**auteur/auteur theory/politique des auteurs/Cahiers du cinéma** Although *auteur* is a term that dates back to the 1920s in the theoretical writings of French film critics and directors of the silent era, it is worth pointing out that in Germany, as early

as 1913, the term 'author's film' (*Autorenfilm*) had already been coined. The *Autorenfilm* emerged partly as a response to the French *Film d'Art* (art cinema) movement which began in 1908 and which proved extremely popular. *Film d'Art* was particularly successful in attracting middle-class audiences to the cinema theatres because of its cachet of respectability as art cinema. The German term, *Autorenfilm*, is, however, also associated with a more polemical issue regarding questions of authorship. In this respect, some writers for the screen started campaigning for their rights to these so-called *Autorenfilm*. That is, they staked their claim not just to the script but to the film itself. In other words, the film was to be judged as the work of the author rather than the person responsible for directing it (Eisner, 1969, 39). In France the concept of auteur (in the 1920s) comes from the other direction, namely that the film-maker is the auteur – irrespective of the origin of the script. Often, in fact, the author of the script and film-maker were one and the same (but not always), for example, the film-maker Germaine Dulac worked with the playwright Antonin Artaud to make *La Coquille et le clergyman* (1927). During the 1920s, the debate in France centred on the auteur versus the scenario-led film (that is, scenarios commissioned by studios and production companies from scriptwriters and subsequently directed by a studio-appointed director). This distinction fed into the high-art/low-art debate already set in motion as early as 1908 in relation to film (the so-called *Film d'Art* versus popular cinema controversy). Thus, by the 1920s within the domain of film theory, auteur-films had as much value if not more than canonical literary adaptations which in turn had more value than adaptations of popular fiction. After 1950, and in the wake of Alexandre Astruc's seminal essay 'Naissance d'une nouvelle avant-garde: la Caméra-stylo' (*L'Ecran français*, 1948) this debate was 'picked up' again and popularized – with the eventual effect, as we shall see, of going some way towards dissolving the high-art/low-art issue. The leader in this renewed auteur-debate was the freshly launched film review *Cahiers du cinéma* (launched in 1951) and the essay most famously identified with this debate is François Truffaut's 1954 essay 'Une certaine tendance du cinéma'. Although it should not be seen as the sole text arguing for auteur cinema, none the less, it is considered *the* manifesto for the **French New Wave**.

In the 1950s, the *Cahiers du cinéma* (still in existence today) was headed by André Bazin, a film critic, and was written by a regular group of film critics, known as the *Cahiers* group. This group did not pursue the 1920s theorists' thinking (see **avant-garde**); in fact, they either ignored or totally dismissed it. This later debate is the one that has been carried forward into film theory. Through the *Cahiers* discussions on the *politique des auteurs* (that is, the polemical debate surrounding the concept of auteurism), the group developed the notion of the auteur by binding it closely up with the concept of **mise-en-scène**. This shift in the meaning of the auteur was largely due to the avid attention the *Cahiers* group paid to American/**Hollywood** cinema. During the German occupation of France in the Second World War, American films had been proscribed. Suddenly, after the war, hundreds of such films, heretofore unseen, flooded the French cinema screens. This cinema, directed by the likes of Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawkes, John Ford and Samuel Fuller, seemed refreshingly new and led the *Cahiers* group to a reconsideration of Hollywood's production. They argued that just because American directors had little or no say over any of the production process bar the staging of the **shots**, this did not mean that they could not attain auteur status. Style, as in mise-en-scène, could also demarcate an auteur. Thanks to the *Cahiers* group, the term auteur could now refer either to a director's discernible style through mise-en-scène or to film-making practices where the director's signature was as much in evidence on the script/scenario as it was on the film product itself. Exemplars of auteurism in this second form (total author) are Jean Vigo, Jean Renoir, Jean-Luc Godard, Agnès Varda in France, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Wim Wenders, Margarethe von Trotta in Germany, Orson Welles and David Lynch in the United States. Certain film-makers (mostly of the mise-en-scène form of auteur) have had this label ascribed to them by the *Cahiers* group even though their work may pre-date this use of the term (for example Hawkes, Ford, Fuller and Hitchcock on the American scene).

The *politique des auteurs* was a polemic initiated by the *Cahiers* group not just to bring favourite American film-makers into the canon but also to attack the French cinema of the time which they considered sclerotic, ossified. Dubbing it *le cinéma de papa,* they accused it of being script-led, redolent with safe psychology, lacking in social realism and of being produced by the same old scriptwriters and film-makers whose time was up (François Truffaut was by far the most virulent in his attacks). This quasi-Oedipal polemic established the primacy of the
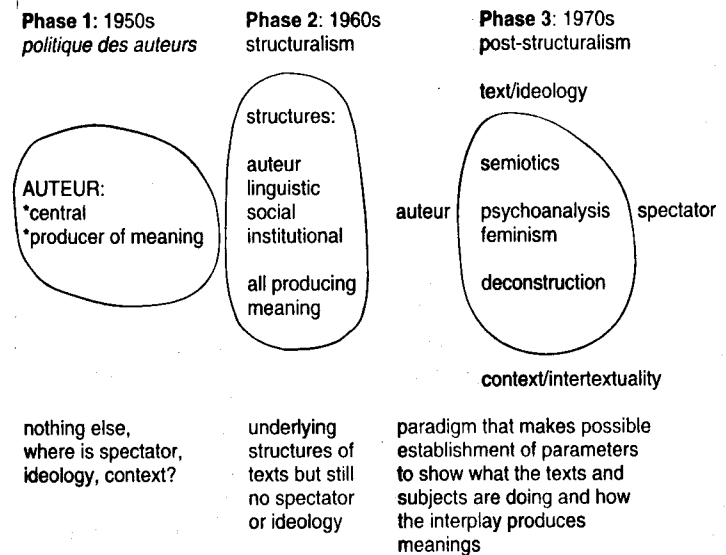
author/auteur and as such proposed a rather romantic and, therefore, conservative aesthetic. And, given the hot political climate in France during the 1950s, it is striking how apolitical and unpoliticized the group's writings were – pointing again to a conservative positioning. A further problem with this polemic is that by privileging the auteur it erases context (that is, history) and therefore side-steps **ideology**. Equally, because film is being looked at for its formalistic, stylistic and thematic structures, unconscious structure (such as the unspoken dynamics between film-maker and actor, the economic pressures connected with the industry) is precluded. Interestingly, of two of the writers in the *Cahiers* group who went on to make films, Godard and Truffaut, it is Truffaut's work that is locked in the conservative romantic ideology of the *politique des auteurs* and Godard's which has constantly questioned auteurism (among other things).

This *politique* generated a debate that lasted well into the 1980s, and auteur is a term which still prevails today. Given its innate conservatism one might well ask why. The first answer is that it helped to shift the notion of film theory, which until the 1950s had been based primarily in sociological analysis. The second answer is that the debate made clear that attempts to provide a single film theory just would not work and that, in fact, film is about multiple theories.

What follows is a brief outline of the development of auteur theory through three phases (for more detail see Andrew, 1984; Caughie, 1981; Cook, 1985; Lapsley and Westlake, 1988). The figure outlined opposite gives a graphic representation of auteurism.

The term 'auteur theory' came about in the 1960s as a mistranslation by the American film critic Andrew Sarris. What had been a 'mere' polemic now became a full-blown theory. Sarris used auteurism to nationalistic and chauvinistic ends to elevate American/Hollywood cinema to the status of the 'only good cinema', with but one or two European art films worthy of mention. As a result of this misuse of the term, cinema became divided into a canon of the 'good' or 'great' directors and the rest. The initial impact of this on film courses and film studies in general was considerable, the tendency being to study only the good or great canon. Thankfully the impact of cultural studies on film studies in the late 1970s has served to redress this imbalance as well as developments in film theory.

The debate did not end there. It was picked up in the late 1960s in the light of the impact of **structuralism**. In France, the



Phase 1: 1950s
*politique des auteurs*

AUTEUR:
*central
*producer of meaning

nothing else,
where is spectator,
ideology, context?

Phase 2: 1960s
structuralism

structures:
auteur
linguistic
social
institutional
all producing
meaning

underlying
structures of
texts but still
no spectator
or ideology

Phase 3: 1970s
post-structuralism

text/ideology
semiotics
psychoanalysis
feminism
deconstruction

auteur ... spectator

context/intertextuality

paradigm that makes possible
establishment of parameters
to show what the texts and
subjects are doing and how
the interplay produces
meanings

*Cahiers du cinéma* was obliged to rethink and readjust its thinking around auteurism, and in Britain the film journal *Movie* significantly developed the debate. As a concept, structuralism dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century primarily in the form of Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic theories. However, it remained little known until the theories were brought into the limelight by the French philosopher-semiotician Roland Barthes in the 1950s – especially in his popularizing essays *Mythologies* (1957). Saussure, in his *Cours de linguistique générale*, sets out the base paradigm by which all language can be ordered and understood. The base paradigm *langue/parole* was intended as a function that could simultaneously address and speak for the profound universal structures of language or language system (*langue*) and their manifestations in different cultures (*parole*). Claude Lévi-Strauss's anthropological structuralism of the 1960s (which looked at American Indian myths) continued in a similar vein, although this time it was applied to **narrative** structures. Lévi-Strauss's thesis was that since all cultures are the products of the human brain there must be, somewhere, beneath the surface, features that are common to all.

Structuralism was an approach that became extremely popular in France during the 1960s. Following the trend set by Barthes and Lévi-Strauss, the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser

adapted it into his discussions on ideology and Jacques Lacan into his writings on **psychoanalysis**. The fundamental point to be made about this popularization of structuralism in France is socio-political and refers to structuralism's strategy of total theory. This popularization of structuralism coincided with Charles de Gaulle's return to presidential power in 1958. His calls for national unity (in the face of the Algerian crisis), the era of economic triumphalism and the consequent nationalism that prevailed were in themselves symptomatic of a desire for structures to be mobilized to give France a sense of national identity. Thus, the desire for total structure, as exemplified by structuralism, can be read as an endeavour to counter the real political instability of the 1960s.

It is also worth labouring the point that this 'rethinking' of film theory in the 1960s did not come via film criticism (as it did in the 1950s) but through other disciplines, namely structural linguistics and semiotics. This pattern would repeat itself in the 1970s with psychoanalysis and philosophy pushing the debate along, and then history in the 1980s. The significance of this new trend of essayists and philosophers turning to cinema to apply their theories cannot be underestimated. Not to put too simplistic a reading on their importance, it is unquestionably their work which has legitimated film studies as a discipline and brought cinema firmly into the academic arena.

Structuralism was eagerly seized upon by proponents of auteurism because it was believed that, with its scientific approach, it would facilitate the establishing of an objective basis for the concept and counter the romantic subjectivity of auteur theory. Furthermore, apart from its potential to give a scientific legitimacy to auteurism, the attraction of structuralism for film theory in general lay in the theory's underlying strategy to establish a total structure.

Symptomatic of this desire for order in film theory were Christian Metz's endeavours (in the mid-1960s) to situate cinema within a Saussurian semiology. Metz, a semiotician, was the first to set out, in his *Essais sur la signification au cinéma* (1971, 1972), a total theory approach in the form of his *grande syntagmatique*. He believed that cinema possessed a total structure. To adopt Saussurian terms, he perceived cinema as *langue* and each film as being *parole*. His endeavour – to uncover the rules that governed film language and to establish a framework for a semiotics of the cinema – pointed to a fundamental limitation with

such an all-embracing, total approach: that of the theory overtaking the text and occluding other aspects of the text. What gets omitted is the notion of pleasure and **audience** reception, and what occurs instead is a crushing of the aesthetic experience through the weight of the theoretical framework.

This is not to say that structuralism did not advance the debate on film theory and auteurism. It did. Auteur-structuralism brought about a major positive change to auteur theory (à la Sarris). The British film journal *Movie* pointed out the problems of a resolutely romantic aesthetic in relation to cinema, but saw ways to deal with them. By situating the auteur as one structure among others – such as the notion of **genre** and the film industry – producing meaning, the theory would yield to a greater flexibility. *Cahiers du cinéma* was also critical of the romantic notion of auteurship because the auteur is not a unified and free creative spirit and film as a text is a 'play of tensions, silences and repressions' (Caughie, 1981, 128). Thus the auteur was displaced from the centre of the work and was now one structure among several others making up the film text. This displacement allowed other structures to emerge, namely, the linguistic, social and institutional structures and the auteur's relationship to them. And even though in the late 1960s the tendency was still to perceive the **auteur** structure as the major one, it was also recognized that the **studio** and **stars** – amongst others – were equally important contributors to the production of meaning in film. Still absent from the debate, however, was the **spectator** – the question of pleasure and ideology.

After 1968 *Cahiers* made a first attempt to introduce ideology into the debate in its exploration of Hollywood films that either 'resisted' or reflected dominant ideology. (In what is referred to as 'the *Young Mr Lincoln* debate', the *Cahiers* group claimed that this film mediated Republican values to counter Roosevelt's Democratic New Deal measures of 1933–41 and to promote a Republican victory in the 1940 Presidential elections.) Althusser's discussions on ideology, particularly his concept of interpellation, made it possible for both *Cahiers* and the British journal *Screen* to start to address the screen–spectator relationship. At this juncture, both journals accepted what, with hindsight, turned out to be a profoundly anti-humanist analysis of spectator positioning. According to Althusser, ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) interpellate individuals as **subjects**: that is, as pre-existing structures, ISAs function to constitute the individual as a subject to the

ideology. ISAs manifest themselves as institutions of the state: the police, government, monarchies are ISAs. Just to illustrate: the British are subjects *to* the monarchy. The individual is, therefore, an effect of ISAs and not an agent. As subject-effects, individuals give meaning to ideology by colluding with and acting according to it. A mirroring process occurs which provides the subject with a reassuring sense of national identity (of belonging). Applied to film this means that cinema, in terms of meaning production, positions the spectator as a subject-effect who takes as real the images emanating from the screen. Thus, meaning is received, but not constructed, by the subject.

It would take the impact of post-structuralism (see **structuralism**), psychoanalysis, feminism and **deconstruction** to make clear finally that a single theory was inadequate and that what was required was a pluralism of theories that cross-fertilized each other. Post-structuralism, which does not find an easy definition, could be said to regroup and, to some extent, cross-fertilize the three other theoretical approaches (psychoanalysis, feminism and deconstruction). As its name implies, it was born out of a profound mistrust for total theory, and started from the position that all texts are a double articulation of **discourses** and non-discourses (that is, the said and the non-said, *le dit et le non-dit*). In terms of auteur theory the effect was multiple: 'the intervention of **semiotics** and psychoanalysis' 'shattering' once and for all 'the unity of the auteur' (Caughie, 1981, 200). Because post-structuralism looks at all relevant discourses (said or unsaid) revolving around and within the text, many more areas of meaning-production can be identified. Thus, semiotics introduced the theory of the textual subject: that is, subject positions within the textual process, including that of the spectator and the auteur, all producing meanings. Furthermore, semiotics also made clear that the text is a series of **signs** producing meanings.

Having defined the auteur's place within the textual process, auteur theory could now be placed within a theory of textuality. Since there is no such thing as a 'pure' text, the **intertextuality** (effects of different texts upon another text) of any film text must be a major consideration, including auteurial intertextuality. That is, the auteur is a figure constructed out of her or his film: because of x hallmarks the film is ostensibly a certain film-maker's and also influenced by that of others, etc. Psychoanalysis introduced the theory of the sexual, specular, divided subject (divided by the fact of difference, loss of and separation

from the mother (see **psychoanalysis**)). Questions of the subject come into play: who is the subject (the text, auteur, spectator)? What are the effects of the **enunciating** text (i.e. the film as performance) on the spectator and those on the filmic text of the spectator? What are the two-way ideological effects (film on spectator and vice versa) and the pleasures derived by the spectator as she or he moves in and out of the text (see **spectator-identification**)? To speak of text means too that the context must also come into play in terms of meaning production: modes of production, the social, political and historical context. Finally and simultaneously, one cannot speak of a text as transparent, natural or innocent: therefore it is to be unpicked, deconstructed so that its modes of representation are fully understood.