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## **AURA, AUTEURISM AND *THE KEY TO RESERVA***

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**Abstract:** This essay revisits some of the most significant and enduring debates over the status of cinema as a popular form. The first debate is over the ‘aura’ and film. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935), Walter Benjamin celebrated the democratic moment when technical reproducibility—culminating with film—abolished the centuries-old ‘aura’ of art. Conversely, in “The Culture Industry” (1944), Theodor Adorno lamented the anti-enlightenment standardization wrought by the assembly line under monopoly capitalism, and the movies were for him a primary example of this mindlessness. Arguably, *auteurism* emerged in the crossfire of the legacies of Benjamin and Adorno. Since it sought to cordon films off from the undistinguished mass of studio ‘product’ by elevating certain film-makers into the rarefied air of individual expression, ‘auteur theory’ may be said to have conferred a plenitude on its chosen few, a plenitude akin to aura. The second debate that I revisit is therefore that between Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael, a debate surrounding the Americanization of the *auteur*.

Finally, the essay concludes with a brief focus on the short film *The Key to Reserva* (2007), directed by Martin Scorsese. It is a playful 9-minute experiment – part mockumentary, part homage – in which Scorsese attempts to ‘preserve’ a script Hitchcock developed but left unfilmed. I shall attempt to stage *The Key To Reserva* as an exciting flashpoint for discussions not only of the status of Hitchcock and Scorsese in Hollywood viz. *auteur* theory, but also as a flashpoint for discussions of mass reproduction and cinema; the commodity form and advertising; standardization and style; anonymity, authorship, and aura.

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### **“A Tremendous Shattering of Tradition”: BENJAMIN AND ADORNO ON FILM**

Benjamin’s and Adorno’s very different assessments of technological potential we might partly explain by recourse to biographical details. In this sense, the decisive break must undoubtedly be the experience of the Holocaust. Benjamin was in any case dead by the fall of

1940—persecution shuffling him into the internment camp where he would quit life by September—three years after the deafening eruption of fascist power across Europe, but some years before any public knowledge of Nazi atrocities. In the “Work of Art” essay, Benjamin suggests the full possibilities of technology are as yet unrecognized because society has failed still to incorporate it “as its organ”. Had he lived, he might have gone back to qualify his position (if not to condemn it altogether). No intellectual who survived the War ever spoke of the redemptive impulses contained within mass mechanics. In the dusk of the 40s, Auschwitz becomes the symbol *par excellence* of raw technology so thoroughly harnessed, widely deployed and intimately integrated, there is nothing crude about its uses anymore. It is the apotheosis of muscular, masculine, *total control*. With its mechanically sound trains and gas chambers, the Final Solution would prompt decades of nervous apologia for technology. Where Benjamin saw mankind taking possession of technology for humanity’s sake, Adorno by 1944 was utterly affected by this awesome display of technical creation. Fascism appears in his writings as the endgame of history, the catastrophic product of the long civilizational progress, the reified result of the prehistoric desire to subjugate nature.

“That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction,” writes Benjamin, “is the aura of the work of art” (Benjamin 1935: 221). *Aura* he has identified elsewhere as a “strange weave of space and time,” “the unique *appearance or semblance of distance*, no matter how close the object may be” (Benjamin 1931). This affective distance persists in the ancient cult and the secular work of the Renaissance, but its spell breaks with the ascension of technological modernity:

Around 1900, technical reproduction had reached a standard that not only permitted it to reproduce all transmitted works of art...[it also] emancipated the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. (Benjamin 1935: 224)

Authenticity, so long anchored by tradition, loses currency with rapidly accelerating forms of mass production ransacking the sacrality of the ‘original’. The work of art – pumping through the channels of lithography and photography first, film later – multiplies and is suddenly on the move, “substitut[ing] a plurality of copies for a unique existence” (Benjamin 1935: 221). For Benjamin the art object is exhilaratingly freed from inner chambers and private galleries, it leaps through towns and cities, is grasped by hands and scrutinized by eyes previously

unknown: *it enters the public*. “In permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced” (Benjamin 1935: 221). The abolition of the aura is a democratic moment in which tradition is crucially banished, a “dragging down of greatness into baseness” for Rolf Wiggerhaus, “one which helped to disinfect the suffocating atmosphere of an aura which could only be sustained artificially” (1994: 204).

If aura is ‘tied to presence’, film is the unprecedeted calibration of absence as phantom presence. If aura is shored on the integrity of the performer, the movie actor’s one performance is actually a composite of so many separate performances. Film moreover champions the commonplace by “focusing on the hidden details of familiar objects...[managing] to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action” (Benjamin 1935: 236). Exploding habitual ways of seeing; it ushers in a “tremendous shattering of tradition” (Benjamin 1935: 221). Film represents a heightened perceptual renewal of the world: “Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories...[blasted] asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second” (Benjamin 1935: 236). It is therefore the zero-aura artwork: artwork for, by, and of the masses.

Benjamin was acquainted primarily with the post-revolutionary Soviet film, and in his primarily optimistic evaluation, film is a force that services the millions, in the process liberating art from the shackles of veneration and raising exciting epistemological questions (“The primary question—whether the very invention of photography had not transformed the entire nature of art” (Benjamin 1935: 227)). Meanwhile, Theodor Adorno writes in exile. He is the last of the intellectuals to leave Germany, forced to abandon a life of privilege for Los Angeles. In his more vision, machines of duplication are the limbs of a giant techno-social complex called the Culture Industry.

This is the heyday of Taylorism and standardization, a mass culture monopoly that impresses a ‘false identity’ on everything, conquering the surface of social reality: “Something is provided for everyone so that no one can escape” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944: 97). “The might of industrial society,” he writes, “is lodged in men’s minds” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944:107).<sup>1</sup> His is a totalitarian vision of our world, in which consumer consciousness and

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin and Adorno perhaps never disagreed more vehemently than over the issue of the modern collective. For Adorno, men in late industrialism are stripped of agency and handed down a false

leisure time are awash with the chilling effects of same-ness and homogeneity. Substitute gratification is all the pleasure that is allowed (Huyssen 1975).

For Adorno, the “montage character” of the culture industry consists in the “synthetic, controlled manner in which products are assembled”, and the privileging of the detail over the work (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944: 99). In the culture industry, according to Adorno,

The so-called leading idea is a filing compartment which creates order, not connections. Lacking both contrast and relatedness, the whole and the detail look alike. Their harmony, guaranteed in advance, mocks the painfully achieved harmony of the great bourgeois works of art. (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944: 99)

Unsurprisingly, it is tradition that rises through the ranks of the resistance to make an offer of redemption. There is an electric charge to the authentic, the old, in a world where the “stereotyped appropriation of everything...for the purposes of mechanical reproduction surpasses the rigor and general currency of any ‘real style’” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944: 103). For Adorno, the assembly-line MGM musicals cannot be compared to the pure singularity of a Beethoven movement; nor can today’s bestselling detective fiction ever measure up to Tolstoy. Harmut Scheible observes in Adorno the tendency to “withdraw into an aesthetically mediated alternative world....Just like the perfectly formed autonomous works of art which lack practical effect” (cited in Roberts 1982: 69). For Adorno, it appears, what is crucial is the existence of a critical, *inverted aura*, inhering in all manner of art, from the romantic lyric to aesthetic modernism, in which the *individual* is at the centre of creation – an individual untainted by the culture industry. It is almost the negative image of Benjamin: *a retreat into the warm womb of auratic splendor*.

We have therefore *two* strongly articulated positions on aura: Benjamin’s, which sees it liquidating with the advance of mechanical reproducibility, and Adorno’s, in which the aura

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consciousness instead. There is no radical politics to be had in the mass consumption of mass produce. Hence, “Something is provided for all so that none may escape.” The individual, thus schematized and stacked as statistic, is cruelly *absorbed into* unintelligibly massive economic dramas. Compare this with Benjamin, who sees the mass as *absorbing* the artwork in a collective ‘state of distraction’. The urban public fosters absent-mindedness rather than attention, assimilating architecture and advertising with a habit of critical indifference. The mass is positioned in the “Work of Art” essay as an alternative vision of consciousness; in Benjamin there is little anxiety about the capacities of the proletariat. In its ‘dream consciousness’ he sees a revelation of the possible future; Adorno sees only a group devoid, in Diane Waldman’s words, of “critical potential” (1977: 48).

persists in high art as a critical, negative faculty. Perhaps Adorno was capitalizing on the instabilities in Benjamin's own explanations of what aura *is*. Benjamin first answered the question "What is aura?" in the essay "Small History of Photography" (1931) with the idea that it was a "semblance of distance". Yet, this key term has remained notoriously hard to define, and commentators too have struggled with its intractability. "Aura is an elusive term for that which is elusive," writes Graeme Gilloch, continuing, "Like the *Angelus Novus*, like the Parisian arcades on the brink of demolition, the aura of the artwork is fleetingly recognizable only at the moment of its extinction, at last sight" (Gilloch 2002: 178). Jan Mieszkowski writes: "Defined as unapproachability incarnate, the aura confirms that the authentic art-object has always-already taken leave of its viewer, always-already being on its way" (Mieszkowski 2004: 39).

In Federico Fellini's *Roma* (1972), a municipal team digs for a new subway, and in the process it drills accidentally into an ancient Roman antechamber. The team is dumbfounded to discover exquisite frescoes that have survived the ages. The contact with fresh air, however, is lethal; with the municipal team watching helplessly, the frescoes begin to deteriorate and quickly disappear altogether. It seems almost as if they endured the millennia only for a brief moment in which they could be glimpsed and then be gone. It is an instructive example. There is at play a truly 'complex temporality' in the notion of the aura; it is discoverable solely in its final, fatal moments. "[Only] in the process of disintegration," Miriam Hansen suggests, "can the aura be recognized, can it be recognized as a qualitative component of (past) experience" (1987: 189). Hansen further notes that Benjamin's layered sense of time is "indebted to the temporality of Jewish Messianism...and narratives of the Fall and Redemption" (Hansen 1987: 190).

The chief surprise, I suppose, is that Benjamin would enshrine such mysticism at the heart of his thesis on secular modernity; aura is a barely-perceptible phenomenological mystery, a something-intuited, a congeries of spirits receding into the depths of the traditional artwork. According to Robert Kaufman, aura is that "trace-presence of something no longer literally, physically present but nonetheless still shimmering," seducing and repelling us with its "charged distance...its luminous and disturbing conjurations of otherness" (Kaufman 2002: 47).

This detour through commentary is not without purpose, for it is in the terms of the Benjamin-Adorno debate over art and aura that I shall like to configure *auteur* theory,

particularly in its Americanized form. As I shall argue, *auteur* theory might be seen as responding to both positions on film — the movies as Culture Industry *and* the movies as zero-aura artwork — thereby also intervening in the ancient crisis of legitimacy suffered by Hollywood.

### **“How Do You Tell The Genuine Director From The Quasi-Chimpanzee?”: SARRIS, KAEL AND AMERICAN AUTEUR THEORY**

The word *auteur* in the way we know it today was probably first used by *Cahiers* critic and eventual New Wave director Francois Truffaut. In a 1954 article titled “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema”, he railed against over-stuffed literary adaptations that carried off trophies at Cannes and Venice, films which belonged to what was “prettily named the ‘Tradition of Quality’” (Truffaut 1954: 9). “Under the cover of literature – and of course, of quality – they give the public its habitual dose of smut, conformity and facile audacity” (1954: 14). Truffaut’s interest was to herald the “man of the cinema” (1954: 13), one who didn’t merely transcribe a literary text but created a cinematic object. *Auteur* critics, as Robert Stam notes, “distinguished between *metteurs-en-scene* i.e. those who adhered to the dominant conventions and to the scripts given them, and *auteurs* who used *mise-en-scene* as part of self-expression” (2000: 85). Whereas filmmakers of old were locked “in a closed world, barricaded by formulas”, men of the cinema broke free to see the world with their “own eyes” (Truffaut 1954: 15). Instead of being confined by the screenplay they were to direct, *auteurs* mastered it, shaping and imprinting the film through their visionary consciousness.

Already we have in Truffaut’s *auteur* the image of an artist struggling against convention to express his oracular vision (‘own eyes’). With the Americanization of the *auteur*, this Romanticism is overblown into a theory – the *auteur theory*. In a short piece titled “Notes on the *Auteur Theory*” (1962), *Village Voice* film critic Andrew Sarris provided three premises for the *auteur* theory:

- (1) Director-as-technician; the technical competence of the director as a criterion of value.
- (2) Director-as-stylist; the “distinguishable personality” of the director as a criterion of value: “over a group of films, a director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature” (1962: 561).

(3) Director-as-auteur; “interior meaning” as a criterion of value, the “ultimate glory of the cinema as an art” (1962: 562).

These premises are presented as three concentric circles, with the auteur ensconced in the innermost circle. The *auteur*’s work is pregnant with ‘interior meaning’, the tension between his personality and the material that is given to him. In this respect, argues Sarris, American directors are better placed than their European counterparts:

Because so much of the American cinema is commissioned, a director is forced to express his personality through the visual treatment of material rather than through the literary content of the material. 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 (Sarris 1962: 562).

Sarris went on to list his ‘Pantheon’ directors, fourteen absolute *auteurs* of the inner circle, a list that went from Flaherty and Griffith to Welles, Lang and Hitchcock. He also erected second and third tiers for the likes of Kubrick, Wilder and Lean (in 1998 Sarris ‘upgraded’ Wilder to the Pantheon and apologized for his erroneous judgment of days bygone.)

In a quick and fiery rebuttal to Sarris, fellow film critic Pauline Kael blasted him for his vague writing, and for advancing an inflationary theory that operated on a “*reductio ad absurdum* with *a priori* judgment” (Kael 1963: 14). Once *auteur* theory declared a director a genius, all his films were to be seen as *works of genius*; moreover, while it was apparent that the genius behind the films could only be deduced from the films themselves, it was this genius behind the films that was being used to read the films in the first place! Kael rejected the criterion of “technical competence” as obvious; she further debunked “distinguishable personality” as meaningless in itself since, as she memorably argues, “the smell of a skunk is more distinguishable than the perfume of a rose, but does that make it better?” (1963: 15). It is with the third and inner circle that Kael was most furious, since to her the notions of “interior meaning” and “tension” served to elevate *trash* into *art*:

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 — a routine, commercial movie can sure use a little “personality” (Kael 1963: 17).

There are indications that Sarris and Kael have cast their lots, however unknowingly, in the old arena of the Culture Industry. Let us recall that Adorno characterized Hollywood studios as churning out ‘trash’: “The truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944: 95). The avant garde alone ‘serves truth’; Warner Brothers and MGM are ‘all the same’, the same garbage artificially sustained by the cult of personality. One hears distant echoes of this kind of formulation in Kael’s snobbish suggestion that the *auteurs* were ultimately aiming to be “connoisseurs of trash” (1963: 17), that they were working “embarrassingly hard trying to give some semblance of intellectual respectability to a pre-occupation with *mindless, repetitious commercial products*” (1963: 20; emphasis mine). Witness her acerbic elitism when she writes that the *auteur* theorists were interested in nothing more than the kind of action movies that “the restless, rootless men who wander on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and in the Tenderloin of all of our big cities have always preferred just because they could respond to them without thought. These movies soak up your time” (Kael 1963: 20). What an astonishing accusation, not least because it contains shades of Benjamin-in-reverse (“our taverns, our metropolitan streets...”) but because it replays Adorno’s idea that under monopoly capitalism, leisure time too was glutted with meaninglessness. The regular movie-goer “needs no thoughts of his own: the product prescribes each reaction, not through any actual coherence — which collapses once exposed to thought...only meaninglessness is acceptable” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944: 109).

Perhaps Sarris would agree with Kael on one thing: that most of Hollywood is trash. Here he is, on the ‘ordinary’ Hollywood director:

Nowadays, it is possible to become a director without knowing too much about the technical side, even the crucial functions of photography and editing. An expert production crew could probably cover up for a chimpanzee in the director’s chair. How do you tell the genuine director from the quasi chimpanzee? (Sarris 1962: 563)

It seems that Sarris *by and large* is not uneasy with the equation of Hollywood with the Culture Industry. What distinguishes him, though, is that he saw *within* Hollywood a discernible reservoir of genuine art secure against the swamps of standardized output. “The real scandal of the *auteur* theory lay not so much in glorifying the director as equivalent in prestige to the literary author, but rather in exactly *who* was granted this prestige...” (Stam 2000: 87). Sarris and his ilk, taking their cue from the *Cahiers* critics, found much to

appreciate in directors working under the constraints of studio heavyweights and in the thankless world of genre pictures – the “fast and enjoyable movies”, as Kael (1963: 15) derisively called them. In other words, Sarris made a case for Culture *in* Industry.

### **“Finding the Shakespeares and Rembrandts of Film”: THE AURATIC DIMENSIONS OF AUTEUR THEORY**

American *auteur* studies intervened in the crisis of legitimacy suffered not only by Hollywood but also by film studies. By felicitating directors as authors, *auteur* studies gave them literary premium and prestige; moreover, by suggesting that films were imprinted with the marks of an *auteur*, it legitimated the entry of cinema into literature departments, as well as strengthening its overall claim to ‘seriousness’ (Stam 2000). Sarris points out that Kael once referred to film criticism as a “mongrel art”; he returns the favour by denouncing her as a “lapdog of the literati” – and naming himself a “mastiff of the movie medium” (Sarris 1974: 63). All this talk of chimpanzees, quasi-chimpanzees, lapdogs, mongrels and mastiffs makes it abundantly clear that the debate is raging in the realm of a derogated mass culture, from which Hollywood could never be disentangled.<sup>2</sup>

Seriousness and mass culture were historically incompatible, with the former figured as genuine, meaningful, and masculine and the latter as mediocre, shallow and feminine. As Andreas Huyssen recounts, mass culture from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards was “somehow associated with women while real, authentic culture remain[ed] the prerogative of men” (1986: 47). The difference between authentic and mass culture would be the difference between the kind of novel that Flaubert *writes*, and the kind of novel his Emma Bovary *reads*. Similarly, the diacritical other of the ‘mass’ form of Hollywood was usually the ‘high’ European form. *Auteurism* provocatively fractured this binary *without* foregoing its

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<sup>2</sup> In “Culture Industry Reconsidered”, Adorno distinguishes between ‘mass culture’ and ‘culture industry’: “In our drafts we spoke of ‘mass culture’. We replaced that expression with ‘culture industry’ in order to exclude from the outset the interpretation agreeable to its advocates: that it is a matter of something like a culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves, the contemporary form of popular art” (Adorno 1967: 98). In my opinion, it is difficult, if not impossible, to draw the line between a ‘spontaneous’ culture and calculated industrial production when one is faced with a mass form; I retain the use of the term ‘mass culture’ *with* the recognition that Hollywood was also a superbly organized system of large-scale production. I also take into account Jameson’s cautionary note that the kind of bourgeois, nostalgically inflected high culture Adorno envisions as the Other of the Culture Industry, could not have come into visibility without the emergence of the mass culture of modernity (Jameson 1992).

masculine allegiances, chalking out a new ‘high’ *within* the ‘low’ that was Hollywood. “Can we conclude,” asks Kael in her famous parting shot, that “the *auteur* theory is an attempt by adult males to justify staying inside the small range of experience of their boyhood and adolescence — that period when masculinity looked so great and important but art was something talked about by poseurs and phonies and sensitive-feminine types?” (Kael 1963: 26). In Kael’s account, *auteur* critics were mostly men talking about men, a near-idolatrous, macho coterie that justified its interest in feminized mass culture by focussing exclusively on the works of great men.

These great men were invariably represented in *auteur* theory as inseminating formless material with their genius. An *auteur* film was virtually radiant with the mark of its maker, imbued with his personality from its depths to its outermost surfaces. Glowing and resplendent, it was nothing if not a *rejuvenated auratic object*. Repeatedly, Sarris represents *auteur* cinema as *sanctum sanctorum*, a private chamber of expression and meaning. Not only is *auteur* cinema the final and *innermost* ring of his three concentric circles, it is always imagined as the end of a pilgrimage of some sort. “Sometimes,” writes Sarris, “a great deal of corn must be husked to yield a few kernels of interior meaning” (Sarris 1962: 564). It’s a metaphor rife with theological overtones (the corn) and the sense of an inward journey (the kernels inside). It smacks of some variety of mysticism, as Kael notes:

‘Interior meaning’ seems to be what those in the know know. It’s a mystique — and a mistake. The *auteur* critics never tell us by what divining rods they have discovered the élan 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. (Kael 1963: 20)

To his credit, Sarris repeatedly asserts that *auteurism* is no guild. “*Auteurism* is not now and never has been an organized religion or a secret society. There are no passwords or catchwords” (Sarris 1974: 61). It may never have been “intended as an occult ritual” (Sarris 1963: 28), but the *auteur* approach itself casts a pall of forbidding inapproachability, elevating both film-makers and film criticism into an art which relies heavily on the personal tastes and instincts of its connoisseurs. With his pantheon of director-gods and infernal second and third tiers, Sarris forged a secular theology of sorts — a cult in fact. The *auteurists* became an unwitting cabal, reviving much of what Benjamin imagined abolished by

mechanical reproducibility.<sup>3</sup> They were figured by their critics, Kael most vocally, as a gate-keeping force that made the *auteur* ‘quality’ elusive not only for film-makers, who must strive now to be admitted to the inner circle, but also for film criticism, because not all could decipher the ‘marks’ of the *auteur*.

Aura, we have already discussed, is something of a phenomenological mystery, a something-intuited, a congeries of spirits receding into the depths of the traditional artwork, a “trace-presence” that is not literally present but shimmers in the distance. I argue now that *auteur* theory owes an unacknowledged debt to the Benjaminian ‘aura’. Kael comes close to sensing it when she observes “some primitive form of Platonism in the underbrush of Sarris’ aesthetics” (1963: 20), but she goes no further. Consider equally Sarris’ least precise but perhaps most honest description of what makes an *auteur*: a certain “élan of the soul”. Responding many decades later to Kael’s harangue, Sarris confesses:

In our largely secular circle it was an easy point for her to score, but I was only beginning my often lonely quest for a way of combining Aristotelian elitism with Christian mercy in broadening the moral range of movie reviewing...an approach to the tantalizing mysteries of movies themselves, and to the mystical realm of *mise-en-scene* (Sarris 1995: 361).

In reading film as mystery, Sarris approximates some of Benjamin’s mysticism. Indeed, it annoyed Kael no end that Sarris sought to wrench directors from their historical environments and read off the surface presence of their films – he desired to “see artists in a pristine state — their essences, perhaps? — separated from all life that has formed them and to which they try to give expression” (Kael 1963: 17). (It’s amazing how Sarris and Kael hit so many of the same notes as Benjamin and Adorno, almost without noticing). The mark of the *auteur* is thus almost outside history, a phenomenal force that exists before time, and perhaps even before language.<sup>4</sup> It is something that is just *there*, a secretion that soaks the art-

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<sup>3</sup> Steve Neale notes the “the tendency...of *auteurism* in general to lapse into cultishness” (2000: 11).

<sup>4</sup> Sarris notes how Truffaut and Chabrol “reviewed English-language films for years without even a minimal comprehension of the language...The fact that most of the *Cahiers* critics depended on French sub-titles or dubbing to know what was going on in English-language movies has two consequences. First, they were able to find redeeming qualities in films with bad dialogue. Second, they were free to concentrate on the visual style of American movies, something that most American reviewers neglected to do. In this way, *Vertigo* could be reevaluated in Paris as the progenitor of *Last Year in Marienbad*, whereas in America, Resnais was considered high art, and Hitchcock was not even considered pop art.” (Sarris 1974: 62).

object. To watch an *auteur* film is to be absorbed *into* a metaphysical experience; as Sarris himself admits, *auteurism* “is ambiguous...embedded in the stuff of the cinema” (Sarris 1962: 562). Sarris, it appears, was driven by a secret religious sensibility from the start; in his approach to cinema he is then a riposte to Benjamin, for his *auteur* is informed by the same kind of seductive, sensual mystery that the ‘aura’ exudes, even as its end is being declared.

The very first time Benjamin tries to explain what aura is in the “Work of Art” essay, he defines it thus: “If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon of a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch” (Benjamin 1935: 223). This is only one in a series of evocative metaphors drawn from nature. In another piece on Atget’s photographs, Benjamin describes Atget as “pumping the aura out of reality like water out of a sinking ship” (cited in Gilloch 178). It seems that Benjamin himself cannot escape the gravity of what he set out to demolish. In another example, he speaks of film as making the sight of immediate reality as rare as the sight of an orchid. “Why did Benjamin choose, albeit with a shade of irony,” asks Miriam Hansen, “the highly auratic metaphor of the Blue Flower – the unattainable object of the romantic quest, the incarnation of desire?” (Hansen 1987: 204). Here lies the aura then, its heart beating vigorously at its death sentence.

Hansen’s general argument is that Benjamin operated with the aura and the masses as his two poles, “implicitly denying the masses the possibility of aesthetic experience” (Hansen 1987: 186). I would argue that *auteur* theory – which was given over to the auratic within mass culture – managed to reconcile these polarities, while also somehow maintaining them. Moreover, by drawing attention to the aesthetic experience, by emphasizing the formal qualities of *auteur* cinema and its use of cinematic codes, it expressly repudiated Benjamin’s argument that the “total function of art” was disturbed by film. To rewrite Benjamin, instead of being based on politics, the function of art was once again based on ritual. *Auteur* critics were invested in uncovering “tell-tale traces in the works of their beloved” (Kael 1963: 18). By displaying an overt academic interest in *mise en scène*, the *auteurists* were also able to crucially salvage something else from the dustbin of the Culture Industry.

*Style* appears in Adorno as a purely negative category; the culture industry, he writes, is “nothing other than style” (1944: 103). Each product may “affect an individual air” but this individuality is superficially added to the work rather than being organic to its conception (1967: 101). Adorno claimed that “the style of the culture industry, which has no resistant

material to overcome, is at the same time the negation of style" (1944: 102). It was exactly the opposite with *auteur* theory, which claimed that *in resistance* to the material he was given, the work of the *auteur* would be an assertion of *individuality* through an *affirmation of style*.

As Andre Bazin had intuited, without the necessary research or analysis, *auteur* theory could devolve into "the kind of snobbish racket which is associated with the merchandising of paintings" (Sarris 1963: 28), a pre-occupation with the marks of the maker, his visible signatures. In being so taken with the imprint of the *auteur*—as opposed to the block-print of the culture industry — it appeared indeed that "one of the main desires of this group [was] to find the Shakespeares and the Rembrandts of film" (Staples 1966: 3). With *auteurism*, it was possible to see cinema as the kind of romantic, individual art Adorno missed and Benjamin decried. Benjamin thought of "uniqueness and permanence" as innate to the traditional artwork, and "transitoriness and reproducibility" as innate to film (Benjamin 1969: 223). Adorno imagined film as having put "an end to unbridled expression", "subduing the unruliness of art" and "subordinating everything to the formula which supplants the work" (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944: 99). All at once, *auteurism* rehabilitated 'uniqueness', revived 'unbridled expression', and displaced the 'formula' as the dominant way of seeing Hollywood production. In order to test my core argument — that *auteurism* inherited directly from the *auratic* — I shall like to end with a brief focus on the short film *The Key to Reserva* (2007), directed by Martin Scorsese.

### **"Who Will I Direct This As?": A TENTATIVE READING OF *THE KEY TO RESERVA***

Pauline Kael dismissed *auteurism* as misguided intellectual energy, a fiction perpetuated by ill-meaning critics, and "a mistake." She systematically dismantled the architecture of *auteur* theory, but she neglected to forward a viable alternative. Arguably, one of the forms the *aura* has taken in mass culture has been the sign of the *auteur*. I say 'sign' because it is apparent that the mystique of the *auteur* is far from spontaneous or organic; it is cultivated with the participation of academics, filmmakers, and audiences.

But 'sign' also approximates the mystical dimension of the movies: its uncanny capacity to show the seminal traces of its maker, the clues left behind by cinematic genius. *The Key to Reserva* is a playful 9-minute experiment – part mockumentary, part homage – in which

Scorsese attempts to ‘preserve’ a script Hitchcock developed but left unfilmed. All Scorsese has of the script are a few pages, and his radical project is to *preserve the film by producing it* – by directing his own Hitchcock film.

Of course, no such script exists, and Scorsese is directing a commercial for Freixenet, the Spanish Cava giant. From the start, *The Key to Reserva* foregrounds its constitutive materials: we are on-location at sets, with cast and crew milling about, reminding us that the filmmaker “is not an untrammelled artist; he or she is immersed in material contingencies, surrounded by the Babel-like buzz of technicians, cameras, and lights of the “happening” which is the ordinary film shoot” (Stam 2000: 90). In its espousal of equipmentality, the film then very much makes a Blue Flower of unmediated and equipment-free reality. We have on hand not only Scorsese, but his screenwriter Ted Griffin and long-time editor Thelma Schoonmaker.

Despite this emphasis on its constructed and collaborative genesis, despite its emphatic announcement that it did not spring fully formed from the head of a genius filmmaker, *The Key to Reserva* is astonishingly abuzz with aura. The three-and-a-half pages of unfilmed Hitchcock script — with a page strategically missing in the middle — must be handled with gloves. “I don’t even want to touch them without their protective envelopes,” Scorsese says. In desperate need of preservation, on the brink of vanishing, the dematerializing script resonates with the ‘complex temporality’ of aura: a belatedly discovered message from a lost time, a kind of revelation before the plunge into oblivion. The last resort of aura, as Benjamin indicated, was “the cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offer[ing] a last refuge for the cult value of the picture” (1969: 26). Repeatedly, the ‘preservation’ project is figured as a séance in which Scorsese communes with Hitchcock (“Sometimes I feel his spirit looking over my shoulder...”):

[I’m] going to do it...Make my own Hitchcock film. But it has to look, it has to be the way he would have made the picture then, only making it now....But the way he would have made it then. If he were alive now, making this now, he would make it now, as if he made it back then...But his film, not mine, because I couldn’t.

*The Key To Reserva* is one long joke, and Scorsese is laughing the loudest. In pretending to be overtaken by the ghost of a revered ancestor — in enacting a kind of possession — Scorsese is channelling the Hitchcock of innumerable interviews, who playfully piled incredulity on incredulity in responding to the most sincere questions (Kapsis 1989). These

were usually the high-minded interviews of the *Cahiers* group, when they undertook a campaign in the 50s to coronate Hitchcock an *auteur*. His camera angles, his formal flourishes, his preoccupation with the ‘Catholic theme of guilt’ were all famously inventoried by Bazin, Truffaut, Rohmer, Chabrol. Taking their cue from the French critics, auteurists in America (Sarris, Robin Wood, and Raymond Durgnant) all privileged Hitchcock’s American period, the time when he was under pressure from a monolithic industry and the stern eyes of Selznick (LaValley 1972). The 50s thus marked for the *auteur* critics the consolidation of Hitchcock’s style as a coherent aesthetic philosophy and as resistance to the homogenizing impulses of assembly-line Hollywood.

Is it a coincidence that when Scorsese refers to the “then” of Hitchcock’s time, he is referring to the decade of Hitchcock’s *auteur*-ization? Every recognizable citation in *The Key To Reserva* is drawn from Hitchcock’s work in the 50s or after: the concert hall and falling death recall *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1955); there is the famous disorienting zoom he frequently deployed, but perhaps distilled to perfection in *Vertigo* (1958); the credit sequence and the music are of course straight out of *North By Northwest* (1959); the blinding flash suggests *Rear Window* (1954); the Technicolor red that saturates cushions, curtains, and carpets might be seen as belonging in general to Hitchcock’s colour phase, but specifically invoking the visual world of *Marnie* (1964). Even the concluding shots, outside the movie-within-a-movie, continue to riff on Hitchcock, bringing to mind *Psycho* (1960) and *The Birds* (1963).

In this sense, it is very much the work of art at its most technè-cally reproducible.<sup>5</sup> According to Adorno, the Culture Industry is marked by the predominance of the “special effect, the trick, the isolated and repeatable individual performance” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944: 133). Style, extrapolated from its organic unity with the work, is emptied of its meaning and condemned to soulless repetition. Advertising is the most articulate symptom of this loss of the totality; “the individual moment, in being detachable, replaceable, estranged even technically from any coherence of meaning, lends itself to purposes outside the work”

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<sup>5</sup> In its citations of artworks whose ‘original’ inspiration has long come and gone, *The Key To Reserva* isn’t too far from Jameson’s ‘pastiche’, a ‘blank parody’ or ‘nostalgia film’ that expresses longing for an aesthetic era rather than a historical one (Jameson 1996). However, its blankness is only notional, since the film is embedded in a force-field of the auratic. Arguably, Scorsese’s pastiche draws equally on the ‘signs’ of other, alternate *auteurs*, all of whom have at some point been positioned as the ‘true’ authors of Hitchcock’s 50s genius: Bernard Herrmann (in the score), Saul Bass (in the titles), and Richard Burks (in the camera-work).

(Adorno and Horkheimer 1944: 133). At only three-and-a-half pages (with a page missing in the middle), *The Key to Reserva* could be summarised as a plotless plundering of Hitchcock, a part without a whole to refer back to. Indeed, in the way that it reproduces those signature camera movements – the track, the pan and the tilt, all studied to great effect – it unspools like *auteurism* on auto-pilot, coldly isolating and re-assimilating elements of Hitchcock's 'style' into an extravagant event for the YouTube age. To dismiss it thus, as all style and no substance, however, is to fail to grapple with another quality of the film: its monumental mystique.<sup>6</sup> This cannot be chalked up to the mystique of the product alone. In fact, the bottled champagne is rendered incidental to the proceedings, as its sale is banked instead on the mystique of a dead director brought back to life.

The MacGuffin is then not a key or a bottle of wine, but at least *partially* the trace of a ghost from cinema's past. Further, the mystique is not simply that of Hitchcock alone. To believe that one would have to believe that Scorsese has successfully effaced *himself* from the film, that he has performed simply as a *via media* for the spirit of Hitchcock: an athletic feat that is tantamount to anti-*auteurism*. Yet, when the credits roll, *The Key To Reserva* is a Martin Scorsese film, not an Alfred Hitchcock film.

Martin Scorsese: essayist *par excellence* of the barely submerged bloodiness of America (*Cape Fear*, 1991; *Gangs of New York*, 2002; *The Departed*, 2006), a filmmaker who has staked his career on unmasking the repugnance beneath civilizational composure (*Mean Streets*, 1973; *Taxi Driver*, 1976; *Raging Bull*, 1980). His penchant for violence—what marked him out as an adversary to high culture in the first place—is also what is *his* tell-tale mark, his *auteur* status exemplified. Fulfilling the foremost creed for an *auteur*—that his talent will 'out', "no matter what the circumstances" (Stam 2000: 84)—Scorsese 'fails' to erase his signature. A man is stabbed in the eye with the shard of a bulb, and there is a striking moment when a cord is strung around a man's throat; surpassing anything in Hitchcock's *oeuvre* (including the shower scene), sheer tactile violence explodes the 'finished' form of this homage film.

"My approach?" meditates Scorsese, his distinctive bespectacled countenance often framed in side-profile, "I'm obviously not going to make it as I would. But can I shoot it as Hitchcock?"

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<sup>6</sup> Our difficulties are compounded by the fact that 'Aura' is now a term that has entered the lexicon of the advertising world, in which it is related to the consumer's search for the authentic brand 'essence' (See Brown et al. 2003).

I don't think so. So who will I shoot them as? This is the question." *The Key To Reserva* has materialized in the transitive hyphen between two *auteurs*, and its mystical appeal has been redoubled in the process.

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“Film was resurrected as secular religion; the ‘aura’ was back in force thanks to the cult of the auteur.” (Stam 2000: 88)

This essay has reconsidered some of the most significant debates on the status of cinema in our world. While Benjamin believed in the messianic power of film to deliver us from the airless aura of tradition, Adorno saw in mindless studio product an image of our civilizational decline. Two radically different thinkers, two powerful and enduring ways of thinking about cinema. It has been my contention that American *auteur* theory emerged in the cross-fire of these legacies, since it revived the auratic and located Culture *in* Industry. Towards testing my thesis, I have focussed briefly and tentatively on the short film *The Key To Reserva*. I cannot provide a conclusive statement on what exactly the film accomplishes, and how. It appears, however, that its unmistakable allure has to do with the aura of the *auteur*. *The Key To Reserva* serves as a reminder that aura is very ‘real’, an indefatigable presence in the midst of our Youtube age. The aura, it appears, has outlived its prognosis. In its present incarnation, it cannot be wished away as a mere “foggy mist”, as Adorno suggested, or as the “phoney spell” of a commodity or personality, as Benjamin indicated.

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