Circles and Squares

Pauline Kael

As the film critic for New Yorker magazine from 1967 to 1991, where she had virtually free rein, Pauline Kael became perhaps the most influential US film critic of the time. Her reviews were said to be able to make or break a film’s chances of success at the box-office. She responded to Sarris’ auteurism with a savage attack on his claims to have established an auteur theory, and thus began a celebrated war of words between the two critics for years. Kael’s antipathy to auteurism is perhaps best seen in her book The Citizen Kane Book (1971), which includes the shooting script for Orson Welles’ classic film and a lengthy analysis, “Raising Cain,” in which Kael argues against Welles’s primary auteur by demonstrating through a combination of historical research and textual analysis the contributions of others such as co-screenwriter Herman Mankiewicz and cinematographer Gregg Toland. In this essay, which appeared originally in the journal Film Quarterly in 1963, her critique of Sarris’ auteur theory was at once the most reasoned and the most accessible of the many that appeared in print.

Joys and Sarris

...the first premise of the auteur theory is the technical competence of a director as a criterion of value... The second premise of the auteur theory is the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value... The third and ultimate premise of the auteur theory is concerned with interior meaning, the ultimate glory of the cinema as an art. Interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension between a director’s personality and his material...

Sometimes a great deal of corn must be husked to yield a few kernels of internal meaning. I recently saw Every Night at Eight, one of the many maddeningly routine films Raoul Walsh has directed in his long career. This 1935 effort featured George Raft, Alice Faye, Frances Langford and Patsy Kelly in one of those familiar plots about radio shows of the period. The film keeps moving along in the pleasantly unpretentious manner one would expect of Walsh until one incongruously intense scene with George Raft thrashing about in his sleep, revealing his inner fears in mumbling dream talk. The girl he loves comes into the room in the midst of his unconscious avowals of feeling, and listens sympathetically. This unusual scene was later amplified in High Sierra with Humphrey Bogart and Ida Lupino. The point is that one of the screen’s most virile directors employed an essentially feminine narrative device to dramatize the emotional vulnerability of his heroes. If I had not been aware of Walsh in Every Night at Eight, the crucial link to High Sierra would have passed unnoticed. Such are the joys of the auteur theory.


Perhaps a little more corn should be husked; perhaps, for example, we can husk away the word “internal” (is “internal meaning” any different from “meaning?”).
We might ask why the link is "crucial"? Is it because the device was "incongruously intense" in Every Night at Eight and so demonstrated a try for something deeper on Walsh's part? But if his merit is his "pleasantly unpretentious manner" (which is to say, I suppose, that, recognizing the limitations of the script, he wasn't trying to do much) then the incongruous device was probably a misconceived attempt that disturbed the manner — like a bad playwright interrupting a comedy scene because he cannot resist the opportunity to tug at your heartstrings. We might also ask why this narrative device is "essentially feminine": is it more feminine than masculine to be asleep, or to talk in one's sleep, or to reveal feelings? Or, possibly, does Sarris regard the device as feminine because the listening woman becomes a sympathetic figure and emotional understanding is, in this "virile" context, assumed to be essentially feminine? Perhaps only if one accepts the narrow notions of virility so common in our action films can this sequence be seen as "essentially feminine," and it is amusing that a critic can both support these clichés of the male world and be so happy when they are violated.

This is how we might quibble with a different kind of critic but we would never get along with Sarris if we tried to examine what he is saying sentence by sentence.

So let us ask, what is the meaning of the passage? Sarris has noticed that in High Sierra (not a very good movie) Raoul Walsh repeated an uninteresting and obvious device that he had earlier used in a worse movie. And for some inexplicable reason, Sarris concludes that he would not have had this joy of discovery without the auteur theory.

But in every art form, critics traditionally notice and point out the way the artists borrow from themselves (as well as from others) and how the same devices, techniques, and themes reappear in their work. This is obvious in listening to music, seeing plays, reading novels, watching actors; we take it for granted that this is how we perceive the development or the decline of an artist (and it may be necessary to point out to auteur critics that repetition without development is decline). When you see Hitchcock's Saboteur there is no doubt that he drew heavily and clumsily from The 39 Steps, and when you see North by Northwest you can see that he is once again toying with the ingredients of The 39 Steps — and apparently having a good time with them.

Would Sarris not notice the repetition in the Walsh films without the auteur theory? Or shall we take the more cynical view that without some commitment to Walsh as an auteur, he probably wouldn't be spending his time looking at these movies?

If we may be permitted a literary analogy, we can visualize Sarris researching in the archives of the Saturday Evening Post, tracing the development of Clarence Budington Kelland, who, by the application of something like the auteur theory, would emerge as a much more important writer than Dostoyevsky; for in Kelland's case Sarris's three circles, the three premises of the auteur theory, have been consistently congruent. Kelland is technically competent (even "pleasantly unpretentious"), no writer has a more "distinguishable personality," and if "interior meaning" is what can be extrapolated from, say, Hawaii! or Advise and Consent or What Ever Happened to Baby Jane? then surely Kelland's stories with their attempts to force a bit of character and humor into the familiar plot outlines are loaded with it. Poor misguided Dostoyevsky, too full of what he has to say to bother with "technical competence," tackling important themes in each work (surely the worst crime in the auteur book) and with his almost incredible unity of personality and material leaving you nothing to extrapolate from, he'll never make it.

If the editors of Movie ranked authors the way they do directors, Dostoyevsky would probably be in that almost untouchable category of the "ambitious."

It should be pointed out that Sarris's defense of the auteur theory is based not only on aesthetics but on a rather odd pragmatic statement: "Thus to argue against the auteur theory in America is to assume that we have anyone of Bazin's sensibility and dedication to provide an alternative, and we simply don't." Which I take to mean that the auteur theory is necessary in the absence of a critic who wouldn't need it. This is a new approach to aesthetics, and I hope Sarris's humility does not camouflage his double-edged argument. If his aesthetics is based on expediency, then it may be expedient to point out that it takes extraordinary intelligence and discrimination and taste to use any theory in the arts, and that without those qualities, a theory becomes a rigid formula (which is indeed what is happening among auteur critics). The greatness of critics like Bazin in France and Agee in America may have something to do with their using their full range of intelligence and intuition, rather than relying on
formulas. Criticism is an art, not a science, and a critic who follows rules will fail in one of his most important functions: perceiving what is original and important in new work and helping others to see.

The Outer Circle

... the first premise of the auteur theory is the technical competence of a director as a criterion of value.

This seems less the premise of a theory than a commonplace of judgment, as Sarris himself indicates when he paraphrases it as, "A great director has to be at least a good director." But this commonplace, though it sounds reasonable and basic, is a shaky premise: sometimes the greatest artists in a medium bypass or violate the simple technical competence that is so necessary for hacks. For example, it is doubtful if Antonioni could handle a routine directorial assignment of the type at which John Sturges is so proficient (Escape from Fort Bravo or Bad Day at Black Rock), but surely Antonioni's L'Avventura is the work of a great director. And the greatness of a director like Cocteau has nothing to do with mere technical competence: his greatness is in being able to achieve his own
personal expression and style. And just as there were writers like Melville or Dreiser who triumphed over various kinds of technical incompetence, and who were, as artists, incomparably greater than the facile technicians of their day, a new great film director may appear whose very greatness is in his struggling toward grandeur or in massive accumulation of detail. An artist who is not a good technician can indeed create new standards, because standards of technical competence are based on comparisons with work already done.

Just as new work in other arts is often attacked because it violates the accepted standards and thus seems crude and ugly and incoherent, great new directors are very likely to be condemned precisely on the grounds that they’re not even good directors, that they don’t know their “business.” Which, in some cases, is true, but does it matter when that “business” has little to do with what they want to express in films? It may even be a hindrance, leading them to banal slickness, instead of discovery of their own methods. For some, at least, Cocteau may be right: “The only technique worth having is the technique you invent for yourself.” The director must be judged on the basis of what he produces—his films—and if he can make great films without knowing the standard methods, without the usual craftsmanship of the “good director,” then that is the way he works. I would amend Sarris’s premise to, “In works of a lesser rank, technical competence can help to redeem the weaknesses of the material.” In fact it seems to be precisely this category that the auteurs critics are most interested in—the routine material that a good craftsman can make into a fast and enjoyable movie. What, however, makes the auteurs critics so incomprehensible is not their preference for works of this category (in this they merely follow the lead of children who also prefer simple action films and westerns and horror films to works that make demands on their understanding) but their truly astonishing inability to exercise taste and judgment within their area of preference. Moviegoing kids are, I think, much more reliable guides to this kind of movie than the auteurs critics: every kid I’ve talked to knows that Henry Hathaway’s North to Alaska was a surprisingly funny, entertaining movie and Huit et une (classified as a “masterpiece” by half the Cahiers Conseil des Dix, Peter Bogdanovich, and others) was a terrible bore.

The Middle Circle

... the second premise of the auteur theory is the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value.

Up to this point there has really been no theory, and now, when Sarris begins to work on his foundation, the entire edifice of civilized standards of taste collapses while he’s tacking down his floorboards. Traditionally, in any art, the personalities of all those involved in a production have been a factor in judgment, but that the distinguishability of personality should in itself be a criterion of value completely confuses normal judgment. The smell of a skunk is more distinguishable than the perfume of a rose; does that make it better? Hitchcock’s personality is certainly more distinguishable in Dial M for Murder, Rear Window, Vertigo, than Carol Reed’s in The Stars Look Down, Odd Man Out, The Fallen Idol, The Third Man, An Outcast of the Islands, if for no other reason than because Hitchcock repeats while Reed tackles new subject matter. But how does this distinguishable personality function as a criterion for judging the works? We recognize the hands of Carné and Prévert in Le Jour se Lève, but that is not what makes it a beautiful film; we can just as easily recognize their hands in Quai des Brames—which is not such a good film. We can recognize that Le Plaisir and The Earrings of Madame de... are both the work of Ophuls, but Le Plaisir is not a great film, and Madame de... is.

Often the works in which we are most aware of the personality of the director are his worst films—when he falls back on the devices he has already done to death. When a famous director makes a good movie, we look at the movie, we don’t think about the director’s personality; when he makes a stinker we notice his familiar touches because there’s not much else to watch. When Preminger makes an expert, entertaining whodunit like Laura, we don’t look for his personality (it has become part of the texture of the film); when he makes an atrocity like Whirlpool, there’s plenty of time to look for his “personality” — if that’s your idea of a good time.

It could even be argued, I think, that Hitchcock’s uniformity, his mastery of tricks, and his cleverness at getting audiences to respond according to his calculations — the feedback he wants and gets from
them — reveal not so much a personal style as a personal theory of audience psychology, that his methods and approach are not those of an artist but a prestidigitator. The *auteur* critics respond just as Hitchcock expects the gullible to respond. This is not so surprising — often the works *auteur* critics call masterpieces are ones that seem to reveal the contempt of the director for the audience.

It’s hard to believe that Sarris seriously attempts to apply “the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value” because when this premise becomes troublesome, he just tries to brazen his way out of difficulties. For example, now that John Huston’s work has gone flat, Sarris casually dismisses him with: “Huston is virtually a forgotten man with a few actors’ classics behind him . . .” If *The Maltese Falcon*, perhaps the most high-style thriller ever made in America, a film Huston both wrote and directed, is not a director’s film, what is? And if the distinguishable personality of the director is a criterion of value, then how can Sarris dismiss the Huston who comes through so unmistakably in *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*, *The African Queen*, or *Beat the Devil*, or even in a muddied Huston film like *Key Largo*? If these are actors’ movies, then what on earth is a director’s movie?

Isn’t the *auteur* theory a hindrance to clear judgment of Huston’s movies and of his career? Disregarding the theory, we see some fine film achievements and we perceive a remarkably distinctive directorial talent: we also see intervals of weak, half-hearted assignments like *Across the Pacific* and *In This Our Life*. Then, after *Moulin Rouge*, except for the blessing of *Beat the Devil*, we see a career that splutters out in ambitious failures like *Moby Dick* and confused projects like *The Roots of Heaven* and *The Misfits*, and strictly commercial projects like *Heaven Knows, Mr Allison*. And this kind of career seems more characteristic of film history, especially in the United States, than the ripening development and final mastery envisaged by the *auteur* theory — a theory that makes it almost de rigueur to regard Hitchcock’s American films as superior to his early English films. Is Huston’s career so different, say, from Fritz Lang’s? How is it that Huston’s early good — almost great — work, must be rejected along with his mediocre recent work, but Fritz Lang, being sanctified as an *auteur*, has his bad recent work praised along with his good? Employing more usual norms, if you respect the Fritz Lang who made *M* and *You Only Live Once*, if you enjoy the excesses of style and the magnificent absurdities of a film like *Metropolis*, then it is only good sense to reject the ugly stupidity of *Finian’s Rainbow*. It is an insult to an artist to praise his bad work along with his good; it indicates that you are incapable of judging either.

A few years ago, a friend who reviewed Jean Renoir’s University of California production of his play *Carola* hailed it as “a work of genius.” When I asked my friend how he could so describe this very unfortunate play, he said, “Why, of course, it’s a work of genius. Renoir’s a genius, so anything he does is a work of genius.” This could almost be a capsule version of the *auteur* theory (just substitute *Hara!* for *Carola*) and in this reduction ad absurdum, viewing a work is superfluous, as the judgment is a priori. It’s like buying clothes by the label: this is Dior, so it’s good. (This is not so far from the way the *auteur* critics work, either.)

Sarris doesn’t even play his own game with any decent attention to the rules: it is as absurd to praise Lang’s recent bad work as to dismiss Huston’s early good work; surely it would be more consistent if he also tried to make a case for Huston’s bad pictures. That would be more consistent than devising a category called “actors’ classics” to explain his good pictures away. If *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Treasure of Sierra Madre* are actors’ classics, then what makes Hawks’s *To Have and Have Not* and *The Big Sleep* (which were obviously tailored to the personalities of Bogart and Bacall) the work of an *auteur*?

Sarris believes that what makes what an *auteur* is “an élite of the soul.” (This critical language is barbarous. Where else should élite come from? It’s like saying “a digestion of the stomach.”) A film critic need not be a theoretician, but it is necessary that he know how to use words. This might, indeed, be a first premise for a theory.) Those who have this élite presumably have it forever and their films reveal the “organic unity” of the directors’ careers; and those who don’t have it — well, they can only make “actors’ classics.” It’s ironic that a critic trying to establish simple “objective” rules as a guide for critics who he thinks aren’t gifted enough to use taste and intelligence, ends up — where, actually, he began — with a theory based on mystical insight. This might really make demands on the *auteur* critics if they did not simply take the easy way out by arbitrary decisions of who’s got “it” and who hasn’t.
Their decisions are not merely not based on their theory: their decisions are beyond criticism. It’s like a woman’s telling us that she feels a certain dress does something for her; her feeling has about as much to do with critical judgment as the auteur critics’ feeling that Minnelli has “it,” but Huston never had “it.”

Even if a girl had plenty of “it,” she wasn’t expected to keep it forever. But this “clan” is not supposed to be affected by the vicissitudes of fortune, the industrial conditions of moviemaking, the turmoil of a country, or the health of a director. Indeed, Sarris says, “If directors and other artists cannot be wrenched from their historical environments, aesthetics is reduced to a subordinate branch of ethnography.” May I suggest that if, in order to judge movies, the auteur critics must wrench the directors from their historical environments (which is, to put it mildly, impossible) so that they can concentrate on the detection of that “clan,” they are reducing aesthetics to a form of idiocy. Elan as the permanent attribute Sarris posits can only be explained in terms of a cult of personality. May I suggest that a more meaningful description of elan is what a man feels when he is working at the height of his powers—and what we respond to in works of art with the excited cry of “This time, he’s really done it” or “This shows what he could do when he got the chance” or “He’s found his style” or “I never realized he had in him to do anything so good,” a response to his joy in creativity.

Sarris experiences “joy” when he recognizes a pathetic little link between two Raoul Walsh pictures (he never does explain whether the discovery makes him think the pictures are any better) but he wants to see artists in a pristine state—their essences, perhaps—separated from all the life that has formed them and to which they try to give expression.

The Inner Circle

The third and ultimate premise of the auteur theory is concerned with interior meaning, the ultimate glory of the cinema as an art. Interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension between a director’s personality and his material.

This is a remarkable formulation: it is the opposite of what we have always taken for granted in the arts, that the artist expresses himself in the unity of form and content. What Sarris believes to be “the ultimate glory of the cinema as an art” is what has generally been considered the frustrations of a man working against the given material. Fantastic as this formulation is, it does something that the first two premises didn’t do: it clarifies the interests of the auteur critics. If we have been puzzled because the auteur critics seemed so deeply involved, even dedicated, in becoming connoisseurs of trash, now we can see by this theoretical formulation that trash is indeed their chosen province of film.

Their ideal auteur is the man who signs a long-term contract, directs any script that’s handed to him, and expresses himself by shoving bits of style up the crevasses of the plots. If his “style” is in conflict with the story line or subject matter, so much the better—more chance for tension. Now we can see why there has been so much use of the term “personality” in this aesthetics (the term which seems so inadequate when discussing the art of Griffith or Renoir or Murnau or Dreyer)—a routine, commercial movie can sure use a little “personality.”

Now that we have reached the inner circle (the bull’s eye turns out to be an empty socket) we can see why the shoddiest films are often praised the most. Subject matter is irrelevant (so long as it isn’t treated sensitively—which is bad) and will quickly be disposed of by auteur critics who know that the smart director isn’t responsible for that anyway; they’ll get on to the important subject—his mise-en-scène. The director who fights to do something he cares about is a square. Now we can at least begin to understand why there was such contempt toward Huston for what was, in its way, a rather extraordinary effort—the Moby Dick that failed; why Movie considers Roger Corman a better director than Fred Zinnemann and ranks Joseph Losey next to God, why Bogdanovich, Meeks, and Sarris give their highest critical ratings to What Ever Happened to Baby Jane? (mighty big crevasses there). If Carol Reed had made only movies like The Man Between—in which he obviously worked to try to make something out of a ragbag of worn-out bits of material—he might be considered “brilliant” too. (But this is doubtful; although even the worst Reed is superior to Aldrich’s Baby Jane, Reed would probably be detected, and rejected, as a man interested in substance rather than sensationalism.)
I am angry, but am I unjust? Here’s Sarris:

A Cukor who works with all sorts of projects has a more developed abstract style than a Bergman who is free to develop his own scripts. Not that Bergman lacks personality, but his work has declined with the depletion of his ideas largely because his technique never equaled his sensibility. Joseph L. Mankiewicz and Billy Wilder are other examples of writer-directors without adequate technical mastery. By contrast, Douglas Sirk and Otto Preminger have moved up the scale because their miscellaneous projects reveal a stylistic consistency.

How neat it all is – Bergman’s “work has declined with the depletion of his ideas largely because his technique never equaled his sensibility.” But what on earth does that mean? How did Sarris perceive Bergman’s sensibility except through his technique? Is Sarris saying what he seems to be saying, that if Bergman had developed more “technique,” his work wouldn’t be dependent on his ideas? I’m afraid this is what he means, and that when he refers to Cukor’s “more developed abstract style” he means by “abstract”, something unrelated to ideas, a technique not dependent on the content of the films. This is curiously reminiscent of a view common enough in the business world, that it’s better not to get too involved, too personally interested in business problems, or they take over your life, and besides, you don’t function as well when you’ve lost your objectivity. But this is the opposite of how an artist works. His technique, his style, is determined by his range of involvements, and his preference for certain themes. Cukor’s style is no more abstract(!) than Bergman’s: Cukor has a range of subject matter that he can handle and when he gets a good script within his range (like The Philadelphia Story or Pat and Mike) he does a good job; but he is at an immense artistic disadvantage, compared with Bergman, because he is dependent on the ideas of so many (and often bad) scriptwriters and on material which is
often alien to his talents. It’s amusing (and or depressing) to see how many critics tend to down-play writer-directors — who are in the best position to use the film medium for personal expression.

Sarris does some pretty fast shuffling with Huston and Bergman, why doesn’t he just come out and admit that writer-directors are disqualified by his third premise? They can’t arrive at that “interior meaning, the ultimate glory of the cinema” because a writer-director has no tension between his personality and his material, so there’s nothing for the auteur critic to extrapolate from.

What is all this nonsense about extrapolating “interior meaning” from the tension between a director’s personality and his material? A competent commercial director generally does the best he can with what he’s got to work with. Where is the “tension”? And if you can locate some, what kind of meaning could you draw out of it except that the director’s having a bad time with lousy material or material he doesn’t like? Or maybe he’s trying to speed up the damned production so he can do something else that he has some hopes for? Are these critics honestly (and tuttily) looking for “interior meanings” or is this just some form of intellectual dillling that helps to sustain their pride while they’re viewing silly movies? Where is the tension in Howard Hawks’s films? When he has good material, he’s capable of better than good direction, as he demonstrates in films like Twentieth Century, Bringing Up Baby, His Girl Friday, and in To Have and Have Not. And The Big Sky he demonstrates that with help from the actors, he can jazz up ridiculous scripts. But what “interior meaning” can be extrapolated from an enjoyable, harmless, piece of kitsch like Only Angels Have Wings; what can the auteur critics see in it beyond the sex and glamour and fantasies of the high-school boys’ universe — exactly what the mass audience liked it for? And when Hawks’s material and/or cast is dull and when his heart isn’t in the production — when by the auteur theory he should show his “personality,” the result is something soggy like The Big Sky.

George cukor’s modest statement, “Give me a good script and I’ll be a hundred times better as a director” provides some notion of how a director might experience the problem of the given material. What can Cukor do with a script like The Chapman Report but try to kid it, to dress it up a bit, to show off the talents of Jane Fonda and Claire Bloom and Glenda Jenkins, and to give the total production a little flair and craftsmanship. At best, he can make an entertaining bad movie. A director with something like magical gifts can make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear. But if he has it in him to do more in life than make silk purses, the triumph is minor — even if the purse is lined with gold. Only by the use of the auteur theory does this little victory become “ultimate glory.”

For some unexplained reason those traveling in auteur circles believe that making that purse out of a sow’s ear is an infinitely greater accomplishment than making a solid carrying case out of a good piece of leather (as, for example, a Zinnemann does with From Here to Eternity or The Nun’s Story).

I suppose we should be happy for Sirk and Preminger elevated up the glory “scale,” but I suspect that the “stylistic consistency” of say, Preminger, could be a matter of his limitations, and that the only way you could tell he made some of his movies was that he used the same players so often (Linda Darnell, Jeanne Crain, Gene Tierney, Dana Andrews, et al., gave his movies the Preminger look). But the argument is ludicrous anyway, because if Preminger shows stylistic consistency with subject matter as varied as Carmen Jones, Anatomy of a Murder, and Advise and Consent, then by any rational standards he should be attacked rather than elevated. I don’t think these films are stylistically consistent, nor do I think Preminger is a great director — for the very simple reason that his films are consistently superficial and facile. (Advise and Consent, an auteur “masterpiece” — Ian Cameron, Paul Maversberg, and Mark Shivas of Movie and Jean Douchet of Cahiers du Cinema rate it first on their ten best lists of 1962 and Sarris gives it his top rating — seems not so much Preminger-directed as other-directed. That is to say, it seems calculated to provide what is many different groups as possible want to see: there’s something for the liberals, something for the conservatives, something for the homosexuals, something for the family.) An editorial in Movie states: “In order to enjoy Preminger’s films the spectator must apply an unprejudiced intelligence; he is constantly required to examine the quality not only of the characters’ decisions but also of his own reactions,” and “He presupposes an intelligence active enough to allow the spectator to make connections, comparisons and judgments.” May I suggest that this spectator would have better things to do than the editors of Movie who put
out Preminger issues: They may have, of course, the joys of discovering links between Centennial Summer, Forever Amber, That Lady in Ermine, and The Thirteenth Letter, but I refuse to believe in these ever-so-intellectual protestations. The author critics aren’t a very convincing group.

I assume that Sarris’s theory is not based on his premises (the necessary causal relationships are absent), but rather that the premises were devised in a clumsy attempt to prop up the “theory.” (It’s a good thing he stopped at three: a few more circles and we’d really be in hell, which might turn out to be the last refinement of film tastes – Abbott and Costello comedies, perhaps?) These critics work embarrassingly hard trying to give some semblance of intellectual respectability to a preoccupation with mindless, repetitious commercial products – the kind of action movies that the restless, rootless men who wander on Forty-Second Street and in the Tenderloin of all our big cities have always preferred just because they could respond to them without thought. These movies soak up your time. I would suggest that they don’t serve a very different function for Sarris or Bogdanovich or the young men of Movie – even though they devise elaborate theories to justify soaking up their time. An educated man must have to work pretty hard to set his intellectual horizons at the level of I Was a Male War Bride (which, incidentally, wasn’t even a good commercial movie).

“Interior meaning” seems to be what those in the know know. It’s a mystique – and a mistake. The author critics never tell us by what divining rods they have discovered the clan of a Minnelli or a Nicholas Ray or a Leo McCarey. They’re not critics; they’re inside dopesters. There must be another circle that Sarris forgot to get to – the one where the secrets are kept.

Notes

1 And, by the way, the turning point came, I think, not with Molly Dicks, as Sarris indicates, but much earlier, with Minnelli Rouge. This may not be so apparent to author critics concerned primarily with style and individual touches, because what was shocking about Minnelli Rouge was that the content was sentimental mush. But critics who accept even the worst of Minnelli probably wouldn’t have been bothered by the fact that Minnelli Rouge was soft in the center, it had so many fancy touches at the edges.

2 In another sense, it is perhaps unmodest. I would say, give Cukor a clever script with light, witty dialogue, and he will know what to do with it. But I wouldn’t expect more than glossy entertainment. (It seems almost too obvious to mention it, but can Sarris really discern the “distinguishable personality” of George Cukor and his “abstract” style in films like Bhowani Junction, Les Girls, The Actress, A Life of Her Own, The Model and the Marriage Broker, Edward, My Son, A Woman’s Face, Romeo and Juliet, A Double Life? I wish I could put him to the test. I can only suspect that many author critics would have a hard time seeing those telltale traces of the beloved in their works.)