



The French New Wave

Critical Landmarks

Edited by

Peter Graham

with Ginette Vincendeau



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5: <i>La Politique des auteurs</i>	130
ANDRÉ BAZIN	
<i>Cahiers du cinéma</i> no. 70, April 1957	
6: Little Themes	149
CLAUDE CHABROL	
<i>Cahiers du cinéma</i> no. 100, October 1959	
7: Review of Alexandre Astruc's <i>Une vie</i>	155
JEAN-LUC GODARD	
<i>Cahiers du cinéma</i> no. 89, November 1958	
8: The Emperor Has No Clothes	163
ROBERT BENAYOUN	
<i>Positif</i> no. 47, July 1962	
9: Interview with François Truffaut	187
<i>Cahiers du cinéma</i> no. 138, December 1962	
10: A Case Study: Contrasting Views of <i>À bout de souffle</i>	221
<i>Jean-Luc Godard</i>	
LUC MOULLET – <i>Cahiers du cinéma</i> no. 106, April 1960	
<i>À bout de souffle</i>	228
RAYMOND BORDE – <i>Premier Plan, Nouvelle vague</i> , 1962	
<i>Le Quai des brumes</i> 1960: <i>À bout de souffle</i> by Jean-Luc Godard	231
GEORGES SADOUL – <i>Les Lettres françaises</i> no. 818, 31 March 1960	
Bibliography	239
Index	251

Preface to the 2009 Edition

The original edition of this book, then entitled *The New Wave*, a collection of articles by and interviews with leading members of the Nouvelle Vague, as well as some broadsides from French critics who opposed the movement, was published in an English translation by Secker & Warburg in association with the British Film Institute in 1968. When that edition went out of print, it became clear, with film studies now a fixture in university syllabuses, that a new and enlarged edition of the book could usefully fill a gap. Over the years I realised, after much deliberation, that François Truffaut's polemical article, 'A Certain Tendency in French Cinema', which at the time I had decided not to include in the selection, could no longer be omitted. The piece had become so canonical that no anthology about the New Wave could be without it. A note, however: although the piece has already been anthologised in English, I was unhappy with aspects of the various existing translations. As a result, the reader will find here a brand new translation of this now classic article. This new edition also includes three other additional articles, by Raymond Borde, Luc Moullet and Georges Sadoul, all of them discussions of Godard's film *À bout de souffle*, as well as a substantial and comprehensive introduction by Ginette Vincendeau that puts the Nouvelle Vague phenomenon into perspective. I decided to retain the bulk of my original linking commentary (which should be seen in its historical context: it was written at a time when film studies and indeed semiotics were still in their infancy). Otherwise, the changes I have made to the original text of the translations and commentary are minimal.

Peter Graham, March 2009

5: *La Politique des auteurs*

ANDRÉ BAZIN

Goethe? Shakespeare? Everything they put their name to is supposed to be good, and people rack their brains to find beauty in the silliest little thing they bungled. All great talents, like Goethe, Shakespeare, Beethoven and Michelangelo, created not only beautiful works, but things that were less than mediocre, quite simply awful.

(Leo Tolstoy, *Diary 1895-99*)

I realise my task is fraught with difficulties. *Cahiers du cinéma* is thought to practise the *politique des auteurs*. This opinion may perhaps not be justified by the entire output of articles, but it has been true of the majority, especially for the last two years. It would be useless and hypocritical to point to a few scraps of evidence to the contrary, and claim that our magazine is a harmless collection of wishywashy reviews.

Nevertheless, our readers must have noticed that this critical standpoint – whether implicit or explicit – has not been adopted with equal enthusiasm by all the regular contributors to *Cahiers*, and that there might exist serious differences in our admiration, or rather in the degree of our admiration. And yet the truth is that the most enthusiastic among us nearly always win the day. Eric Rohmer put his finger on the reason in his reply to a reader in no. 64: ‘When opinions differ on an important film, we generally prefer to let the person who likes it most write about it.’ It follows that the strictest adherents of the *politique des auteurs* get the best of it in the end, for, rightly or wrongly, they always see in their favourite directors the manifestation of the same specific qualities. So it is that Alfred Hitchcock, Jean Renoir, Roberto Rossellini, Fritz Lang, Howard Hawks or Nicholas Ray, to judge from the pages of *Cahiers*, appear as almost infallible directors who could never make a bad film.

I would like to avoid one misunderstanding from the start. I beg to differ with those of my colleagues who are the most firmly convinced that the *politique des auteurs* is well founded, but this in no way compromises the general policy of the magazine. Whatever our differences of opinion about films or directors, our common likes and dislikes are numerous enough and strong enough to bind us together; and although I do not see the role of the auteur in the cinema in the same way as François Truffaut or Rohmer for example, it does not stop me believing to a certain extent in the concept of the auteur and very often sharing their opinions, although not always their passionate loves. I fall in with them more reluctantly in the case of their hostile reactions; often they are fiercely critical of films I find defensible – and I do so precisely because I find that the work transcends the director (they dispute this phenomenon, which they consider to be a critical contradiction). In other words, almost our only difference concerns the relationship between the work and its creator. I have never regretted that one of my colleagues has stuck up for such and such director, although I have not always agreed about the qualities of the film under examination. Finally, I would like to add that although it seems to me that the *politique des auteurs* has led its supporters to make a number of mistakes, its total results have been fertile enough to justify them in the face of their critics. It is very rare that the arguments drawn upon to attack them do not make me rush to their defence.

So it is within these limits, which, if you like, are those of a family quarrel, that I would like to tackle what seems to me to represent not so much a critical mistranslation as a critical ‘false nuance of meaning’. My point of departure is an article by my friend Jean Domarchi on Vincente Minnelli’s *Lust for Life*, which tells the story of Vincent Van Gogh. His praise was very intelligent and sober, but it struck me that such an article should not have been published in a magazine which, only one month previously, had allowed Rohmer to demolish John Huston. The relentless harshness of the latter, and the indulgent admiration of the former, can be explained only by the fact that Minnelli is one of Domarchi’s favourites and that Huston is not a *Cahiers* auteur. This partiality is a good thing, up to a certain point, as it leads us to stick up for a film that illustrates certain facets of American culture just as much as Minnelli’s personal talent. I could get Domarchi caught up in a contradiction, by pointing out to

him that he ought to have sacrificed Minnelli in favour of Renoir, since it was the shooting of *Lust for Life* that forced the director of *French Cancan* to give up his own project on Van Gogh. Can Domarchi claim that a *Van Gogh* by Renoir would not have brought more prestige to the *politique des auteurs* than a film by Minnelli? What was needed was a painter's son, and what we got was a director of filmed ballets!

But whatever the case, this example is only a pretext. Many a time I have felt uneasy at the subtlety of an argument, which completely failed to camouflage the *naïveté* of the assumption whereby, for example, the intentions and the coherence of a deliberate and well-thought-out film are read into some little B-feature.

And of course as soon as you state that the film-maker and his or her films are one, there can be no minor films, as the worst of them will always be in the image of their creator. But let's see what the facts of the matter are. In order to do so, we must go right back to the beginning.

Of course, the *politique des auteurs* is the application to the cinema of a notion that is widely accepted in the individual arts. Truffaut likes to quote Jean Giraudoux's remark: 'There are no works, there are only auteurs' – a polemical sally which seems to me of limited significance. The opposite statement could just as well be set as an exam question. The two formulae, like the maxims of François de La Rochefoucauld and Chamfort, would simply reverse their proportion of truth and error. As for Rohmer, he states (or rather asserts) that in art it is the auteurs, and not the works, that remain; and the programmes of film societies would seem to support this critical truth.

But one should note that Rohmer's argument does not go nearly as far as Giraudoux's aphorism, for, if auteurs remain, it is not necessarily because of their output as a whole. There is no lack of examples to prove that the contrary is true. Maybe Voltaire's name is more important than his bibliography, but now that he has been put in perspective it is not so much his *Dictionnaire philosophique* that counts nowadays as his Voltairean wit, a certain *style* of thinking and writing. But today where are we to find the principle and the example? In his abundant and atrocious writings for the theatre? Or in the slim volume of short stories? And what about Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais? Are we to go looking in *La Mère coupable*?

In any case, the authors of that period were apparently themselves aware of the relativity of their worth, since they willingly disowned their works, and sometimes even did not mind being the subject of lampoons whose quality they took as a compliment. For them, almost the only thing that mattered was the work itself, whether their own or another's, and it was only at the end of the eighteenth century, with Beaumarchais in fact, that the concept of the auteur finally crystallised legally, with his or her royalties, duties and responsibilities. Of course I am making allowances for historical and social contingencies; political and moral censorship has made anonymity sometimes inevitable and always excusable. But surely the anonymity of the writings of the French Resistance in no way lessened the dignity or responsibility of the writer. It was only in the nineteenth century that copying or plagiarism really began to be considered a professional breach that disqualified its perpetrator.

The same is true of painting. Although nowadays any old splash of paint can be valued according to its measurements and the celebrity of the signature, the objective quality of the work itself was formerly held in much higher esteem. Proof of this is to be found in the difficulty there is in authenticating many old pictures. What emerged from a studio might simply be the work of a pupil, and we are now unable to *prove* anything one way or the other. If one goes back even further, one has to take into consideration the anonymous works that have come down to us as the products not of an artist, but of an art, not of a person, but of a society.

I can see how I will be rebutted. We should not objectify our ignorance or let it crystallise into a reality. All these works of art, from the Venus de Milo to the African mask, did in fact have an auteur; and the whole of modern historical science is tending to fill in the gaps and give names to these works of art. But did one really have to wait for such erudite addenda before being able to admire and enjoy them? Biographical criticism is but one of many possible critical dimensions – people are still arguing about the identity of William Shakespeare or Molière.

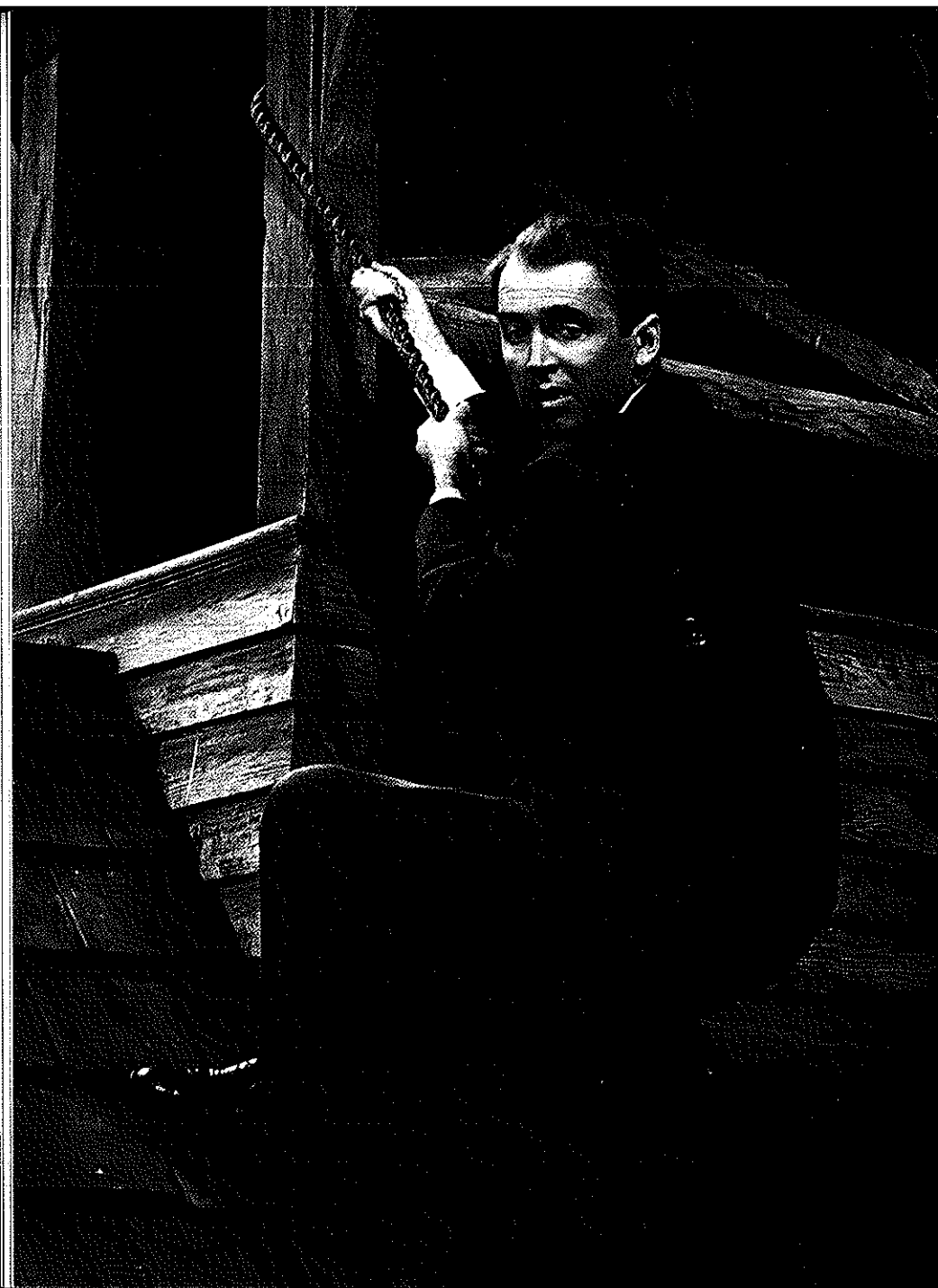
But that's just the point! People *are* arguing. So their identity is not a matter of complete indifference. The evolution of Western art towards greater personalisation should definitely be considered as a step forward, as a refinement of culture, but only as long as this individualisation remains only a

final perfection and does not claim to *define* culture. At this point, we should remember the irrefutable commonplace we learned at school: the individual transcends society, but society is also and above all *within* the individual. So there can be no definitive criticism of genius or talent which does not first take into consideration the social determinism, the historical combination of circumstances and the technical background which to a large extent determine it. That is why the anonymity of a work of art is a handicap that impinges only very slightly on our understanding of it. In any case, much depends on the particular branch of art in question, the style adopted and the sociological context. African art does not suffer by remaining anonymous – although of course it is unfortunate we know so little about the societies that gave birth to it.

But *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, *Europa '51* and *Bigger Than Life* are contemporary with the paintings of Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse and Gustave Singier! Does it follow that one should see in them the same degree of individualisation? I for one do not think so.

If you will excuse yet another commonplace, the cinema is an art which is both popular and industrial. These conditions, which are necessary to its existence, in no way constitute a collection of hindrances – no more than in architecture – they rather represent a group of positive and negative circumstances which have to be reckoned with. And this is especially true of the American cinema, which the theoreticians of the *politique des auteurs* admire so much. What makes Hollywood so much better than anything else in the world is not only the quality of certain directors, but also the vitality and, in a certain sense, the excellence of a tradition. Hollywood's superiority is only incidentally technical; it lies much more in what one might call the American cinematic genius, something which should be analysed, then defined, by a sociological approach to its production. The American cinema has been able, in an extraordinarily competent way, to show American society just as it wanted to see itself; but not at all passively, as a simple act of satisfaction and escape, but dynamically, i.e. by participating with the means at its disposal in the building of that society. What is so admirable in the American cinema is that it cannot help being spontaneous. Although the fruit of free enterprise and capitalism – and harbouring their active or still only virtual defects – it is in a way the truest

James Stewart in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956)





and most realistic cinema of all because it does not shrink from depicting even the contradictions of that society.

But it follows that directors are swept along by this powerful surge; naturally their artistic course has to be plotted according to the currents – it is not as if they were sailing as their fancy took them on the calm waters of a lake.

In fact it is not even true of the most individual artistic disciplines that genius is free and always self-dependent. And what is genius anyway if not a certain combination of unquestionably personal talents, a gift of the gods and a moment in history? Genius is an H-bomb. The fission of uranium triggers off the fusion of hydrogen pulp. But a sun cannot be born from the disintegration of an individual alone unless this disintegration has repercussions on the art that surrounds it. Whence the paradox of Arthur Rimbaud's life. His poetic flash in the pan suddenly died out and Rimbaud the adventurer became more and more distant like a star, still glowing but heading towards extinction. Probably

Christopher Olsen (left), James Mason and Barbara Rush in Nicholas Ray's *Bigger Than Life* (1956)

Rimbaud did not change at all. There was simply nothing left to feed the flames that had reduced the whole of literature to ashes. Generally speaking, the rate of this combustion in the cycles of great art is usually greater than the lifespan of a man. Literature's step is measured in centuries. It will be said that genius foreshadows that which comes after it. This is true, but only dialectically. For one could also say that every age has the geniuses it needs in order to define, repudiate and transcend itself. Consequently, Voltaire was a horrible playwright when he thought he was Jean Racine's successor and a storyteller of genius when he made the parable a vehicle for the ideas which were going to shatter the eighteenth century.

And even without having to use as examples the utter failures which had their causes almost entirely in the sociology of art, creative psychology alone could easily account for a lot of patchiness even in the best authors. Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame-de-Paris* is pretty slight compared with *La Légende des siècles*, Gustave Flaubert's *Salammbô* does not come up to *Madame Bovary*, or André Gide's *Corydon* to *Le Journal des faux-monnayeurs*. There is no point in quibbling about these examples, there will always be others to suit everyone's taste. Surely one can accept the permanence of talent without confusing it with some kind of artistic infallibility or immunity against making mistakes, which could only be divine attributes. But God, as Jean-Paul Sartre has already pointed out, is not an artist! Were one to attribute to creative man, in the face of all psychological probability, an unflagging richness of inspiration, one would have to admit that this inspiration always comes up against a whole complex of particular circumstances which make the result, in the cinema, a thousand times more chancy than in painting or in literature.

Conversely, there is no reason why there should not exist – and sometimes they do – flashes in the pan in the work of otherwise mediocre filmmakers. Results of a fortunate combination of circumstances in which there is a precarious moment of balance between talent and milieu, these fleeting brilliancies do not prove all that much about personal creative qualities; but they are not however intrinsically inferior to others – and probably would not seem so if the critics had not begun by reading the signature at the bottom of the painting.

Well, what is true of literature is even truer of the cinema, to the extent that this art, the last to come on to the scene, accelerates and multiplies the evolutionary factors that are common to all the others. In fifty years, the cinema, which started with the crudest forms of spectacle (primitive but not inferior) has had to cover the same ground as the play or the novel and is often on the same level as they are. Within that same period, its technical development has been of a kind that cannot compare with that of any traditional art within a comparable period (except perhaps architecture, another industrial art). Under such conditions, it is hardly surprising that genius will burn itself out ten times as fast, and that a director who suffers no loss of ability may cease to be swept along by the wave. This was the case with Erich von Stroheim, Abel Gance and Orson Welles. We are now beginning to see things in enough perspective to notice a curious phenomenon: a filmmaker can, within his or her own lifetime, be refloated by the following wave. This is true of Gance and Stroheim, whose modernity is all the more apparent nowadays. I am fully aware that this only goes to prove their quality of auteur, but their eclipse still cannot be entirely explained away by the contradictions of capitalism or the stupidity of producers. If one keeps a sense of proportion, one sees that the same thing has happened to people of genius in the cinema as would have happened to a 120-year-old Racine writing Racinian plays in the middle of the eighteenth century. Would his tragedies have been better than Voltaire's? The answer is by no means clear-cut; but I bet they would not have been.

One can justifiably point to Charles Chaplin, Renoir or René Clair. But each of them was endowed with further gifts that have little to do with genius and which were precisely those that enabled them to adapt themselves to the predicament of film production. Of course, the case of Chaplin was unique, since, as both auteur and producer, he has been able to be both the cinema and its evolution.

It follows, then, according to the most basic laws of the psychology of creation, that, as the objective factors of genius are much more likely to modify themselves in the cinema than in any other art, a rapid maladjustment between the film-maker and the cinema can occur, and this can abruptly affect the quality

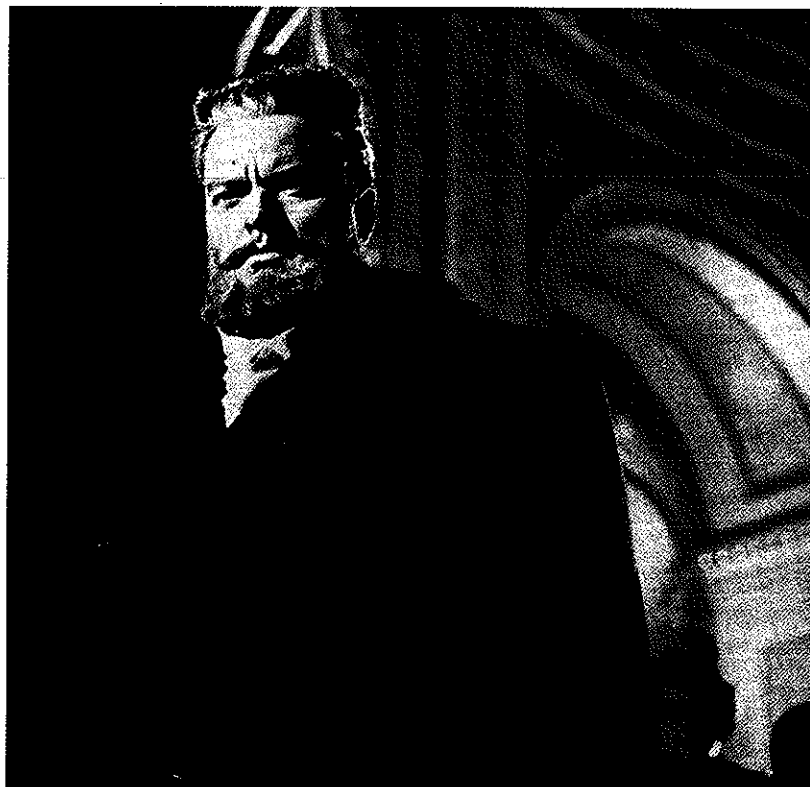
Dorothy Comingore and Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane* (1941)



of his or her films as a result. Of course I admire Welles's *Confidential Report*, and I can see the same qualities in it as I see in *Citizen Kane*. But *Citizen Kane* opened up a new era of American cinema, and *Confidential Report* is a film of only secondary importance.

But let's pause a moment on this assertion – it may, I feel, allow us to get to the heart of the matter. I think that not only would the supporters of the *politique des auteurs* refuse to agree that *Confidential Report* is an inferior film to *Citizen Kane*; they would be more eager to claim the contrary, and I can easily see how they would go about it. As *Confidential Report* is Welles's sixth film, one can assume that a certain amount of progress has already been made. Not only did the Welles of 1953 have more experience of himself and of his art than in 1941, but however great the freedom he was able to obtain in Hollywood *Citizen Kane* cannot help remaining to a certain extent an RKO product. The film would never have seen the light of day without the co-operation of some superb technicians and their just as admirable technical apparatus. Gregg Toland, to mention only one, was more than a little responsible for the final result. On the other hand, *Confidential Report* is completely the work of Welles. Until it can be proved to the contrary, it will be considered a priori a superior film because it is more personal and because Welles's personality can only have matured as he grew older.

As far as this question is concerned, I can only agree with my young firebrands when they state that age as such cannot diminish the talent of a film-maker and react violently to that critical prejudice which consists of always finding the works of a young or mature film-maker superior to the films of an old director. It has been said that Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux* was not up to *The Gold Rush*; people have criticised Renoir's *The River* and *Le Carrosse d'or* (*The Golden Coach*), saying they miss the good old days of *La Règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*). Eric Rohmer has found an excellent answer to this: 'The history of art offers no example, as far as I know, of an authentic genius who has gone through a period of true decline at the end of his career; this should encourage us rather to detect, beneath what seems to be clumsy or bald, the traces of that desire for simplicity that characterises the "last manner" of painters such as Titian, Rembrandt, Matisse, or Bonnard, composers such as Beethoven and Stravinsky ...' (*Cahiers du cinéma* no. 8, 'Renoir américain').



What kind of absurd discrimination has decided that film-makers alone are victims of a senility that other artists are protected from? There do remain the exceptional cases of dotage, but they are much rarer than is sometimes supposed. When Charles Baudelaire was paralysed and unable to utter anything other than his 'cré nom', was he any less Baudelairean? Robert Mallet tells us how Valery Larbaud, Joyce's translator into French, struggling against paralysis after twenty years of immobility and silence, had managed to build up for himself a vocabulary of twenty simple words. With these, he was still able to bring out some extraordinarily shrewd literary judgments. In fact, the

Orson Welles in his own film *Mr Arkadin* (aka *Confidential Report*, 1955)

few exceptions one could mention only go to prove the rule. A great talent matures but does not grow old. There is no reason why this law of artistic psychology should not also be valid for the cinema. Criticism that is based implicitly on the hypothesis of senility cannot hold water. It is rather the opposite postulate that ought to be stated: we should say that when we think we can discern a decline it is our own critical sense that is at fault, since an impoverishment of inspiration is a very unlikely phenomenon. From this point of view, the bias of the *politique des auteurs* is very fruitful, and I will stick up for them against the *naïveté*, the foolishness even, of the prejudices they are fighting.

But, always remembering this, one has nevertheless to accept that certain indisputable 'greats' have suffered an eclipse or a loss of their powers. I think what I have already said in this article may point to the reason for this. The problem has to do with the ageing not of people but of the cinema itself: those who do not know how to age *with* it will be overtaken by its evolution. This is why it has been possible for there to have been a series of failures leading to complete catastrophe without it being necessary to suppose that the genius of yesterday has become an imbecile. Once again, it is simply a question of the appearance of a clash between the subjective inspiration of the creator and the objective situation of the cinema, and this is what the *politique des auteurs* refuses to see. To its supporters *Confidential Report* is a more important film than *Citizen Kane* because they justifiably see more of Orson Welles in it. In other words, all they want to retain in the equation *auteur plus subject = work* is the auteur, while the subject is reduced to zero. Some of them will pretend to grant me that, all things being equal as far as the auteur is concerned, a good subject is naturally better than a bad one, but the more outspoken and foolhardy among them will admit that it very much looks as if they prefer minor B-films, where the banality of the scenario leaves more room for the personal contribution of the auteur.

Of course I will be challenged on the very concept of auteur. I admit that the equation I have just used is artificial, just as much so in fact as the distinction one learned at school between form and content. To benefit from the *politique des auteurs* one first has to be worthy of it, and as it happens this school of criticism claims to distinguish between true auteurs and *metteurs-en-scène*,

even talented ones: Nicholas Ray is an auteur, John Huston is supposed to be only a *metteur-en-scène*; Robert Bresson and Roberto Rossellini are auteurs, René Clément is only a great *metteur-en-scène*, and so on. So this conception of the author is not compatible with the auteur/subject distinction, because it is of greater importance to find out if a director is worthy of entering the select group of auteurs than it is to judge how well he or she has used the material to hand. To a certain extent at least, auteurs are a subject to themselves; whatever the scenario, they always tell the same story, or, in case the word 'story' is confusing, let's say they have the same attitude and pass the same moral judgments on the action and on the characters. Jacques Rivette has said that an auteur is someone who speaks in the first person. It's a good definition; let's adopt it.

The *politique des auteurs* consists, in short, of choosing the personal factor in artistic creation as a standard of reference, and then of assuming that it continues and even progresses from one film to the next. It is recognised that there do exist certain important films of quality that escape this test, but these will systematically be considered inferior to those in which the personal stamp of the auteur, however run-of-the-mill the scenario, can be perceived even infinitesimally.

It is far from my intention to deny the positive attitude and methodological qualities of this bias. First of all, it has the great merit of treating the cinema as an adult art and of reacting against the impressionistic relativism that still reigns over the bulk of film criticism. I admit that the explicit or admitted pretension of a critic to reconsider the production of a film-maker with every new film in the light of his or her judgment has something presumptuous about it that recalls Ubu. I am also quite willing to admit that if one is human one cannot help doing this, and, short of giving up the whole idea of actually criticising, one might as well take as a starting-point the feelings, pleasant or unpleasant, one feels personally when in contact with a film. Okay, but only on condition that these first impressions are kept in their proper place. We have to take them into consideration, but we should not use them as a basis. In other words, every critical act should consist of referring the film in question to a scale of values, but this reference is not merely a matter of intelligence; the sureness of one's judgment arises

also, or perhaps even first of all (in the chronological sense of the word), from a general impression experienced during a film. I feel there are two symmetrical heresies, which are: (a) objectively applying to a film a critical all-purpose yardstick; and (b) considering it sufficient simply to state one's pleasure or disgust. The first denies the role of taste, the second presupposes the superiority of the critic's taste over that of the author. Detachment ... or presumption!

What I like about the *politique des auteurs* is that it reacts against the impressionist approach while retaining the best of it. In fact the scale of values it proposes is not ideological. Its starting-point is an appreciation largely composed of taste and sensibility: it has to discern the contribution of the artist as such, quite apart from the qualities of the subject or the technique: i.e. the person behind the style. But once one has made this distinction, this kind of criticism is doomed to beg the question, for it assumes at the start of its analysis that the film is automatically good since it has been made by an auteur. And so the yardstick applied to the film is the aesthetic portrait of the film-maker deduced from his or her previous films. This is all right so long as there has been no mistake about promoting this film-maker to the status of auteur. For it is objectively speaking safer to trust in the genius of the artist than in one's own critical intelligence. And this is where the *politique des auteurs* falls in line with the system of 'criticism by beauty'; in other words, when one is dealing with a genius, it is always a good method to presuppose that a supposed weakness in a work of art is nothing other than a beauty that one has not yet managed to understand. But as I have shown, this method had its limitations even in traditionally individualistic arts such as literature, and all the more so in the cinema where the sociological and historical cross-currents are countless. By giving such importance to B-films, the *politique des auteurs* recognises and confirms this dependence *a contrario*.

Another point is that as the criteria of the *politique des auteurs* are very difficult to formulate, the whole thing becomes highly hazardous. It is significant that our finest writers on *Cahiers* have been practising it for three or four years now and have yet to produce the main corpus of its theory. Nor is one particularly likely to forget how Rivette suggested we should admire



Hawks: 'The mark of Hawks's genius is its statement of fact; *Monkey Business* is the work of a genius, and it impresses itself on one's mind through this statement of fact. Some people resist against this, they demand more than simple affirmations. And perhaps the failure to appreciate his talent arises quite simply from this. ...' You can see the danger here: an aesthetic personality cult.

But that is not the main point, at least to the extent that the *politique des auteurs* is practised by people of taste who know how to watch their step. It is its negative side that seems the most serious to me. It is unfortunate to praise a film that in no way deserves it, but the dangers are less far-reaching than when a worthwhile film is rejected because its director has made nothing good up to that point. I am not denying that the champions of the *politique des auteurs* discover or encourage a budding talent when they get the chance. But they do systematically look down on anything in a film that comes from a common

Cary Grant (left), Ginger Rogers (centre) and Marilyn Monroe (right) in Howard Hawks's *Monkey Business* (1952)

fund and which can sometimes be entirely admirable, just as it can be utterly detestable. Thus, a certain kind of popular American culture lies at the basis of Minnelli's *Lust for Life*, but another more spontaneous kind of culture is also the principle of American comedy, the Western and the film noir. And its influence is here beneficial, for it is this that gives these cinematic genres their vigour and richness, resulting as they do from an artistic evolution that has always been in wonderfully close harmony with its public. And so one can read a review in *Cahiers* of a Western by Anthony Mann – and God knows I like Anthony Mann's Westerns! – as if it were not above all a Western, i.e. a whole collection of conventions in the script, the acting and the direction. I know very well that in a film magazine one may be permitted to skip such mundane details; but they should at least be implied, whereas what in fact happens is that their existence is glossed over rather sheepishly, as though they were a rather ridiculous necessity that it would be incongruous to mention. In any case, the supporters of the *politique des auteurs* will look down on, or treat condescendingly, any Western by a director who is not yet approved, even if it is as round and smooth as an egg. Well, what is *Stagecoach* if not an ultra-classical Western in which the art of John Ford consists simply of raising characters and situations to an absolute degree of perfection? And while sitting on the Censorship Committee I have seen some admirable Westerns, more or less anonymous and off the beaten track, but displaying a wonderful knowledge of the conventions of the genre and respecting that style from beginning to end.

Paradoxically, the champions of the *politique des auteurs* admire the American cinema, where production restrictions are heavier than anywhere else. It is also true that it is the country where the greatest technical possibilities are offered to the director. But the one does not cancel out the other. I do however admit that freedom is greater in Hollywood than it is said to be, as long as one knows how to detect its manifestations, and I will go so far as to say that the tradition of genres is a base of operations for creative freedom. The American cinema is a classical art, but why not then admire in it what is most admirable, i.e. not only the talent of this or that film-maker, but the genius of the system, the richness of its ever-vigorous tradition, and its fertility when it comes into contact with new elements – as has been proved, if proof there need

be, in such films as *An American in Paris*, *The Seven Year Itch* and *Bus Stop*. True, Joshua Logan is lucky enough to be considered an auteur, or at least a budding auteur. But then when *Picnic* or *Bus Stop* get good reviews the praise does not go to what seems to me to be the essential point, i.e. the social truth, which of course is not offered as a goal that suffices in itself, but is integrated into a style of cinematic narration just as pre-war America was integrated into American comedy.

To conclude: the *politique des auteurs* seems to me to hold and defend an essential critical truth that the cinema is in need of more than the other arts, precisely because an act of true artistic creation is more uncertain and vulnerable in the cinema than elsewhere. But its exclusive practice leads to another danger: the negation of the film to the benefit of praise of its auteur. I have tried to show why mediocre auteurs can, by accident, make admirable films, and how, conversely, a genius can fall victim to an equally accidental sterility. I feel that this useful and fruitful approach, quite apart from its polemical value, should be complemented by other approaches to the cinematic phenomenon which will restore to a film its quality as a work of art. This does not mean one has to deny the role of auteurs, but simply give them back the preposition without which the noun auteur remains but a halting concept. Auteur, yes, but what of? (P.)

(*Cahiers du cinéma* no. 70, April 1957)

At this point, in order to give a clearer idea of the flavour of writing by cahiers du cinéma critics/directors in the late 1950s, I have decided to include a couple of pieces by them in their entirety, rather than rely, as Gérard Gozlan did in his article 'The Delights of Ambiguity – In Praise of André Bazin' (pp. 91–128) on selected quotes.

The first article, Claude Chabrol's notorious plea for 'little themes', contains a lot of hard common sense. But it is marred by Chabrol's je-m'en-foutiste ('couldn't-care-less') attitude and conscious prejudice against the ambitious theme per se. A

similar, and equally persuasive, article could be written, containing just as great a proportion of truth and falsehood, championing the big, as against the little, theme.

The second article, Jean-Luc Godard's review of Alexandre Astruc's *Une vie*, is remarkable for a number of reasons. Not only is its tone, blustering, halting, pretentious and full of paradoxes, very close to that of the films he was later to make; but Godard, who sees the universe in his own very personal terms, spots in Astruc's film (or more likely reads into it) some of the characteristics of his own work: abrupt changes of tone, gratuitousness, gestures and acts seen out of context, almost abstractly.

6: Little Themes

CLAUDE CHABROL

Directors who want to make a film on a theme of their own choosing have two solutions open to them. Depending on their aspirations they can describe the French Revolution or a quarrel with the next-door neighbours, the apocalypse of our time or the barmaid who gets herself pregnant, the final hours of a hero of the Resistance or an inquiry into the murder of a prostitute. It is a question of personality: the important thing, surely, is that the film should be good, that it should be well directed and well constructed, that it should be good cinema. The only distinction one can make between the apocalypse and the prostitute, the revolution and the barmaid, the hero and the quarrelling neighbours is on the level of the ambitiousness of the theme. For there *are*, of course, big and little themes. Anyone who doesn't agree should put up their hand.

From here on, it's child's play: it is easy to tell which film deserves one's attention and which one does not. I take two sheets of paper, and on one I write the following synopsis:

The Apocalypse of Our Time. Scenario: After a total atomic war, life has disappeared from the face of the earth. The sole survivor is a black man, who is all alone in New York. He organises his life as best he can, but suffers from loneliness. After a couple of months he realises that another human being, a white woman, has survived the catastrophe. He meets her. Soon he falls in love with her, but his racial complexes make happiness impossible for him. Two months later, a white man appears in a dinghy. He too wants the woman. At first the black man acts self-effacingly, then he reacts and challenges the other man. The white man decides on a duel to the death, and in the deserted city, in front of the United Nations building, the two last men on earth throw