

A Film by (Director's Name Here): Authorship Theory, the Collaborative Nature of Filmmaking
and why *The Social Network* is and is not *Citizen Kane*

By

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As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins.¹

Roland Barthes and others pronounced the death of the author in poststructuralist theory. And with this declaration came a metaphorical turn in the way scholars have approached film. Not only was the author dead, but the theory of authorship in film also metaphorically died. So, using authorship theory as an approach to filmmaking today might be seen as a postmodern revivification of the dead, a zombie of a theory. So how useful can it be? I would argue that despite its atrophied use in understanding meaning in film, the problem of authorship has not actually gone away. Theories and problems of authorship in film began simultaneously with the birth of the moving image as an art and as a business. It will not go away because there are still too many questions that this concept raises in relation to our understanding of films and their meanings. The first question that comes to mind is why do we want to get rid of authorship? If our job as scholars is to uncover meaning, authorship theory is just one more tool for doing this. Is it not counterproductive to throw away any approach that would help us understand all the layers of meaning that exist in a text? I say the author is alive and kicking, but the niggling question remains: who is the author of a film?

Historically the director has been singled out as *the* creative force behind the final product. The perpetuation of this delineation, both in scholarship and production practice, has been contested over the years. Scholars have gone on to make cases for writers, cinematographers and editors as authors of films, in fact using the same arguments used to point to the director. Regardless of which part of the production process that is focused upon to

¹ Roland Barthes. "The Death of the Author." *Theories of Authorship*. (London: Routledge, 1981) 208.

determine authorship, what we continue to do is insist upon a single author. If this is how we continue to use authorship theory, then indeed, it is merely a zombie. Perhaps instead of throwing the entire theory out, it is time for it to evolve into a new theory. For the singular quality of the term ‘author’ contradicts the very collaborative process of filmmaking.

With the release of *The Social Network*, many critics have evoked *Citizen Kane* in their reviews, the canonical film with the ‘auteur’ director, and refer to this film as a David Fincher film. In this paper, I look at why these critics have evoked this canonical film in reference to *The Social Network* and expose that traditional authorship approaches to criticism remain, despite its supposed death. By utilizing traditional authorship theory, I will reveal how *The Social Network* should be seen as a product of the screenwriter, Aaron Sorkin, and not the director. The goal of this revivification is to begin to address those elements of authorship theory which may still prove useful toward a new theory of collaborative creation.

The Problem with the Auteur Theory in American Cinema

The history of the development of film as an art and industry includes many instances where the director, scenarist or star has been privileged. By reading through any trade publication or fan magazine from the inception of the Hollywood filmmaking industry, articles about new films, as well as their advertisements, obviously show that Hollywood has used these individuals as ways to distinguish their films, at least since the inception of the star system in the early teens. While these practices are industrial, they point to the fact that the concept of individuals as creators is important. This is not theoretical but practical. Yet, it indicates that theories of authorship would emerge.

When Francois Truffaut wrote his seminal and vitriolic essay ‘Une certaine tendance du cinéma français’ for the *Cahiers du Cinema* in 1954 he started a revolution in French cinema. I point out that this was specific to the French film industry, as this essay focused on what he

referred to as the ‘tradition of quality’ in French cinema at the time.² Truffaut’s essay attacked a very specific practice at a very specific time in France. The context of both time and place must be taken into consideration when evaluating and utilizing Truffaut’s theory about cinema.

Truffaut’s essay was a backlash against the use of literary adaptations by literary writers in film. His particular criticism appears to lay specifically with novels being adapted by novelists who have neither an understanding nor an appreciation for film. He wrote:

Talent, to be sure, is not a function of fidelity, but I consider an adaptation of value only when written by *a man of the cinema*. Aurenche and Bost are essentially literary men and I reproach them here for being contemptuous of the cinema by underestimating it.³

For Truffaut, the true author of a film must be ‘a man of the cinema,’ with Robert Bresson being one of the auteurs that he credits as being just such a man. Robert Bresson was a writer and director of the cinema. So, while, Truffaut, and other critics of the *Cahiers du Cinema*, attributed authorship to these directors, we must keep in mind that many of them were also writers of their films.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, American scholar and critic Andrew Sarris appropriated Truffaut’s theory and applied it to American cinema. Sarris’s approach was a historical one, looking at directors and their films, to create a hierarchy of films and directors as a way of looking at the history of American cinema. What he appropriated from Truffaut was the attribution, or privileging, of the director as the author, or primary creative force, behind each film or body of work.⁴ Sarris states:

The auteur critic is obsessed with the wholeness of the art and the artist. He looks at the film as a whole, a director as a whole. The parts, however entertaining

² Francois Truffaut, “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema,” *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*, Ed. Bill Nichols, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

³ Truffaut “A certain tendency of the French cinema.”

⁴ Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors And Directions 1929-1968*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996) 25.

individually, must cohere meaningfully. This meaningful coherence is more likely when the director dominates the proceedings with skill and purpose.⁵

The problem with Sarris's appropriation of the director as author is that Truffaut's theory was a backlash against a particular practice in French cinema. Truffaut's particular issue did not apply to American cinema, at least not in the same way. The industrial practices in Hollywood were quite different from those in France. Truffaut's argument may have been arbitrary, but it was specific to a particular problem. What Sarris, and others, proceeded to do with American film criticism and the privileging of the director was illogical both from a theoretical perspective and a practical one. Thomas Schatz's book, *The Genius of the System*, gives a detailed historical account of the industrial practices of the American film industry. His account privileges the studio system itself, and often times the producer specifically.⁶ Within the contract system of classical Hollywood filmmaking – meaning that all roles within the filmmaking process were individuals for hire – the privileging of one individual as the author of a film becomes problematic. What the auteur critics did was to attribute the concept of an individual signature, clearly readable across an individual's body of work, to the director. Jane Gaines, a professed anti-auteurist, says:

One of my objections, then, has to do with the mixed metaphors of authorship: the hand of, the mark of, the body of. My question also has to do with the difficulty of finding as well as attributing marks, with identifying signs said to have been left in the text by an author, signs that critics have read as "signatures."⁷

It is this 'signature' or individual style that could supposedly be read as the director's that is arbitrary and problematic. These directors were under contract just as the writers,

⁵ Sarris, 30.

⁶ Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*, (New York: Henry Holt, 1996).

⁷ Jane M. Gaines, "Of Cabbages and Authors," Ed. Jennifer M Bean & Diane Negra, *Feminist Reader in Early Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002) 94.

cinematographers, editors, stars, etc. were. The privileging of the director as the primary creative force was appropriated from Truffaut and applied in a way that just did not make sense. The reading of these signatures across the body of work of any given director could also be applied to any other role within the industry to the same result.

The auteur-structuralist scholars raised new issues. Instead of focusing on the amorphous ‘signature’ of the director, they sought to look for thematic similarities within the structure of the narratives themselves. While this provides interesting insights into storytelling and myth, not just for film but for any narrative format, these scholars still utilized their theory in regard to the director. While their approach attempted to be, what they considered, a more scientific approach, they maintained the privileging of the director as the author. This arbitrary choice actually becomes more problematic with structuralism as the structure of a film is first introduced in a screenplay, written by an individual who may or may not be the director. Had the auteur-structuralists utilized their theory to privilege the screenwriter or scenarist instead of the director it would have been more logical, although still limiting.

As film theorists began to look at semiotics as a way of uncovering meaning, we return to where I began this paper – with the death of the author. In the simplest explanation possible, the author is irrelevant because the reader interprets the meanings of a text. It is this interpretation that is important. Yet, the interpretation of meaning comes through many channels. Foucault in his essay ‘What is an author?’ details the theory of the author function. He writes, ‘the function of an author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society.’⁸ What Foucault does, as well as others, is to strip the concept of the signature of an individual from the text and reduces the author to a function of discourse itself. Yet even

⁸ Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” *Theories of Authorship*. Ed. John Caughie. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul in association with the British Film Institute, 1981) 284.

Foucault makes a point, whether intentional or not, that the concept of the author contributes to how the reader, or viewer, interprets meaning. He says:

With the name of an author, however, the problems are far more complex. The disclosure that Shakespeare was not born in the house that tourists now visit would not modify the functioning of the author's name, but, if it were proved that he had not written the sonnets that we attribute to him, this would constitute a significant change and affect the manner in which the author's name functions.⁹

How we interpret a sonnet by Shakespeare will change if we discover that he did not write it.

The idea of an author, with a particular aura - to herald back to Walter Benjamin, contributes to the meaning making process. Foucault doesn't necessarily want to eliminate the author, but to diminish the importance of the individual and focus on the function of the role. Yet, we cannot entirely eliminate the individual, whether we like or it not, from our meaning-making processes.

Utilizing authorship theory as a tool for understanding meaning should not be thrown out but should be broken down into separate components. I argue that authorship theory needs to be looked at in two ways: 1) intentional authorship that is collective and 2) derived authorship.

Peter Sellors in his essay 'Collective Authorship in Film,' defines authorship as follows, 'Authorship is not a concept to be derived from a text but an *intentional action of an intending agent that causes* a text.'¹⁰ Sellors appears to be building off of Foucault's author-function theory, and yet Sellors maintains the importance of the individual contribution. He proposes that 'Without intention behind a work, we have no justification for interpreting it, as we have no distinction between the purposeful activity of text production and a chance occurrence of markings.'¹¹ If there is no intended meaning, then we have no reason to interpret it.

⁹ Foucault, 283.

¹⁰ Paul Sellors, "Collective Authorship in Film." *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism* 65.3 (2007) 263.

¹¹ Sellors, 264.

This argument falls apart on one level. There are many unintentional acts that occur from which we derive meaning – a leaf falling from a tree in autumn, a wave crashing on a rocky beach. Romantic images, no doubt, but unintentional in nature. Of course, based on Sellors' definition of authorship, these would not qualify as discourse. Even so, intention is not necessary for interpretation, even within discourse. Yet, if authorship is an aspect of discourse, then the intentions remain pertinent for understanding all levels of derived meaning. What is important, though, is that discourse is intentional. As readers or viewers, we attempt to interpret what the author intended as part of the meaning making process. It is not the sole level of interpretation but one, thereby maintaining the importance of authorial intention.

What I refer to as derived authorship deviates from Sellors but also returns to Foucault. The citation used earlier about Shakespeare illustrates what is meant here. Once an author has been established, our understanding of who that individual is – biographically, historically, stylistically – contributes to how we will interpret other works by that individual. It is another layer of meaning that cannot be overlooked or eliminated. Sellors uses an elaborate example of a monkey, by chance, typing out the exact same text that we know as *Henry V* by William Shakespeare. While highly improbable, the point he makes is that while the words of the text remain the same, the way we would read that text and derive meaning from it changes.¹² While his point is to emphasize how intentions change a work, I would argue, as did Foucault, that it is our knowledge of the individual, from a cultural perspective, that also contributes to how we interpret a text.

So far this discussion still appears to focus on the concept of a single individual as author. Sellors' intention is to broaden this concept out to collective authorship with collaborative intentions. He says, 'If there is one substantial point in the critique of romantic notions of

¹² Sellors, 265.

authorship, it is that authorship is not an instance of solitary genius but, like most other human activities, a social practice.’¹³ He focuses on the concept of discourse, as a means to get to film as a collectively authored process with collective, or collaborative intentions. Everyday conversation is a collaborative discourse with multiple authors with individual and collective intentions.¹⁴ He goes on to make the case that there are many authors within a given film whose intentions are both individual and collective. To single out one individual as the author of a film would eliminate the collective intention of the work and thereby diminish the ultimate meaning that could be derived. He states, ‘We need to consider therefore not only how many members of a production count as members of the film’s authorial body, but also the number of authored components that contribute to the overall film and how each of these contributions relate to one another.’¹⁵ The intended meaning of a film is singular yet collective. Each authorial component contributes individual meaning for a collective goal. It is in the collaboration that collective intended meaning is achieved.¹⁶

Reviving the Debate: The Author of Citizen Kane

When Pauline Kael wrote her controversial essay ‘Raising Kane’ in 1971, she revived an old debate concerning the very nature of authorship in film. The essay provoked responses, most notably Peter Bogdanovich’s *Esquire* interview with Orson Welles himself, to what was seen as an attack on a figure and film within the canon, which were beyond reproach. For Laura Mulvey, both critics have presented a rhetorical case, which she ultimately finds problematic. She instead turns to Robert Carringer’s book *The Making of Citizen Kane* as the definitive answer to who the author of this film is. She states:

¹³ Sellors, 268.

¹⁴ Sellors, 264.

¹⁵ Sellors, 270.

¹⁶ Sellors, 268.

Robert Carringer's book *The Making of Citizen Kane* quietly describes the production history of the film and the collaborative conditions of work under which Welles developed the *Citizen Kane* project, in such a way as to do justice to all creative contributions while also describing just how and why disputes arose. His book puts paid to the 'Who is the true author of *Citizen Kane*?' debate, with a researched rather than rhetorical assessment of Welles's central role, while also illuminating the complexities of authorship in Hollywood, studio system, cinema.¹⁷

While I do not necessarily disagree with Mulvey, there are three key points that are addressed by Kael, which due to the 'rhetorical' nature of her essay, seem to have been overlooked: (1) the importance of the screenplay to filmmaking once sound emerged, (2) the collaborative nature of filmmaking, and (3) indeed, the need for someone to be in control.

The first important point that Pauline Kael makes in "Raising Kane" is truly about the importance of the development of the screenplay once synchronized sound became a reality. She focuses on the thirties' comedies and the group of writers who wrote many of them. She extols that first decade of talking films primarily because of the writers that had already been drawn to Hollywood during the silent era and then lured their friends there. These writers shared a common background, one in newspapers and magazines. Writers like Mankiewicz, Ben Hecht, Charles MacArthur, George S. Kaufman, Dorothy Parker, Nathanael West, John O'Hara, Donald Ogden Stewart and Nunnally Johnson, just to name a few that she mentions.¹⁸ The scenarist in the silent era was not privileged, but even with the introduction of sound, the screenwriter remained relegated to the backburner of filmmaking. As Kael aptly notes:

Screenwriters don't make names for themselves; the most famous ones are the ones whose names were famous before they went to Hollywood, or who made names later in the theatre or from books, or who, like Preston Sturges, became directors.¹⁹

¹⁷ Laura Mulvey, *Citizen Kane*. (London: BFI Publishing, 1992) 9.

¹⁸ Pauline Kael, *Raising Kane and other essays*. (London: Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd., 1996) 167-168.

¹⁹ Kael, 172.

The director had already taken hold as the binding force in filmmaking, if primarily in practice and not yet in theory. Laura Mulvey comments on Pauline Kael and the issue of the auteur theory – and its emphasis on the director - in her book *Citizen Kane* by stating, “In 1971 Pauline Kael revived and refueled old embers of the credit controversy with an ulterior and polemical motive: to counter the auteurist tendency in film criticism.”²⁰ While Mulvey’s assessment may be correct in what Kael’s motives were in reviving the debate, Kael’s point and a desire to counter the auteurist tendency in filmmaking is important. The point she makes, which seems to have been overlooked, is that there are two different kinds of films: those that are driven by the direction and those that are driven by the screenplay.²¹ The emphasis on the first type is where scholars and film schools have focused and those are the films that are placed in the canon. With an emphasis on the visuals and the *mise en scene*, which film schools later picked up on with their extolling of the phrase “show don’t tell,” the importance of the screenplay has been minimized. For the concept of “show don’t tell” can be read too literally. What she explains is that the added element of sound provided an entirely new vista of opportunities with which to work within filmmaking - the opportunity to narrate a story with dialogue full of subtext or the sound of a particular actor’s voice. It was a time of experimentation with this new element. She explains:

The talking comedies weren’t as aesthetically pure as the silents, yet they felt liberating in a way that even great silents didn’t. The elements to which we could respond were multiplied; not there were vocal nuances, new kinds of timing, and wonderful new tricks, like the infectious way Claudette Colbert used to break up while listening to someone.²²

I would make one addition to Kael’s use of the word “aesthetically.” Clearly, she means to use it in reference to visual aesthetics, because in reference to film that is what scholars seem to take it

²⁰ Mulvey, 11.

²¹ Kael, 176-177.

²² Kael, 176.

to mean. But the concept of aesthetics does not merely apply to the visual; it can also apply to the aural. We talk about aesthetics in reference to music. In some way, those comedies of the thirties that she feels have been overlooked within the canon were masterpieces of aural aesthetics at a time when film was experimenting with a new element, an element that transformed film from merely a visual medium to a visual and aural medium. The aural element of filmmaking – which must necessarily include dialogue as well as sound effects – contributed to what film became. Those screenplays with their acerbic wit and overlapping dialogue were just as important to the development of filmmaking as were the visual aesthetics of the earlier silents. It was in the thirties that the possibilities for the screenplay as something more than just a list of visual scenes to be shot came into being. While Kael's overall emphasis is a focus on Mankiewicz as the screenwriter of *Citizen Kane* and the importance of his contribution to that great film work, the underlying point is that the screenwriter is just as important to the filmmaking process as the director. Even Carringer notes the importance of Mankiewicz's contribution to this particular film.

Citizen Kane is the only major Welles film on which the writing credit is shared. Not coincidentally, it is also the Welles film that has the strongest story, the most fully realized characters, and the most carefully sculpted dialogue. Mankiewicz made the difference. While his efforts may seem plodding next to Welles's flashy touches of genius, they are of fundamental importance nonetheless.²³

Carringer's argument is ultimately about this film; Kael makes a much more universal statement about the screenplay. While arguably much of Kael's analysis is anecdotal, based on her own experiences as an audience member in the '30s, it does not mean that it is incorrect. The approaches that Kael and Carringer take may be different, but the ultimate results are comparable.

²³ Robert L. Carringer, *The Making of Citizen Kane*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1996) 35.

The emphasis on the director as the author of a film by mere fact of that role is what Kael seems to want to dispute. In the theatre the playwrights and actors rule, in film the directors and actors rule. The play is all about the dialogue and how that dialogue is utilized to relay character, themes and plot. Film began as a purely visual medium, even though work on synchronized sound and image had been going on almost since film's emergence. Until the technology caught up with the vision for what the talking motion picture could be, film remained silent. Therefore, it makes a kind of sense that the writers in film would be considered less important and those who created the on-screen visuals would be elevated. The irony is that it was the director and not the cinematographer who was elevated to that status.

The concept of directing is amorphous in many ways. If you were to ask a director of either a stage play or a film what it is that s/he does, you would invariably get an answer that would be completely different from what any other director might say. In one sense it is very much a managerial role. The director is the person who takes all of the elements that are needed to create a staged production or film and combines them into a coherent whole. Yet, to combine them into a coherent whole, there is another element, the one that is truly amorphous. For lack of a better word, let's call it a 'vision' of what the final product will be and will mean. On the stage when a play is being produced for the first time, more often than not the playwright is at all the rehearsals. The vision of the director, whatever it may be, will be constantly influenced by the playwright and the playwright's intentions. This is not to say that the director has no influence, it is just a more collaborative effort. A theatrical director has more control when reviving a play than when introducing one. In filmmaking, the screenwriter has never had this privilege. The playwright writes alone and from his own ideas; the screenwriter, almost from the beginning, was a contracted worker who may have been able to input her/his own ideas while working within the system, but the very nature of a worker for hire changes the output. The

system itself was set up as a collaborative process in which no one was privileged, except perhaps the studio putting out the film, until the star system emerged.²⁴

Kael addresses that the very nature of traditional authorship theory could actually be applied to another role within the filmmaking process. She relays the following story:

A few years ago, some college students asked me what films I would like to see again just for my own pleasure, and without a second's thought I replied *Duck Soup* and *Million Dollar Legs*, though at the time I had no idea there was any connection between them. Yet surely there is a comic spirit that links them – even the settings, Freedonia and Klopstokia with Groucho as Prime Minister of one and Fields as President of the other – and now that I have looked into Herman Mankiewicz's career it's apparent that he was a key linking figure in just the kind of movies my friends and I loved best.²⁵

Of course, Mankiewicz's involvement in these two films was as producer and not writer, but the point she makes is that he links them. It is the common connection of a single person between two seemingly unrelated films, both with a certain 'comic spirit' that she found appealing. A comic spirit that was based on a particular type of cynical, literary wit that was prevalent in screenwriting during this time due to the very nature and backgrounds of the screenwriters.²⁶ Is this empirical evidence? Absolutely not, but neither are any of the arguments that link directors to their films. She liked two films and in the process of determining why she liked them she made a connection between them through a solitary figure – her perception, or interpretation of who the author was. Here's my anecdote. Three of my top ten favorite films are *All About Eve*, *The Philadelphia Story* and *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*. What links all three films? Joseph Mankiewicz (coincidentally the brother of Herman for whom Kael so passionately pleads). Is he the author of the films? Perhaps, but not because he directed them, because he only directed two, was a writer on one and the producer on one. The point is that I make a connection between

²⁴ See Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, Thomas Schatz's *The Genius of the System*, or even Tom Gunning's *D.W. Griffith & The Origins of American Narrative Film*, just to name a few.

²⁵ Kael, 176.

²⁶ Kael, 167.

these films based on what I perceive as the common influence. And the common influence is a single person, just not always in the same role. What is key to all of this is that the connection to a single author is made after-the-fact. Kael made her connection upon looking for it, as did I. I would argue that Sarris and the American auteurs after him have done the same. As long as authorship theory is used to make this after-the-fact connection, it can never progress toward what could become another important site of meaning making.

The second and third points which I find key to Kael's argument are actually closely related, the collaborative nature of filmmaking and a controlling force behind the film. In fact, after all of the time spent on the screenplay and Mankiewicz, she even appears to lapse back into traditional authorship theory in reference to the director and that role in the process. Toward the end of the essay, she states:

The director should be in control not because he is the sole creative intelligence but because only if he is in control can he liberate and utilize the talents of his co-workers, who languished (as directors do) in studio-factory productions. The best interpretation to put on it when a director says that a movie is totally his is not that he did it all himself but that he wasn't interfered with, that he made the choices and the ultimate decisions that the whole thing isn't an unhappy compromise for which no one is responsible; not that he was the sole creator but almost the reverse – that he was free to use all the best ideas offered him.²⁷

The emphasis on collaboration and control are the two key points that she makes here. In fact, it is that someone must have control in order to take full advantage of the collaborative aspects of the medium. While she seemingly appears to be reverting to the director as author, the very fact that she uses the word creator instead of author is key. There are multiple points of input during the filmmaking process and obviously, to avoid chaos, someone should be in control. That control she refers to is about incorporating all of those points of input, not to take credit for them. Despite this, even Kael admits that the control point for Citizen Kane was Orson Welles: "Welles

²⁷ Kael, 255.

had a vitalizing, spellbinding talent; he was the man who brought out the best in others and knew how to use it.”²⁸ And this conclusion that she arrives at is not so different from the one that Carringer arrives at when he concludes, “ The quality of the film is partly a measure of the quality of its collaborative talent. On *Citizen Kane*, Welles was fortunate to have collaborators ideally suited to his temperament and working methods and capable of performing at his level of ambition. The film could never have been made without him.”²⁹ *Citizen Kane* was indeed Welles’s film. It was his vision from the start but not in isolation. He helmed the ship and had the control over the best way to utilize all of the talents that were available. Ultimately, what all of this says is that *Citizen Kane* is a great film not merely because Orson Welles alone was a genius director. It was Welles’s ability to recognize the genius of others and combine them into a product for which the whole was greater than merely the sum of its parts.

Sorkin, Fincher and Why the Film Doesn’t Achieve Greatness

Kael, Mulvey and Carringer are merely a small sample of those who have written about the canonical film that is *Citizen Kane* and the many talented artists who contributed to its making. It still stands today as one of the ‘greatest’ films ever made. For this reason, when utilizing *Citizen Kane* as a comparative tool, a distinction needs to be made between the two *Citizen Kane*’s. For there are two. The first is the canonical film of unachievable greatness, the film that has caused the Kael, Mulveys, and Carringers of the academy and critical world to write about so passionately and so often. The second is the product made up of those elements that have been utilized intertextually in so many films that have been made subsequently. And one of those films is *The Social Network*.

²⁸ Kael, 255.

²⁹ Carringer, 134.

While not all of the reviews made a direct connection between *Citizen Kane* and *The Social Network*, of the reviews I read five of them made no direct mention to *Kane*, although the implication was there, and six of them mentioned *Kane*. So, let's be perfectly clear about what it means to connect *The Social Network* to *Citizen Kane*. There is not one review that utilizes the first *Kane* and rightly so. In fact, Todd McCarthy in his blog *Deep Focus* when evoking a comparison between the two films says, "I advance this idea reluctantly, as nothing will cause a film to appear overrated like comparing it in any way to the perennial greatest movie ever made in Hollywood."³⁰ It is, in fact, the second *Kane* that is evoked, those component parts that make up the product. So how is *The Social Network* a *Citizen Kane* for the Internet generation? Well, primarily through its screenplay – the narrative, its structure and its themes. Comparative references to acting style, editing techniques or cinematography are rare, as are comparisons to the amorphous directing. This latter is most striking simply because, as had already been noted, the film is credited and referred to by the critics as a David Fincher film. Credits aside, *The Social Network* is actually an Aaron Sorkin film.

So what comparisons are made by the critics? There is a list: both films are about media magnates, have an unsympathetic main character who has lost something significant which propels his every move (Rosebud/Erica), have a narrative chronology which utilizes a juxtaposition of a present endeavor (the search for Rosebud/the lawsuits' depositions) with a chronological revealing of the past to the present, have overlapping, fast-paced dialogue, both thematically address problems with a capitalist society when one individual obtains so much wealth at a young age, and ultimately, neither of the main characters of the two film cares about money, instead they are both looking for universal popularity. Each of the reviews addresses at

³⁰ Todd McCarthy, "Review: *The Social Network*." Todd McCarthy's Deep Focus, October 19, 2010, http://blogs.indiewire.com/toddmccarthy/archives/review_the_social_network/#.

least one of these comparative elements, whether a direct connection is made between the films or not.

Each of these connections, though, directly relates to the actual narrative of the film, a narrative whose initial incarnation is in the form of a screenplay. Yet the arbitrary delineation of the director as the author of the film, entrenched through traditional authorship, comes through. For example, NY Times critic Manohla Dargis refers to the film as “David Fincher’s fleet, weirdly funny, exhilarating, alarming and fictionalized look at the man behind the social-media phenomenon Facebook,”³¹ and Roger Ebert said, “David Fincher’s film has the rare quality of being not only as smart as its brilliant hero, but in the same way. It is cocksure, impatient, cold, exciting and instinctively perceptive.”³² A contradiction emerges. Those elements that are being praised are attributed solely to Fincher, yet these particular attributes more rightly belong to Aaron Sorkin. The language that is utilized by these critics refers to elements of narrative and character and not in reference to visual representation specifically. The critics refer to it as David Fincher’s film, while referring to Aaron Sorkin’s screenplay. This disconnection between film and screenplay is one of the subtle side-effects of authorship theory.

The main problem raised in these early reviews and analyses of the film, where the remnants of authorship theory hang like a ghost in journalistic criticism, is this: what do you do when you have two known entities contributing to the final product of a film? David Fincher’s film work, especially films like *Se7en* and *Fight Club*, began to establish him as a director to watch. Aaron Sorkin is a known entity primarily from his television series’ (*Sports Night*, *The West Wing*), although he has film credits to his name as well. As Pauline Kael aptly noted,

³¹ Manohla Dargis, “Millions of Friends, But Not Very Popular,” *The New York Times*, 24 Sept. 2010, Web 19 Oct. 2010.

³² Roger Ebert, “The Social Network - rogerebert.com - Reviews.” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 29 Sept. 2010, Web 19 Oct. 2010.

screenwriters get recognition when they already have a name. Sorkin's name was established in another medium. Yet coming into this film, both could be seen as auteurs in their own right with specific qualities setting them apart from others. While one of the qualities that Sorkin is known for is his style of dialogue, which is certainly addressed by these critics, the fact that Aaron Sorkin's name is referenced in almost every review in more than just a perfunctory way contributes to the problem of the 'film by' delineation. Not unlike the problem that Kael raises in reference to Welles and Mankiewicz.

There is a difference, and it is the key difference in understanding why authorship on this film is more clouded than a mere credit can clear. While both Kael and Carringer address the multiple talents that contributed to *Citizen Kane*, Welles was the sole figure who brought those talents together. In that instance, a single person had control over how to guide the film. Such is not the case with *The Social Network*. While critics refer to 'Fincher and his writer, Aaron Sorkin'³³ and 'David Fincher and his team,'³⁴ it was not David Fincher who put together the entire team. In an in depth look at Aaron Sorkin and the screenplay for the film, Mark Harris in *New York Magazine* describes how producers Dana Brunetti and Michael DeLuca joined with Scott Rudin to bring this film to production, and Aaron Sorkin was brought on board by them early in 2009.³⁵ Orson Welles chose Herman Mankiewicz. David Fincher didn't choose Aaron Sorkin. Already, the question of a single controlling visionary over the film is raised. Without complete control over and collaboration with the writer over the script, Fincher's authorship of the film is questionable. Not his directorial abilities, but the film's designation as solely 'his.'

³³ Ebert.

³⁴ Bob Mondello, "The Social Network': Fact Or Fiction, It's A Tangled Web," *All Things Considered*, 30 Sept. 2010. Web. 19 Oct. 2010.

³⁵ Mark Harris, "Inventing Facebook," *NY Magazine*, 17 Sept 2010, Web. 19 Oct 2010.

Despite this, according to Harris, Sorkin had Fincher's support and approval with the script that he wrote. A pre-production anecdote establishes the beginnings of a collaborative effort. Sorkin's original screenplay was 162 pages, which in normal production 'page-to-minute' parlance would lead to a film of over 2 and ½ hours. The production company told them the script would have to be cut. The director and writer went away and according to Fincher "I took out my iPhone and put the little stopwatch on and handed the script to Aaron and said, 'Start reading.' He was done in an hour and 59 minutes. I called the studio back and said, 'No, we can do this. If we do it the way Aaron just spoke it, it'll be two hours.'" Combined with a later anecdote that Fincher also relayed to Harris regarding training the actors on how to perform Sorkin's writing, the influence of this particular script on this particular director ultimately reveals the power of Sorkin's screenplay to influence directorial choices. While it was still Fincher's choice as the director of the film, it was Sorkin's unique style of writing that shaped a key aspect of the film, and as such, emphasizes why this film should not be designated a David Fincher film. While this is merely a single anecdotal instance of this type of influence, it seems impossible to assume that it hasn't happened before. As screenwriters do not often receive the attention that Sorkin did in regard to this film, this is an interesting dynamic for further investigation.

What all of this leads back to is the problem with traditional authorship theory and its entrenchment in industrial practice, particularly crediting. While this case study reveals in part the truly collaborative nature of filmmaking, it fails to live up to its great predecessor. What makes the film great lies with the strength and brilliance of the screenplay – Sorkin's stylistic dialogue and his intertextual structure – that ultimately influenced directorial decisions leaving an imprint that is more Sorkin than Fincher. Even when the critics attribute narrative elements to the director, it is done in a way that ultimately points to Sorkin's contribution. Roger Ebert

closes his review by saying: “‘The Social Network’ is a great film not because of its dazzling style or visual cleverness, but because it is splendidly well-made. Despite the baffling complications of computer programming, web strategy and big finance, Aaron Sorkin’s screenplay makes it all clear, and we don’t follow the story so much as get dragged along behind it.”³⁶ Despite his reference to it as a David Fincher film in the opening of his review, the last word is with Aaron Sorkin. The film is David Fincher’s, but its greatness lies with Aaron Sorkin? The contradiction is blaring. The relegation of the screenplay in filmmaking to one of necessary though lesser importance, an issue which Kael and even Carringer address, still reigns in 2011. Even the fact that Sorkin’s talent could be compared to Mankiewicz – and David Denby, critic for the *The New Yorker*, compares him to Ben Hecht and Preston Sturges who are considered equally talented screenwriters as Mankiewicz – addresses this issue. We can compare new screenwriters to great screenwriters of the past. There is no taboo there. Yet, no one would be willing to make a direct comparison between Fincher and Welles. This is not to disparage the talent of David Fincher, but as Todd McCarthy noted the reluctance to compare any film to *Citizen Kane*, there is the same reluctance to compare any director to Orson Welles. Even when problematic authorship theory can be used to point to another role as the authorial center of a film, the director has remained the central focus, even if he is no Orson Welles. The hierarchical valuation of the various roles in the filmmaking process has been influenced by authorship theory. Further research and an analysis of those industrial practices and their more specific role in the ‘film by’ delineation – especially from an historical perspective – might reveal how practice has influenced theory. This is something not directly addressed in this paper and is an issue that requires further investigation in order to continue to inform and transform traditional authorship theory from a zombie into a creative collaboration theory. The

³⁶ Ebert.

circumstances and environment of the classical Hollywood studio system and the nature of Welles's original contract when he first came to Hollywood could provide insight into why traditional authorship theory makes more sense when applying it to a film product of that system. From the inception, it was Welles's creation of the right creative team and then his ability to 'direct' their talents toward the final product that made *Citizen Kane* the canonical film it remains today. Fincher never had quite that level of control even if the creative team behind *The Social Network* were true collaborators. Control is key for traditional authorship theory. Collaboration is key to create a film that is greater than the sum of its parts.

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