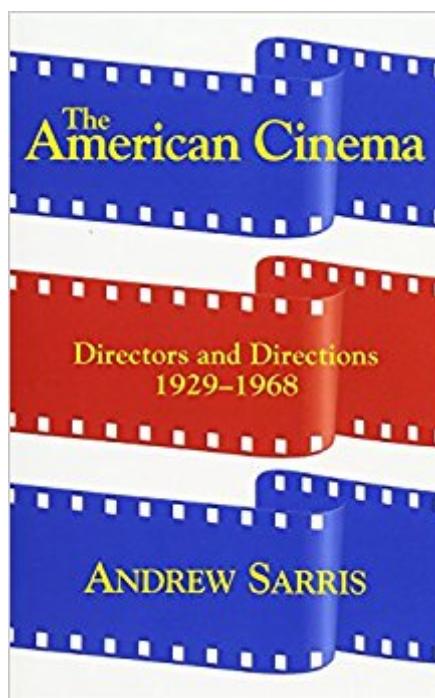


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The American Cinema: Directors And Directions 1929-1968



Synopsis

The auteur theory, of which film critic Andrew Sarris was the leading American proponent, holds that artistry in cinema can be largely attributed to film directors, who, while often working against the strictures of studios, producers, and scriptwriters, manage to infuse each film in their oeuvre with their personal style. Sarris's *The American Cinema*, the bible of auteur studies, is a history of American film in the form of a lively guide to the work of two hundred film directors, from Griffith, Chaplin, and von Sternberg to Mike Nichols, Stanley Kubrick, and Jerry Lewis. In addition, the book includes a chronology of the most important American films, an alphabetical list of over 6000 films with their directors and years of release, and the seminal essays "Toward a Theory of Film History" and "The Auteur Theory Revisited." Over twenty-five years after its initial publication, *The American Cinema* remains perhaps the most influential book ever written on the subject.

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Customer Reviews

Since its publication in 1968, *The American Cinema* has been the manifesto of the auteur theory. Written by Andrew Sarris, the theory's chief advocate, the book traces the history of movies by examining the careers of more than 200 film directors. Covering everyone from D.W. Griffith to Francis Coppola, Orson Welles to Roman Polanski, Sarris argues that directorial greatness is marked by a personal style and consistency of excellence that can be traced throughout a career. Sarris's commentary is sometimes worshipful, sometimes acrid, but almost always quotable. Alfred Hitchcock is "the supreme technician of the American cinema." John Huston coasted "on his reputation as a wronged individualist with an alibi for every bad movie." Stanley Kubrick holds "a

naive faith in the power of images to transcend fuzzy feelings and vague ideas." Michelangelo Antonioni makes films so pessimistic and alienating that Sarris dubs him "Antoniennui." You may not agree with all of Sarris's assessments, but this book provides the best possible opportunity to consider auteurism, an approach to cinema that, in an age that reveres Scorsese, Spielberg, and Tarantino, seems more relevant than ever. The book closes with an essay called "The Auteur Theory Revised," Sarris's attempt at a definitive theoretical statement. --Raphael Shargel

This 1968 volume is probably the bible of the auteur theory of filmmaking, i.e., that the director's vision is what shapes film history. Though LJ's reviewer found some of Sarris's conclusions "furiously debatable," this nonetheless is an "invaluable reference book and a major contribution to film literature" (LJ 12/15/68). Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This book is a classic and was a Christmas present for a relative who is a film freak. It covers American film directors and their films/film careers through 1968. Welles, Von Sternburg, John Houston, etc. Most of the directors worked in black and white first. For those who are not aware of the old masters (and a few losers) this is a fine book for film study.

ok

Read this many years ago and am planning to re-read it. The part about the tension between the material and the artist never made much sense and Sarris never applied it during his movie reviewing career. We all read it because it was a touchstone on what to watch and a tool for organizing your thinking about films and what separates a good director from a great one. You can pretty much find the bad ones on your own. The fight between Sarris and Pauline Karl enriched film criticism. They were equally matched great critics. There will never be another pair like them or as illuminating as they were. David Debby and Anthony Lane apparently no longer work at the New Yorker and the magazine isn't saying why. I called the magazine to inquire and never received a return call. I'm discovering Roger Ebert's writing after years of thinking he was a jerk on television. Anybody worth reading that I'm overlooking?

If you don't know this book, buy it immediately. It takes American film criticism up to about 1970 and coincides with the time Sarris was involved with the (real) Village Voice, Jonas Mekas, American Cahiers, and the founding of the NY Film Festival and the national society of film critics. It took me

about five years of reading his reviews until I finally got it - Sarris had understood that the most profound thoughts and themes were played out with style and panache by genre filmmakers with personal obsessions and ideas that did not require Western Union to spell it out. There's some things to quibble about (I never could see why he thought so highly of Blake Edwards, but I keep trying because I trust his insight. Even Sarris can change his mind as he did on Billy Wilder a few years back). If you are a film buff and have not discovered his work (also recommended: *Confessions of a Cultist*; *The John Ford Mystery Book*; *You Ain't Seen Nothing Yet* are among the best) start here. That goes double if you experience guilty pleasure and see things no one else does in people like Anthony Mann, Michael Powell, Sam Fuller, Max Ophuls, Budd Boetticher or James Whale. I have often given this book as a gift to film loving friends. It opens a world of discovery and rapport when a friend "gets it" and suddenly, you both have a shared sensibility and frame of reference. Also, check out his website for yearly top ten lists and also the work of his wife Molly Haskell (especially good on Howard Hawks).

I am not a contrarian by nature but there are several points that require clarification among the many reviews of Sarris's seminal *The American Cinema*. In an historical context, the book is of interest because he is an early proponent of the director as auteur theory. I would compare it to an early English dictionary in that word origins are delineated and classifications and definitions are from years ago. Meanings have remained the same for many but others have changed and new words have been added. Sarris was wise in his introduction to state that this work was not the last word on the subject but more of a springboard for further discussion. Surely no one would argue that Mr. Sarris is very erudite and an excellent writer very similar, in fact, to David Thompson. These characteristics may sway many even though his opinions may be erroneous. Although true that various directors' works are reevaluated, it is hard to conceive that Billy Wilder was not recognized as an important director. I know that he later admitted this transgression and corrected himself. Still other now esteemed directors such as Sidney Lumet, John Huston, Elia Kazan, and Stanley Kubrick are not given their true value. He stated that Robert Mulligan never directed an entirely satisfactory film yet he helmed one of the great films of the sixties *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In Sarris's defense some of the artists' better films were yet to be made. I was impressed that he recognized Francis Coppola's talent before *The Godfather*. In summary, *The American Cinema* is interesting to read in its historical context. It is not a reliable

reference book due to its antiquated inaccuracies and the cursory treatment of many of the subjects covered. Mr. Sarris's scholarly approach is impressive but does not convince with his incorrect assessments of several directors of major talent.

Sarris's book started a salvo the equivalent of the battle of Tushima Straits between those who bought the French idea of the director as "author" or auteur, and those who did not. Filmmakers bought the auteur theory whole hog, and why not, since it put directors into the same rank as poets, painters, composers and novelists. Sarris approached his analysis by ranking directors by his view of their worth. His ideas on certain directors will madden some, particularly in his "Less Than Meets the Eye," category, but overall, Sarris presents us with a well-thought-out view of American film, arguably the most important cultural force since the printing of the Bible in vernacular languages. Some drawbacks, for which Sarris is not at fault: the work is dated, stopping in 1968, right before the massive burst of new directors who would change American film for a brief time, until blockbusters stifled them. If you are interested in Cinema, in film studies, in writing film criticism, this book is worth your while.

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