The Cinematography of Roger Corman

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Exploitation Filmmaker or Auteur?

By

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the twenty first century, a number of film scholars have focused their academic interest towards exploitation cinema. Exploitation – until then neglected and underrated – suddenly saw the publishing of voluminous academic works on its history in Hollywood,[1] Europe[2] and even Latin America,[3] collections of interviews with the filmmakers that worked within its genres, encyclopedic studies on the topic in general,[4] as well as comprehensive analyzes of individual genres,[5] works on the cultural phenomenon of cult film,[6] books[7] and articles investigating exploitation film posters, feminist analyzes,[8] and many more. Of course, scholars and film aficionados also examined the works of particular directors[9] as well as producers,[10] including one of the most prolific representatives of exploitation – Roger Corman. As Corman has

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[1] See, for example: Eric Shaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True! A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

[2] See, for example: Danny Shipka, *Perverse Titillation: The Exploitation Cinema of Italy, Spain and France* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), or Ernest Mathijs, ed, *Alternative Europe: Eurotrash and Exploitation Cinema Since 1945* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004).

[3] Victoria Ruétalo and Dolores Tierney, eds, *Latsploitation, Exploitation Cinemas, and Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

[4] See, for example: Ric Meyers, *For One Week Only: The World of Exploitation Films* (Guilford, CT: Emery Books, 2011) or Mike Quarles, *Down and Dirty: Hollywood's Exploitation Filmmakers and Their Movies* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1993).

[5] See, for example: Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

[6] See, for example: Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton, *Cult Cinema* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2011).

[7] Tony Nourmand, Graham Marsh and Dave Kehr, *Film Posters Exploitation* (Berlin: Taschen, 2006).

[8] Henry Jenkins, *The Wow Climax: Tracing the Emotional Impact of Popular Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

[9] See, for example: Calum Waddell, *Jack Hill: The Exploitation and Blaxploitation Master, Film by Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009).

[10] See, for example: John Hamilton, *Beasts in the Cellar: The Exploitation Film Career of Tony Tenser* (Godalming, UK: FAB Press, 2005).

been working in the exploitation business since 1955, having directed 50 films himself and produced another 400 features by other directors, numerous publications on his topic are available. They include (in chronological order):

- J. Philip Di Franco, Karyn G. Browne and Roger Corman, *The Movie World of Roger Corman* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1979) – an early publication which contains a biography of the director, a description of his films and a plethora of Corman-related materials: posters, photos, one-sheets and much more;
- Ed Naha and Roger Corman, *The Films of Roger Corman: Brilliance on a Budget* (New York: Arco Pub, 1982) – a presentation of Corman's career and of his works supplied with Corman's own commentaries;
- Gary Morris, *Roger Corman* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 1985) – a critical analysis of Corman's career;
- Mark Thomas McGee, *Roger Corman: The Best of the Cheap Acts* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1997) – a film-by-film analysis complete with biographies of Corman and his collaborators;
- Alan G. Frank, *The Films of Roger Corman: shooting my way out of trouble* (London: BT Batsford, 1998) – another film-by-film treatment complete with stills, photographs and newspaper reviews;
- Mark Whitehead, *Roger Corman* (Harpenden, UK: Pocket Essentials, 2003) – a concise description of Corman and his works;
- Beverly Gray, *Roger Corman: Blood-Sucking Vampires, Flesh-eating Cockroaches, and Driller Killers* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2004) – a collection of interviews with eighty of Corman's collaborators;
- Alain Silver and James Ursini, *Roger Corman: Metaphysics on a Shoestring* (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 2006).

Though all of these publications – in one way of another – consider Corman to be an exceptional filmmaker, none of them embarks on a comprehensive, academic analysis to determine whether he is also an artist, i.e. an auteur. This might stem from the fact that Corman is an ambiguous artistic figure. On the one hand, he directed films like *Attack of the Crab Monsters* (1957), *She Gods from Shark Reef* (1958) or *Creature from the Haunted Sea* (1961) and produced such "masterpieces" as *The Brain Eaters* (1958), *Queen of Blood* (1966), *Slumber Party Massacre* (1982) or *Dinocroc vs. Supergator* (2010) – films whose very titles already

suggest their artistic deficiencies. He is also notorious for shooting and producing his films quickly, cheaply and with blatant disregard for safety measures, which – together with his ability to issue a dozen new films every year and his impressive production filmography (most of which is on the artistic level of *Dinocroc vs. Supergator*) – have earned him the titles of "shlockmeister"[11] or "the King of the B's"[12] among film journalists.

On the other hand, however, Corman can boast of extraordinary merits both as a director and as a producer. In 1964, he became the youngest American director to be given a film retrospective at the prestigious Cinémathèque Française in Paris. In 2008, one of his directorial efforts – *House of Usher* – was selected for preservation in the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress. As a producer, he discovered and promoted such directorial talents as Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, James Cameron, Curtis Hanson, Ron Howard or Jonathan Demme, to name just the directors whose later works were awarded Academy Awards. His production-distribution company, New World Pictures, was the first to release the films of Bergman, Fellini and Kurosawa (and countless other European artists) on the American market. Finally, in 2010, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences awarded him with an Academy Honorary Award "for his rich engendering of films and filmmakers."

Which of these two faces of Corman is his real one? Is he an exploitation shlockmeister or a great filmmaker worthy of critical recognition? The following study shall strive to answer that question. Yet, before it can be addressed, there are two issues which need to be addressed.

The first issue pertains to Corman's copious filmography. The sheer number of films he produced makes the task of analyzing all of them virtually insurmountable. Merely watching them would require a scholar to spend about 500-600 hours in the projection room, and their subsequent analysis would generate a rather cumbersome volume. Moreover, not all of these productions are available for analysis as many of them received limited distribution in American drive-in cinemas, after which they vanished into oblivion. Finally, and most importantly, it would be difficult

[11] Phelim O'Neill, "Revenge of the shlockmeister: Roger Corman gets his due," *The Guardian*, November 25, 2009. http://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2009/nov/25/roger-corman-oscar. Accessed December 10, 2013.

[12] John Hiscock, "Roger Corman is still prolific at the age of 87," *The Telegraph*, September 19, 2013. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/film-news/10318784/Roger-Corman-is-still-prolific-at-age-of-87.html. Accessed December 10, 2013.

– if not impossible – to assess the degree of Corman's participation in each of the features he produced, as he indeed masterminded some of them (like *The Fast and the Furious*) but only financed some others (like *Il castello dalle porte di fuoco*).[13] Therefore, a scholarly examination of all ca. 400 of his productions could cause justifiable doubts whether these films are truly his.

For these reasons, the films Corman produced shall be excluded from analysis in the following study. Instead, it shall focus on the features he directed himself, for there is initially far less doubt whether he is their artistic creator. Yet, his directorial filmography poses its own problem – it varies from one source to another. This stems from the fact that when Corman was running a production company, he would sometimes be required to step in and help his director finish the film. As a result, five films issued by New World Pictures – *A Time for Killing* (1967), *The Wild Racers* (1968), *De Sade* (1969), *Deathsport* (1978) and *Battle Beyond the Stars* (1980) – were co-directed by Corman. However, it is difficult to determine the level of his directorial involvement in each of these films, and analyzing them would again raise justifiable doubts whether he is indeed their author. Consequently, this study shall focus only on the films in which he was the sole director.[14]

Limiting the scope of this study to Corman's directorial efforts excludes the majority of his low-cost exploitive productions as well as some of his artistic merits (an extraordinary eye for talent, the promotion of European art cinema in America), but the question of whether Corman is a shlockmeister or a true artist still remains unanswered. After all, his

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[13] Roger Corman, *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood and Never Lost a Dime* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1990), 226.

[14] They include exactly fifty titles: *Five Guns West; Apache Woman; Day the World Ended; Swamp Women; The Oklahoma Woman; The Gunslinger; It Conquered the World; Not of This Earth; Attack of the Crab Monsters; Teenage Doll; Rock All Night; The Undead; She Gods of Shark Reef; Naked Paradise; Sorority Girl; Carnival Rock; War of the Satellites; The Saga of the Viking Women and Their Voyage to the Waters of the Great Sea Serpent; Teenage Caveman; Machine Gun Kelly; I, Mobster; A Bucket of Blood; The Wasp Woman; Ski Troop Attack; House of Usher; The Little Shop of Horrors; The Last Woman on Earth; Creature from the Haunted Sea; Atlas; Pit and the Pendulum; The Intruder; The Premature Burial; Tales of Terror; The Tower of London; The Young Racers; The Raven; The Terror; X: The Man with the X-Ray Eyes; The Haunted Palace; The Secret Invasion; The Masque of the Red Death; The Tomb of Ligeia; The Wild Angels; The St. Valentine's Day Massacre; The Trip; Target: Harry; Bloody Mama; Gas-s-s!; Von Richthofen and Brown;* and *Frankenstein Unbound.* See filmography for details.

directorial filmography is also full of contradictions, with typically exploitive *The Wasp Woman* on the one hand, and the acclaimed *House of Usher* on the other.

This leads us to the second important issue: how can it be academically determined whether a director is an artist or just a craftsman/craftswoman? The auteur theory can help solve this problem. Formed in the 1950s by French film critics and subsequently developed by British and American thinkers, it provides a set of theoretical tools which can be used to determine if a director is the major creative force behind his/her films and whether these films reflect his/her artistic vision. Using these tools, a scholar can determine whether a director is an extraordinary artist or just a journeyman at a film studio's service.

The aim of this study is, therefore, to investigate the directorial works of Corman using the tools provided by the auteur theory and to determine whether his films are merely exploitation features or whether at some point they bear the hallmarks of auteur cinema.

As for the structure of the following study, Chapter 1 briefly presents the history of the auteur theory and chooses its structuralist version as the most suitable for the analysis herein. It also explains the notion of exploitation cinema and delves into a preliminary discussion whether an exploitation filmmaker can be deemed an auteur. Chapter 2 includes a concise biography of Corman and describes the production process of his motion pictures in a chronological manner: from choosing a film idea, through scriptwriting, casting and direction, until post-production. Chapter 3 focuses on Corman's exploitation output and analyzes the way in which he exploited popular social and political topics. Chapter 4 presents the two most common motifs in his filmography – female empowerment and outsider protagonists. It also separately examines his most famous film series – the adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe's gothic horror short stories. Chapter 5 investigates Corman's early and mature film styles. In the latter, it identifies three key stylistic features of his direction: camera movement, deep shot and symbolism. Finally, the conclusion shall try to answer the question posed in this introduction: is Corman an exploitation filmmaker or an auteur, and consequently, is he an artist or a shlockmeister?

CHAPTER ONE

AUTEUR THEORY AND EXPLOITATION FILMS

1. Introduction

The following theoretical chapter is comprised of three sections. The first section discusses the auteur theory, its provenance and key concepts. It also strives to establish an evaluation system consistent with the auteur theory which could be applied in order to discern whether particular film directors are auteurs or not.[1] The second section presents the term "exploitation cinema" and aims at defining it. The final part delves into preliminary deliberations whether an exploitation director can be considered an auteur.

2. The auteur theory

Film is a specific artistic discipline in that it is usually a joint enterprise of many artists. There is no denying the fact the director is an artist, the writer is an artist, the actors and actresses are artists, but there are probably even more people within the film crew who could be deemed artists: costume and set designers, CGI specialists, make-up artists (they are even called "artists" when the credits roll) and so on. Which of these artists is the author of the film? In the case of other arts there is no such problem: the writer is the author of a novel, the painter – of a painting, the composer – of a piece of music, etc. But how to attribute the authorship of a film to anyone if the credit list comprises several hundred names of people who contributed to the creation of this film? Who is the author? The scriptwriter who wrote the screenplay for the film? The director who realized it? The actors who we can actually *see*? Or the producer who bound all these people together and financed the project? Maybe they are all authors? Or there is none?

[1] The concept of auteurism is relatively well-known, so the following chapter shall present its history only briefly, and concentrate on the version which is the most useful for the analysis herein.

The auteur theory makes an effort to answer this question. It was conceived at the turn of the 1940s and 1950s on the pages of French film periodical *Cahiers du cinéma,* which hosted such names as Jean-Luc Godard, André Bazin, Alexandre Astruc, Fereydoon Hoveyda, François Truffaut or Claude Chabrol. The auteur theory has its roots in the French existentialist philosophy, notably the works of Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre posited that "existence precedes essence" (French: "l'existence précède l'essence"[2]) and that "man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself" (French: "l'homme n'est rien d'autre que ce qu'il se fait"[3]). This is how Sartre explains these notions:

> What do we mean here by "existence precedes essence"? We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself.[4]

These philosophical concepts were soon applied to cinema by André Bazin, who advocated that "cinema's existence precedes its essence."[5] This means that we can talk about the features, or the essence, of particular cinema only after the films pertaining to this cinema were created. The same principle applies to filmmakers: their artistry, or essence, will become visible only after they film their pictures.

Sartre's approach also paved the way for another French novelist and film critic: Alexandre Astruc, who conceived the concept of camera-pen (French: caméra-stylo). According to Astruc, a camera works for a filmmaker in a similar way in which a pen works for a writer: the filmmaker does not simply capture pictures but rather creates art. He wrote:

> The cinema is simply becoming a means of expression, something which all other art has been before, especially painting and novel. After successively being trash entertainment, a leisure activity similar to boulevard theatre and a means to capture the images of the epoch, it has become a language – a form in which and through which an artist can

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[2] Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme* (Paris : Editions Nagel, 1946), 21.
[3] Ibid., 22.
[4] Jean- Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 21.
[5] André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, Vol. 1, trans. Hugh Gray (London: University of California Press Ltd, 1967), 71.

> express his thoughts, however abstract, and translate his obsessions exactly as if he was writing an essay or a novel. That is why I call this new age of cinema the age of camera-pen.[6]

However, unlike a painting or a novel, a film is a joint effort, so which member of the film crew is the artist expressing their thoughts? Who writes with the camera-pen: the director who directs the camera, or the cameraman who operates it? Or perhaps the scriptwriter who writes the story, or the actor who gives it his face? According to Astruc, the filmmaker who wields the camera-pen is the director:

> This of course implies that the scriptwriter directs his own scripts; or rather, that the scriptwriter ceases to exist, for in this kind of filmmaking the distinction between author and director loses all meaning. Direction is no longer a means of illustrating or presenting a scene, but a true act of writing. The auteur writes with a camera as the writer writes with a pen.[7]

If directors use the camera just like writers use the pen, then gifted directors must possess their own distinct style which operates like the style of gifted writers: it has its distinguishing characteristics, it progresses from one work to another, emanates from every film and allows the viewers to recognize the author.

The ideas posited by Astruc were developed by François Truffaut in his essay "Une certaine tendence du cinéma français," where he used the term "auteur cinema," which he contrasted with commercial cinema. In his view, commercial cinema, which attracts flocks of viewers, offers them very little: "its habitual dose of smut, non-conformity and facile audacity."[8] He was particularly shocked by one such film: "In the same reel of film, by the end, you can hear in less than ten minutes such words as: prostitute, whore, slut and bitchiness."[9] Auteur cinema, on the other hand, is audacious in a different way. Auteur-directors, or "men of cinema" as Truffaut calls them, are audacious in the way they realize their *mise-en-scène*. In other words, their audacity is strictly related to the medium they work in – the camerawork, light, pacing, control over their actors, editing, etc. – not to other media, like the script.[10]

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[6] Alexandre Astruc, "Naissance d'une nouvelle avant-garde: la caméra stylo," *L'écran français* 144 (30 March 1948): 20 [translation mine].
[7] Ibid., 22.
[8] François Truffaut, "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema," *Cahiers du cinema in English* (January 1967), 35.
[9] Ibid., 36.
[10] Ibid., 39.

Truffaut's article was a turning point for auteur theory not only because it featured the concept of "auteur cinema" for the first time and established the director as the unquestionable auteur, but also because it commenced the discussion on the *mise-en-scène* as a means to identify auteurs. After Truffaut had written "it is not so much the choice of subject which characterizes Becker as how he chooses to treat his subject,"[11] others followed his line of reasoning. Taking Truffaut's remark on Becker and Sartre's philosophy as starting points, Hoveyda wrote the following about the relation between *mise-en-scène* and auteurism:

> The originality of the *auteur* lies not in the subject matter he chooses, but in the technique he employs, i.e. the *mise-en-scène,* through which everything on the screen is expressed… As Sartre said: "One isn't a writer for having chosen to say certain things, but for having chosen to say them in a certain way." Why should it be different for cinema? … the thought of a *cinéaste* appears through his *mise-en-scène.* What matters in a film is the desire for order, composition, harmony, the placing of actors and objects, the movements within the frame, the capturing of a moment or a look; in short, the intellectual operation which has put an initial emotion and a general idea to work. *Mise-en-scène* is nothing other than the technique invented by each director to express the idea and establish the specific quality of his work… The task of the critic thus becomes immense: to discover behind the images the particular "manner" of the *auteur* and, thanks to this knowledge, to be able to elucidate the meaning of the work in question.[12]

In short, directors can be recognized as auteurs solely on the basis of their *directing*, and not, for example, on the basis of scripting or casting, which are not the tasks of a director as such. Moreover, their directing should be more than technically competent; it should contain a distinguishable, personal vision progressing from one film to another. It must be also highlighted at this point that superior directors are auteurs *despite* their working conditions; despite the script, the actors' performance, the interference on the part of their studios. If the director can retain their artistry in defiance of these difficulties, it is a proof of their talent. As Hoveyda wrote: "in the hands of a great director, even the most insignificant

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[11] François Truffaut, "Les Truands sont fatigues," *Cahiers du cinéma* 34, (April 1954).

[12] Fereydoon Hoveyda, "Les Taches du soleil," translated as "Sunspots" in *Cahiers du cinéma:the 1960s*, ed. Jim Hillier (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 141-142.

detective story can be transformed into a work of art."[13] This approach *also* stems from Truffaut's "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema," where he accused French scriptwriters of stifling directors' inspiration and impeding their work. This accusation is even more accurate in relation to Hollywood and its studio system:

> Given the fact that in Hollywood the director often had no more than token control over the choice of subject, the cast, the quality of the dialogue, all the weight of creativity, all the evidence of personal expression and statement had to be found in the *mise-en-scène,* the visual orchestration of the story, the rhythm of the action, the plasticity and dynamism of the image, the pace and the causality introduced through the editing.[14]

Establishing the *mise-en-scène* as the key factor in assessing director's authorship brings about certain problems, though. First of all, criteria like "the desire for order, composition, harmony, the placing of actors and objects, the movements within the frame, the capturing of a moment or a look" or "the visual orchestration of the story, the rhythm of the action, the plasticity and dynamism of the image, the pace and the causality introduced through the editing" are too general and imprecise, and refer to the subjective sense of esthetics of the viewer. As a result, film criticism would resemble watching pictures in an art gallery, moving pictures, and deciding whether they look beautiful or not. Directors, however, as Astruc himself asserted, have more in common with writers rather than with painters, and just like there is more to books than their style, there is more to films than their form. Secondly, the auteur theory conceived by *Cahiers* favors the directors of genres in which camerawork and editing play a major role (action, western, crime, horror, etc), at the same time discriminating against directors of genres which rely on different aspects of film production (comedies – script and dialogue;[15] musicals – music, choreography and actor performance; etc).

It is, therefore, of little surprise that the French auteur theory provoked an extensive debate once it had spread outside the borders of France. A British critic, Penelope Houston, for example, argued that "cinema is about the human situation, not about 'spatial relationships.'"[16] But the first

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[13] Ibid., 38.

[14] Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face With Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 244.

[15] For instance, currently there are probably very few critics who would deny the opinion that Woody Allen is an auteur.

[16] Penelope Houston, "The Critical Question," *Sight and Sound,* vol. 29, no. 4 (Autumn 1960): 163.

non-French critic to thoroughly embark on the topic and develop his own version of the auteur theory was Andrew Sarris. Sarris' merits for the auteur theory are twofold. First, he introduced it to America and the entire English-speaking critical community, and gave it its present "English" name, "auteur theory," for it had been previously known under the French term "la politique des auteurs." This step not only helped to broaden the discussion on auteurism but in fact allowed it to continue, as the critical impetus of the *Cahiers* had already started to decline.[17] Second, he contributed into auteurism himself, shaping the theory, which he considered to be "so vague at the present time."[18] Notably, he proposed three "premises" useful in distinguishing auteur-directors, which I would like to extensively quote below:

> The first premise of the auteur theory is the technical competence of a director as a criterion of value. A badly directed or undirected film has no importance in a critical scale of values, but one can make interesting conversation about the subject, the script, the acting, the color, the photography, the editing, the music, the costumes, the décor, and so forth. […] Now, by the auteur theory, if a director has no technical competence, no elementary flair for the cinema, he is automatically cast out from the pantheon of directors. A great director has to be at least a good director. This is true in any art.
>
> The second premise of the auteur theory is the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value. Over a group of films, a director must exhibit certain recurring characteristics of style, which serve as his signature. The way a film looks and moves should have some relationship to a way the director thinks and feels.
>
> 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.[19]

Sarris' "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962" began a new chapter for auteur theory as it spawned countless publications by various critics and theorists. Many of them regarded the question of authorship in a radically different way when compared to what Sarris and *Cahiers* had proposed,

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[17] Jim Miller, *Cahiers du Cinéma: Volume I: The 1950s. Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1985), 11.
[18] Andrew Sarris, "Notes on the auteur theory in 1962," in *Theories of Authorship: A Reader,* ed. John Caughie (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1981), 63.
[19] Ibid., 63-64.

claiming, for example, that individual authors do not exist because authorship is corporate (Andrew Darley[20]) or because it is the audience which creates the meaning of a text (Roland Barthes[21]). Among those scholars who did recognize individual auteurs in directors, structuralists Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Peter Wollen stand out.

In his book on Luchino Visconti, Nowell-Smith wrote off all the non-structuralist approaches that had been conceived before, except for the very basic foundation of the auteur theory – that the director-as-auteur exists:

> The so-called *auteur* theory can be understood in three ways: as a set of empirical assertions to the effect that every detail of a film is the direct and sole responsibility of its author, who is the director; as a standard of value, according to which every film that is a *film d'auteur* is good, and every film that is not is bad; and as a principle of method, which provides a basis for a more scientific form of criticism that has existed hitherto. The first interpretation is manifestly absurd. Any proponent of the theory who puts it forward uncompromisingly in that form both trivialises the theory and commits himself to a statement that is demonstrably untrue. The second is simply gratuitous and leads only to a purposeless and anti-critical aesthetic dogmatism. It is only in the third interpretation that the theory has any validity. As a principle of method the theory requires the critic to recognize one basic fact, which is that the author exists, and to organize his analysis of the work round that fact.[22]

Next he explained how he really saw the task of a critic:

> [O]ne essential corollary of the theory as it has been developed is the discovery that the defining characteristics of an author's work are not always those that are most readily apparent. The purpose of criticism becomes therefore to uncover behind the superficial contrasts of subject and treatment a structural hard core of basic and often recondite motifs. The pattern formed by these motifs, which may be stylistic or thematic, is what gives an author's work its particular structure, both defining it internally and distinguishing one body of work from another.[23]

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[20] See: Andrew Darley, *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres* (London: Routledge, 2000).
[21] See: Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989).
[22] Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Visconti* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1967), 7.
[23] Ibid., *Visconti,* 8.

Nowell-Smith's laconic mention of "basic and often recondite motifs […] which may be stylistic or thematic" was developed in the works of Peter Wollen. Wollen wrote a number of publications in which he conducted structural examinations of directors he deemed auteurs, thus creating model analyses other structuralists could follow. He looked closely at the thematic motifs in the works of Hawks and Curtiz and noticed these motifs are mostly independent of the type of film:

> Hawks worked in almost all the genres, treating them pretty much the same – the group could be cow-punchers or pilots delivering the mail or Free French patriots – it didn't much matter as long as there was danger and loyalty and sacrifice and a romance, salted with wisecracks and gimmicks, or, in the case of a comedy, plagued by humiliation, misunderstanding and descent into chaos.[24]

In fact, he argued that a true auteur transcends genre and that the recurring plot elements like loyalty or romance are merely used to build deeper, more sophisticated and indeed "recondite" themes which are related to, among others, interpersonal relationships (especially between men and women) in the face of danger, the role and place of an individual in a society or a group in a society, the hierarchy of values, the nature of death, of friendship, of bravery, of love, of responsibility, and so on.[25] It is in these little bits of philosophy that we can recognize the personality of the auteur.

It is also a proof of authorship, Wollen suggests, when the director includes elements of their personal life/experience in the film. Hawks, for example, had a "liking for scenes which mirrored or even parodied the behavior of people he personally knew."[26]

Lastly, an auteur-director should control the film production process to a considerable degree, preferably choosing the scripts they want to shoot and working on them before filming.[27] Such an approach to authorship allowed Wollen to analyze film plots, extensively quoting dialogue lines – a method unthinkable for the *Cahiers* critics.

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[24] Peter Wollen, "Who The Hell Is Howard Hawks?" in *Paris Hollywood: Writings on Film,* ed. Peter Wollen (London & New York: Verso, 2002), 56-57.
[25] Peter Wollen, "The auteur theory" in *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, ed. Peter Wollen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972).
[26] Wollen, "Who The Hell Is Howard Hawks?", 55.
[27] Peter Wollen, "The auteur theory: Michael Curtiz and Casablanca," in *Authorship and Film,* ed. David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger (London: Routledge, 2003), 63.

It is clearly visible that, unlike Sarris and the *Cahiers* critics, Wollen and the structuralists created a practicably applicable method of author analysis, which could be broken down into three areas of interest:

- work ethic – personal elements in the films, personal control over and commitment to the production process outside direction;
- themes – topics and concerns common for all/many of the films regardless of the film genre;
- style – recurring stylistic motifs/elements in the camerawork, editing, framing, etc.

Although it might be unjust to say that the structuralist version of the auteur theory is superior over the theories conceived by Sarris or the *Cahiers*, it is beyond doubt that his approach is more holistic, encompassing all the concerns put forward by the other two theories. Of course, Wollen's methodology received its share of criticism.[28] Yet, it is not the ambition of this chapter to indicate "the best" version of the auteur theory but to find a critical tool to analyze the works by Corman. Nor is it the ambition of this study to prove that the filmmaker is an auteur beyond any doubt but rather that he is more than just an exploitation filmmaker. The essence of the methodology proposed by Wollen and Nowell-Smith fits this task very well as it necessitates an examination of the entire body of work from the perspectives of content (recurring thematic motifs), style (recurrent stylistic motifs) and production (control and involvement in the filmmaking process). For this reason, the analysis of the body of works by Corman herein is based on the methodology proposed by these two structuralists.

3. Exploitation cinema

Although Roger Corman shot films falling into different genres – westerns, dramas, horrors, science-fiction, black comedies, fantasy, action and adventure – his pictures could primarily be classified as exploitation cinema. In fact, whenever film scholars analyze exploitation cinema, sooner or later the name "Roger Corman" appears in their deliberations as well.

Exploitation is not a film genre *per se*, as it is sometimes treated, but rather a method of making moving pictures in such a way that, when

[28] See: Brian Henderson, "Critique of Ciné-Structuralism," part 1, *Film Quarterly*, 27/1 (Winter, 1973-1974), 25-34.

released, they bring the highest possible profit in relation to their costs. An exploitation picture is, therefore, made *explicitly* to earn money. Obviously, by this definition most films would fall into the exploitation category, as "film in general is exploitive."[29] Since film is the most expensive art form, it is more of an investment than any other piece of art, and, unless the picture is subsidized, its maker almost always aims at earning some profit from it. But what differentiates exploitation from the rest of the cinema is the fact that it *exploits* its certain feature. This may be a controversial topic, special effects, sex, violence, a film star or a particular film character. Again, there might be some confusion between exploitation cinema and "quality films," especially modern blockbusters, some of which do exploit particular topics primarily to achieve success at the box office. Superhero movies exploit the recent superhero craze, *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) exploits a popular character, and all the sequels and prequels exploit the success of their predecessors.

So, is there a difference between, say, *Green Lantern* (2011) and *Piranha* (1978) if both of them relied on the success of their predecessors and were made primarily to earn profit? There is and it lies in the budget. While *Green Lantern*'s $200,000,000 budget was comparable or even bigger than the budgets of earlier superhero movies ($150,000,000 for *X-Men Origins* or $185,000,000 for *The Dark Knight*), *Piranha*'s $600,000 budget accounted to less than ten percent of the money spent to make *Jaws*.[30] Unlike quality pictures, exploitation films are usually made cheaply to maximize the difference between costs and income,[31] which often results in their low quality.

Another distinctive feature of exploitation films is that their exploited topic constitutes the main element of their advertising campaign. The title should already be meaningful: *Blood Beast Terror, Creature from Black Lake* and *Monster from Green Hell* are all creature features, *Slaughter High, Hospital Massacre* and *The Dorm that Dripped Blood* are slasher films while *Black Caesar, Boss Nigger* and *Hell Up in Harlem* are destined for the African American audience. The tagline should further highlight the topic. For example, *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), a rape and revenge movie, was advertised with the following sentence: "This woman has just cut, chopped, broken and burned five men beyond recognition...

[29] Jeremy Richey, "Exploitation USA" in *Directory of World Cinema: American Independent,* ed. John Berra (Malta: Gutenberg Press, 2010), 145.
[30] Figures quoted after Internet Movie Database: www.IMDb.com. 8 January 2012.
[31] Interestingly, if the primary difference between exploitation cinema and some modern, quality cinema blockbuster is the funds, then perhaps those blockbusters can be referred to as "quality exploitation cinema."

but no jury in America would ever convict her! I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE ... an act of revenge," while *Grizzly* (1976), a *Jaws* spin-off, had the tagline "The most dangerous jaws on land."

Moreover, exploitation films often aim at outperforming one another as far as their topic is concerned. A film about violence will generally try to show more of it or make it more brutal in order to outdo its predecessors while a nudist film will attempt to reveal more skin than other productions on the same subject matter. Obviously, this is a strategy that can lead to diminishing returns, which accounts for the fact that many exploitation subgenres, like cannibal films or rape-and-revenge films, were so short-lived.

Another difference between a quality film and an exploitation picture lies in the film crew. Exploitation films are usually produced by smaller, independent companies rather than major studios. Consequently, prominent A-film stars, directors and screenwriters tend to steer clear of the exploitation cinema, most probably due to the salaries which seem low in comparison with those offered by big studios, or because they consider such work degrading. As a result, exploitation cinema has developed its own pool of filmmakers, consisting mostly of young talents or people rejected by or unappreciated in A-grade cinema. Jack Hill, Jess Franco or Lucio Fulci, for example, are considered exclusively exploitation directors. Many of these filmmakers are usually tied to one particular subgenre; for example, Pam Grier is typically a blaxploitation actress while Tinto Brass focuses on erotic cinema. However, there is some degree of personnel fluctuation between exploitation and "quality cinema." Young filmmakers often start their careers in the former, achieve success, draw the attention of wealthy producers and get "promoted" to the latter, as in the case of Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese or James Cameron, to name just the artists discovered by Corman. Conversely, filmmakers who suffer financial difficulties, are down on their luck or at the end of their careers are often forced to earn their living in lower-class, exploitive cinema outside their major studios, as it was with the last films by Bela Lugosi or Lon Chaney Jr., for example.

Finally, exploitation films are distributed differently. Before the 1980s, they were almost never released in theatres affiliated with major studios. Instead, a separate branch of cinemas, grindhouses and drive-ins existed, which specialized in screening exploitation films. From time to time, standard theatres would also take a break from the regular Hollywood repertoire to show an exploitation picture. Because of such limited distribution, there were far fewer exploitation prints than "quality film"

prints.[32] In the 1980s, with the advent of the VHS technology, exploitation was slowly squeezed out of the theatres and its producers were forced to shoot pictures straight-to-VHS, and later on straight-to-DVD. As Corman says:

> When I started in the late 1950s, every film I made--no matter how low the budget--got a theatrical release. Today, less that 20-percent of our films get a theatrical release. The major studios have dominated the theatrical market.[33]

Bearing in mind all the features of exploitation cinema, one can draw a conclusion that it is as old as film itself. Indeed, it dates back as far as to early 1890s, when Thomas Edison constructed his first Kinetoscope, a device which showed fifteen second footage recorded on perforated film. The picture had to be viewed through a peephole by one person at a time and Edison would charge one nickel for every screening. These "Nickelodeons" proved to be a commercial success: "when the first Kinetoscope Parlor opened in New York's Union Square on April 14, 1894, the curious queued around the block to drop a nickel into one of the ten available machines and watch the pictures come to life. Across its first day of business, the parlor grossed $155.70 from the ten machines – equivalent to 3,114 separate viewings."[34] Sensing high profit, Edison started to look for topics which would be more attractive to his audiences than a record of a person sneezing or a bird flying. Soon enough, his film studio, Black Maria, hosted a prizefighting match and, later on, a cockfight, both of which were illegal at that time, to shoot and show them in the parlors for money. Edison's most popular repertoire also featured a vast array of dancing girls. Films like *Annabelle Butterfly Dance* or *Dolorita's Passion Dance* attracted even more viewers than their violent counterparts. In fact, *Dolorita's Passion Dance* was considered so obscene for that time that it got banned from public viewing in New Jersey,[35]

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[32] Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*, 4.
[33] Roger Corman, interview by Andrew J. Rausch, "Roger Corman on *The Blair Witch Project* and Why *Mean Streets* Would Have Made a Great Blaxploitation Film," *Images*, 26 February 2004, accessed May 10, 2012, http://www.imagesjournal.com/issue09/features/rogercorman/.
[34] Dave Thompson, *Black and White and Blue: Adult Cinema from the Victorian Age to VCR* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2007), 18.
[35] Ibid., 19.

which only made it even more sought-after.[36] All in all, Edison and his co-workers seemed to follow a typically exploitive principle of filmmaking: the more sex and violence, the better. To quote Charles Musser:

> Sex and violence figured prominently in American motion pictures from the outset. In fact, such subjects were consistent with the individualized, peephole nature of the viewing experience: they showed amusements that often offended polite and/or religious Americans. COCK FIGHT was taken close up against a black background that made the roosters stand out. Terriers were filmed attacking rats. Petit and Kessler appeared in WRESTLING MATCH, while Madame Ruth did the hoochie-coochie for DANCE DE VENTRE. Women dancers often wore skimpy attire. Although many of these films appealed specifically to male voyeurism, they also attracted women with brief glimpses of the usually forbidden world of masculine amusement.[37]

As far as the history of the first *projected* films is concerned, it does not look much different. The first moving picture to be projected dates back to 1895, whereas the first erotic movie, *La coucher de la mariée,* was shot merely one year later by Eugène Pirou and Albert Kirchner.[38] Although the first erotic films by Pirou might be considered a form of artistic expression, they inspired numerous European filmmakers to exploit the topic of nudity in order to make profits. Soon enough, while some of the early filmmakers, like Georges Méliès, were exploring the possibilities of the new artistic medium, others were looking for means to lure as many viewers as possible to their "cinemas" and earn as much money on the film as they could, usually by hiring actors and actresses (who were often prostitutes) for next to nothing and producing a ludicrous screenplay, the only aim of which was to show a lot of nakedness and sex scenes.

Exploitation cinema has not changed much since the times of Edison and Pirou. Although it has branched out into dozens of subgenres, it still follows the same principle – the more sex and violence, the better. This does not mean, however, that exploitation is mindless and unworthy of analysis.

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[36] Many exploitation films thrive on their notoriety, like *Cannibal Holocaust,* whose director was arrested on suspicion of actually murdering his actors on screen.

[37] Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 78.

[38] Laurent Mannoni, "Kircher, Albert," in *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema,* ed. Richard Abel (New York: Routledge, 2005), 518.

Exploitation had long existed outside the margins of scholarly discourse. Academics neglected this branch of cinema, preferring to focus on films they deemed important and esthetically significant. The reason was probably simple: film was a relatively new art domain and there was still a lot to be discovered, described, analyzed and categorized.[39] Critics acted in a similar way: they ostracized exploitation, which they considered inferior, and drew the public's attention to "quality cinema." The reason was even simpler: this is the task of a critic.

The advent of postmodernism brought about its main principle, relativism, which questioned the academic status quo. Advocates of relativism argued that all products of culture, be they high or low, are equally significant and worth analyzing. Only then has exploitation film entered the circle of interests of the academy and revealed its cultural importance.

Existing outside the major studio system, exploitation filmmakers enjoyed a greater deal of freedom, so they could embark on themes the majors considered bad taste at a particular time: mostly sex and violence but also counterculture and antiestablishment. These themes, though segregated from mainstream cinema, still pertained to society or comprised an element of human nature. If it is understandable that a brutally raped woman seeks violent revenge on her persecutors, why not show it on film?

Moreover, while the major studios tried to appeal to universal tastes of the audience, exploitation filmmakers targeted particular tastes of particular audiences, which was financially feasible because they operated within a small budget and needed fewer viewers to make a profit. As a result, they shot numerous pictures for people whose problems and tastes were neglected by mainstream cinema: dramas about discriminated working women, action films about freelance truckers fighting with dishonest trucking corporations, and so on. Every aspect of these subgenres, from the script and choice of actors to music and setting, was precisely tailored to cater to the needs of their respective audiences. Blaxploitation films, for example, were set in typically African American urban milieu (e.g. Harlem) or a Southern plantation, told a story of a black hero who would fight hostile and often white authority (plantation owners or organized crime like drug pushers, pimps, gangsters, corrupted policemen and politicians), and featured typical African American slang (like the word "honky") and black music (soul and funk).

[39] It is enough to say that as late as in 2008 Noël Carroll published a book entitled *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), which still focused on the most basic question in film theory: is film art or not?

Independence from the studio system also allowed exploitation filmmakers to employ their own esthetics, or rather anti-esthetics, to shock their viewers. Shocksploitation as well as splatter, rape-and-revenge and cannibal films vividly presented extreme violence unseen anywhere else in cinema, fueling the natural human fascination with the aberrant, morbid, anomalous and gruesome, and providing refuge from the orderly everyday life. The same principle concerned nudity in film. While the major studios, obliged by the Motion Picture Production Code, could not reveal too much female skin, parallel independent companies shot allegedly educational films about drug abuse or prostitution, which were dotted with nude scenes.

It is obvious now that exploitation has always existed hand in hand with the mainstream cinema, feeding on everything the mainstream would reject. Nowadays, exploitation cinema is in decline, mainly due to the aforementioned distribution hindrances, but also because many themes previously reserved for exploitation have been incorporated into the mainstream: extreme and even sadistic violence is no longer a taboo subject, even some of the highest paid actresses do not shy away from getting undressed in front of the camera, and the major studios themselves excel at exploiting popular subjects, shooting remakes, prequels and sequels of the highest grossing pictures.

4. Exploitation filmmakers as auteurs?

At the beginnings of the auteur theory, authorship was reserved for a particular brand of director: prolific, successful, popular with the audiences and recognized by the critics, well-established within the film business, and, if American, holding a strong position in their big studios. The names Hitchcock, Hawks, Ford, Welles or Aldrich would most often pop up as examples of Hollywood auteurs, which was understandable: the new theory needed clear-cut evidence to authenticate itself. Later on, critics and academics would argue whether this or that director is/was an auteur or not, but again they used to choose recognized, mainstream, popular figures like Curtiz.[40] The most recent publications on directors-as-auteurs also analyze critically-acclaimed and well-established filmmakers like Eastwood,[41] or, surprisingly enough, evaluate the works of directors who were already recognized as auteurs by the previous generation of

[40] See: Wollen, "The auteur theory: Michael Curtiz and Casablanca."
[41] See: Paul Smith, *Clint Eastwood: A Cultural Production* (London: UCL Press, 1993).

scholars (Ford,[42] Fellini[43]). Nevertheless, there exists a number of directors who would pose an interesting challenge to auteur theorists: blockbuster directors like Michael Bay, decidedly bad directors like Uwe Boll, or exploitation filmmakers like Corman.

It is here that we arrive at the main question of this paper: can an exploitation director be an auteur? The answer that initially comes to mind is "no." If exploitation films are schematic and audience-oriented, how can they reflect the personality of the director? Well, paradoxically, such a director can fulfil the three authorship criteria proposed by Wollen as well as (and sometimes even better than) a mainstream director.

Criterion number one: work ethic. Exploitation directors enjoy far more freedom than mainstream ones because, beside directing, they often produce their own movies as well and, consequently, hold the entire decisive power in their hands. Even if it is not the case and there is an external producer, the budget of an exploitation picture is usually too small to allow for a numerous film crew, which forces the director to perform the functions normally reserved for other crewmembers, like casting and even scriptwriting or acting. There is often no second directing unit either, so that the entire direction is the responsibility of one person only. Independent directors, like Tinto Brass or Uwe Boll, who work outside the studio system, first conceive a film (and sometimes write the script themselves) and then look for the means to finance it. As the budget of such pictures is relatively low, it is easier for directors to convince the producers to their own vision and make them finance the film without too much interference in the creative process. All in all, exploitation directors exert considerable influence not only on the artistic side but also on preparation and production.

Criterion number two: recurring themes. Bearing the afore-mentioned artistic freedom in mind, it is visible that the potential creativity of a director is not hampered too much by the influence of third parties. However, is self-expression through exploitation film at all possible? According to the auteur theory, it is as the "basic and recondite motifs," which reflect director's personality and provide evidence for authorship, transcend genres. The genre remains unimportant as long as it allows the director to express their thoughts, bear their personal expression and stamp their individuality and character.

Criterion number three: style. Style is even more detached from film genre than thematic notions. A truly gifted director can shoot a beautiful

[42] See: Brian Spittles, *John Ford* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2002).
[43] See: John C. Stubbs, *Federico Fellini As Auteur: Seven Aspects of His Films* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2006).

movie regardless of the topic, just like a truly talented painter can paint virtually anything in a beautiful way. In both cases, the topic is secondary and it is the technique that matters. If, as Hoveyda claimed, "in the hands of a great director, even the most insignificant detective story can be transformed into a work of art," then so can a biker story, cannibal story or nudist story.

It is, therefore, possible for an exploitation director to be an auteur, at least in theory. In practice, it does not mean that such a director does indeed exist, or ever existed, since many renowned and recognized directors who shot exploitation films and could be considered auteurs (Coppola, Scorsese, Bogdanovich, Demme) quickly moved to the major studios and earned their reputation making A-grade films.[44] However, if "pure" exploitation-auteurs do exist, Roger Corman could be one of them. With 50 directed motion pictures (many of which he also produced or co-produced), 60 years' work in the exploitation business, an Honorary Oscar for Lifetime Achievement and the title "B-movie king" awarded by the press, Roger Corman, if anyone, might be a true exploitation auteur.

[44] Yet, numerous B-films from the major studios (such as Val Lewton's RKO productions) as well as some motion pictures from the "poverty row" (*Stranger on the Third Floor, Detour, The Hitch-Hiker*) are critically acclaimed and considered classics. Though they are not strictly exploitation, their status suggests that some low-budget filmmakers might indeed be considered auteurs.