

BOOK REVIEWS

Talking Pictures: Screenwriters in the American Cinema,

by Richard Corliss
(New York, Penguin Books Inc., 1975), 398 pages, paper, \$5.50

The *auteur* theory dies hard. Hatched in the nest of *Cahiers du Cinéma* in Paris in the early '50s, it boldly asserted that the film director is the person chiefly responsible for the artistic quality of a film. It even argued that an indifferent film by a genuine *auteur* like Alfred Hitchcock or Jean Renoir will be of greater interest stylistically than a fine film directed by a mere *metteur-en-scène* – by directors like John Huston or René Clément. It was thus never meant to be academically responsible. It gained energy from its own excess. It was intended to be a polemic, a '*politique*' – a critical policy that would clear the ground for action. And this is what happened. By the late '50s, its most passionate champions – Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol – were all making films – films that were simultaneously exciting and extremely personal.

In North America, the chief guru of this *politique des auteurs* is Andrew Sarris. His special edition of *Film Culture on the American cinema* in 1963 was an inspired defense of artistic quality within the Hollywood product, a quality that was supremely the achievement of Sarris's 'Pantheon' directors – of men like Chaplin, Ford, Hawks, Hitchcock, and Welles. This defense was followed in 1967 by his *Interviews with Film Directors*, with material culled from a good many sources but a lot from the pages of *Cahiers du Cinéma*. In spite of loud protests from 'socially conscious' critics like John Simon and Pauline Kael, the *auteur* theory was securely launched. And about the same time, out on the West Coast, enthusiastic young film buffs like Peter Bogdanovich and Francis Ford Coppola began to make films.

In *Talking Pictures*, Richard Corliss sets out less to refine this theory than to subvert it. I don't think he succeeds. While it is one thing to introduce the importance of the screenwriter, especially for the American product, it is another thing altogether to attempt to elevate him into a position of prominence. "Realizing a

screenplay is the director's job," as Corliss explains, "transcending it is his glory." It is when the play is transcended, however, that we have a film really worth talking about – that we have an *auteur* film.

Corliss has obviously been influenced by Andrew Sarris, not only in the format of his book but also in the epigrammatic terseness that Corliss strives for. But on a theoretical level, his project is a lost cause. For one thing, so many of the writers he regards as *auteurs* actually became directors. The case he makes for Preston Sturges, Frank Tashlin, George Axelrod, Abraham Polonsky, and Billy Wilder could scarcely be made on their writing alone. For another, Corliss is not that enthusiastic even about the writers which he wants to include in his particular Pantheon. It is as if he cannot fully believe his own thesis.

When Sarris writes about Hitchcock, or Welles, or von Sternberg, while we might feel that his claims are excessive and his ignoring of their collaborators misleading, part of what we enjoy is Sarris's own enthusiasm, the insights that accompany his own delight. If Sarris caught on, it wasn't just because his theory was helpful but because his enthusiasm was infectious.

The tone of Corliss's book is very different from this. While Ben Hecht

takes pride of place as Hollywood's most important writer, listen to how Corliss presents him to us:

"...it can be said without exaggeration that Hecht personifies Hollywood itself: a jumble of talent, cynical and overpaid; most successful when he was least ambitious; often failing when he mistook sentimentality for seriousness; racy, superficial, vital, and *American*."

If this is true and Hecht is among the best of Hollywood writers, then why should we care about them? In contrast, listen to Sarris on Howard Hawks:

"If Ford's heroes are sustained by tradition, the Hawksian hero is upheld by an instinctive professionalism. Even during the Depression, Hawksian characters were always gainfully employed. The idea that a man is measured by his work rather than by his ability to communicate with women is the key to Hawksian masculinity, as the converse is the key to Antonioni's femininity. Whereas Ford's attitude to his women can be defined in terms of chivalry, the Hawksian woman is a manifestation of the director's galantry."

Whatever one takes away from such antithetical brevity, it seems packed with challenging perceptions which might help us organize our experience of the films. The point of such criti-

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cism is less to be right or fair than it is to be useful.

Corliss's project is, finally (as Saris himself says in the Preface), a 'revisionist' enterprise. It deflects discussion of the cinema away from the details of execution back towards the subject-matter, the details of the script. Thus the *quality* of the films tends to get lost. We have instead elaborate accounts of the plot of his chosen films, with some concern with thematic interconnections that exist between films written by the same writer.

Furthermore, in a way that is surprising for someone who is the editor of a magazine like *Film Comment*, Corliss seems completely out of touch with the critical climate of the times. One searches in vain for any historical or political references in any of his accounts. He seems completely naive about how 'reactionary' his position will appear to many people now. He dislikes 'message' films — i.e., any films that challenge directly his own preconceptions about how life is or ought to be; and he regrets the increasing 'rigidification' of the Robert Riskin/Frank Capra 'populist' formula that he detects between **Mr Deeds Goes to Town** in 1936 and **Meet John Doe** in 1941, without ever mentioning the crucial fact of the intervention of the war!

However, while I disagree with both its basic premise and its general philosophy, I have to say that I think the book is valuable. It is valuable both for the checklists it provides for a number of American screen-writers and for the informed accounts of a number of interesting films. Yet even here, I must confess that I think the essence of Corliss's position is more succinctly available in a useful text that he edited two years ago, *The Hollywood Screen-Writers* (New York, Avon, 1972); and if his accounts of **Red River** and **The Searchers** are exemplary as pieces of criticism, it is because Corliss is not only talking about the contribution of Borden Chase and Frank Nugent but also of Howard Hawks and John Ford as well.

Peter Harcourt

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