribution of power, the way decisions are made... all this and more. Rather than try to construe film production,

poorly and inadequately, on the model of individual artistic effort as in novel-writing, we ought to look if anywhere to the business world for the complex models that we can deploy to better understand how a film comes to be.

The second point is rather more subtle. Suppose we admit that the conditions under which a film comes into being are extremely complex, and that there is no single or simple account–nor any adequate simplifying account—that we can use. The average mainstream narrative film, then, is rather like Microsoft's "Internet Explorer." Who made it? The company as a whole did, of course, but beyond this largely empty answer there just remains the dirty work of mapping out the complex relations of roles, power, influence, decision, and so on, for each particular case. (Incidentally this is my response to the "studio as artist" line of Thomas Schatz.) Well and good. But stop to think for a minute: this implies, I think, that there is no answer to the question "Who is the artist behind the film?"

Think of a parallel case. The Beatles were a group of four talented musicians making different contributions to the final product, namely the song (more technically: the song-performance). I take it we're not tempted at all to ask who *the* artist is behind songs by the Beatles. Well, maybe we are, you might say, given the number of people who seem to think it was George Martin, or Paul on this and John on that. But those examples play into my hands: they are attempts to sort out who contributed what to which. That's what I think we should do with film, too.

I don't think it's a bad thing to give up talk of the artist (although it is a surprising one!). There is no answer to the question "Who is the 'artist' behind Internet Explorer?" either, but we don't seem to be dismayed by that. Sometimes one person, or a small group, will have such an impact on the product that we can simplify our lives and talk about how that person or small group should be credited, or blamed, with the way the whole thing turned out. The writer-director-producer combination of modern Hollywood is like that, and so is (say) Bill Atkinson's creation of Hypercard. But just as often we'll have to sort through the sticky mess of charting responsibilities and contributions.

So, to return to the auteur-arguments put forward at the beginning: I suggest we reject the inference they turn on. It is *not* the case that film as artwork entails that there must be an artist, or even many artists, who brought it into being. Instead, I think we should embrace the radical alternative of dropping talk about the artist altogether. There are artworks, and we can talk about their aesthetic properties, but to speak of artists in addition to artworks generally gets us nowhere.

I want this conclusion to hold even for traditional models of aesthetic production. But let me set out some of the details. First, I suggest we can, without loss or remainder, replace talk of the artist with talk of the autonomous artwork: rather than saying e.g. that Quentin Tarantino is satirizing film noir in his movie *Pulp Fiction*, we just say that the movie *Pulp Fiction* satirizes film noir. Simple as that. Second, getting rid of the artist means that in consequence we can perhaps end further confusion between talking about the aesthetic properties of the artwork and talking about the aethetic intentions or aims of the producer of the artwork—the point in the New Criticism I take to still be valid. An artist, one might suppose, is legitimately entitled to aesthetic aims, and if we talk of artists then we may easily slide from their aims (a fact about the producer of the artwork) to their achievements (a fact about the artwork in itself). Without the crutch of artists, we'll be less likely to commit the Intentional Fallacy. Of course, this doesn't prevent us from talking about the aims and intentions of the producers, and even asking whether they are or were realized in the artwork, but it does tell against their being given ultimate authority: the aesthetic properties of objects are public and open to public assessment: no matter how many times a director insists he meant to make something ironic, we may judge that he has failed, and we can be right in such judgements. We can be wrong, too, but the point is that the question is open for discussion.

Film, therefore, is artistless art. If I had time I would defend the claim in general that most art is interestingly artistless. But that will have to wait for another occasion. The moral I want to draw from this conclusion is that there is no particular reason to single out the Director, or indeed any particular individual or role, for any film in advance of particular views about the creation of that individual film. That is to say: We can't have armchair confidence that we understand the aesthetic value of a film by looking to its Director, any more than to any other contributor, and it is much more likely that we have to do the messy work of sorting out the actual details in actual individual cases. In some ways this is perhaps an unexciting conclusion, and leaves us with a complicated task ahead of us. But that's right, I think. It *is* complicated, and philosophical theories may simplify matters but they falsify the genuine complexity that is part of aesthetic achievement. Appreciating such complexity should be our goal as philosophers and aestheticians. The best way to get there is to treat film, and possibly all artworks, as artistless—not as artless!