Notes on the Politics of the *Auteur*: Stanley Kubrick, Wes Anderson, and the Spectator

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Notes on the Politics of the *Auteur*:
Stanley Kubrick, Wes Anderson, and the Spectator

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# Table of Contents

Introduction .................................................................................................................................................. 3

## Part One: Kubrick, Text, Affect

1.1. *Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the [Sign]......................... 9
1.2. *La Politique des auteurs ................................................................................................................ 17
1.3. Affect and the Politics of Humor ..................................................................................................... 20
1.4. *Eyes Wide Shut, or: How I Learned to Start Worrying................................................................. 24

**Figure 1:** *Eyes Wide Shut* Promotional Poster .................................................................................. 30
1.5. Masks .............................................................................................................................................. 30
1.6. Criticism as an Art ............................................................................................................................ 40
1.7. *Napoleon* and Unfinished Business ............................................................................................... 46

## Part Two: Realignments

2.1. “Authors” and Author-Functions; or: Criticism as Science ......................................................... 56

**Table 1:** Ideas About the Phenomenological Construction of the “Author”.................................... 61
2.2. Film Buffs and Other Spectators ...................................................................................................... 62

## Part Three: “Anderson,” Commodity, Identity

3.1. Toward Consuming the “Author” .................................................................................................... 67

**Figure 2:** Wes Anderson Bingo ......................................................................................................... 70
**Figure 3:** Anderson’s American Express Commercial ......................................................................... 80
3.2. Works of Art ..................................................................................................................................... 81
3.3 *Moonrise Kingdom* and the Nostalgic Commodity ..................................................................... 88

Works Cited .............................................................................................................................................. 94
Introduction

What is an author, and what does it matter? These questions about authority in the cinema have been the subject of often-heated debate since the late 1940s, when Alexandre Astruc posited the notion of the caméra-stylo in France. A slightly reductive understanding of the term “auteur”—a term that Cahiers du Cinéma would later adopt—states that, with the shadow of the World War II era of censorship still looming in the 1950s, the many individual voices of the cinema needed to be both heard and promoted. Namely, the director should be regarded as (and should consider his or her primary objective to serve as) an audiovisual “voice” who uses the cinema to not only relate a personal statement, but to do so by crossing over the limits of written text to depict his or her version of reality. The cinema, as Astruc and Cahiers critics André Bazin and François Truffaut conceived it, was evolving into a political medium for directors to interrogate hegemonic structures while expressing themselves aesthetically and poetically. In keeping with what some have called Romantic, Judeo-Christian, or Occidental traditions of ascribing all expressive elements of a film or body of films to a singular Author, these French critics developed a policy of critiquing authorship that remained dominant until the 1960s, but that also shaped the foundations of film criticism both in the popular press and the academy.

The origins of a director-based film criticism still insistently echo today: countless volumes about individual directors are published each year, the Criterion Collection releases “Eclipse” box sets of directors’ bodies of work, film festivals and museums highlight individual directors in their retrospectives, and the common use of “to Tarantino” as an intransitive verb meant to describe one who delivers a narrative through a non-linear plot, all underscore the persistent preoccupation (on the levels of criticism, distribution, exhibi-
tion, and spectatorship) with the “individual voice” behind the camera. However, I want to argue that authorship does not end with the director. Instead I posit that, today, authors are identified as loci of instances of repetition—in keeping with the writings of Truffaut, Andrew Sarris, Peter Wollen, and Michel Foucault—that in turn inspire spectators to project (via writing, consumerism, or otherwise) traces of the authorship they have identified. Authorship cannot be self-contained: its “voices” must be repeatedly circulated in order to maintain their political, cultural, and social functions.

In presenting that argument, I structure this thesis in a way that seeks to highlight the dialogic nature of the multiplicity of influences that have impacted the development of the cinema and its criticism from the 1940s to the present day. The people who have participated in the cinema (especially directors, critics, and spectators) have been impacted by and singled out during eras characterized by military conflict, economic crises, political scenarios, and marketing schemes, and in turn have seen the value of their influence change throughout this period, affecting the face of cinema’s global and historical development. I divide this work into three major parts, each representing a period in film history during which major shifts in the conception of authorship in the cinema have occurred.

Furthermore, I focus on the works of two directors, Stanley Kubrick and Wes Anderson, which I believe are among the best examples of the theoretical negotiations of their respective eras. With Kubrick, I begin by focusing on the idea of film-as-text and the critical, spectatorial work of écriture, and work toward troubling that formulation by emphasizing the affective, experiential qualities that distinguish the film from the scénario. Figuratively, I cross-cut between other influences, such as issues of nationalist cinemas and traditions of “etiquette” to highlight the ways in which the foundational “auteurist” writings
struggled to enunciate exactly what it is about a director that (not-) so clearly highlights his or her identity as an author. I use the privilege of hindsight to reinvestigate these seminal works in film authorship by applying new vocabularies to old ones, and argue that the theories of the 1940s through the 1960s undoubtedly influenced the works of later authorship theorists and critics—for Astruc, Bazin, Truffaut, and Sarris, too, are authors. Furthermore, notions of the experiential quality of spectatorship, which alternate between the realms of the symbolic and the affective, govern my analysis of Kubrick, whom critics lauded as being a “conductor” or “orchestrator” of the senses.

In Part Two, I seek to emphasize the dialectical shift in the author criticism of the 1960s by focusing on the rise of Lévi-Straussian structuralism in the academy and by aligning it with a new generation of (formally or self-) educated film buffs and directors who had grown up in a cinema that was increasingly targeted to the young adult demographic and supplemented by an author-centric body of criticism. This 1960s-1970s generation of directors at least somewhat consciously viewed canonizing film history (through allusion to auteurs of the past and by reworking generic conventions, as Noël Carroll argues) by director as one of its goals. The “Auteur theorists” of this time sought to fill in the gaps of subjectivity exhibited in the writings of their predecessors by embracing a more “scientific” approach of analysis, and perhaps its most important contribution to their field involved removing ideas of the author-director’s intentions from the critical deductions made by spectators. The “readings” of films and bodies of work were no longer attributable to a director who had intended for a set of meanings or ideology to be produced, but rather the “Author” could only be known in the abstract, as a symbol locating the systems of meaning generated and negotiated by all of the spectators who participated in the experience of that director’s
cinema. As I argue, these “Authors” became symbols charged both with textual and affective meaning, calling to mind associations of formal and narrative tropes, as well as personal experiences that uniquely qualify an individual’s relationship to this author-structure.

In the final section, I focus on the work of Wes Anderson, a director I argue exemplifies the inherent commodity fetishism in postmodern (and post-structuralist) American society. The “Author” here no longer represents a set of associations created after-the-fact, but instead exists before the film experience, already known to the spectator because of the efforts of marketing and the director’s self-conscious construction of his or her public image. I argue here that, in many ways, the capitalist model has co-opted the Romantic Author and provided it with a market value based on its ability to sell products not limited to tickets at the local cinema or multiplex. Rather, the author is implicated in the ritual of consumption more generally, using his or her own “signature” as a brand name that entices spectators to buy products related in some way to the world depicted in the film, the director’s political motive or, most importantly, to the affective experience the film is expected to provide. Most notably, Anderson’s work deals with desire and nostalgia, and these themes echo throughout the recent critical work surrounding authorship. The author has erased him or herself as an individual being in the marketplace, existing only as a brand name meant to entice spectators to consume in an effort to regain a sense of “wholeness” that his work suggests never existed to begin with. With the author’s increasing existence as a brand name and a price tag, critics today note the deferment of authority to the spectator, the one who has the power to reinforce the director’s authority with the swipe of a credit card; “buying in” is intended to make us feel a way that we never “textually” were.
This project bridges the academically discrete fields of cinema studies and cultural studies to suggest that in our “society of the spectacle,” the two are implicit in one another. However, I also borrow a page from the work of Devin Orgeron, who argues that there is an inherent bias in the foundations of the auteurist discussions. As he observes, the heated discussions between Pauline Kael of The New Yorker and Andrew Sarris as to the validity of the auteur theory developed in tandem with the cinema’s shift toward targeting a younger demographic, highlighting new cultural voices. Like Sarris’ mistranslation of Truffaut and Bazin’s politique into a theory, Orgeron argues that

Auteurism emerged in part out of a half-digested realization that the cinema itself was changing—that it was being created by and appealing to a newly emerging youth culture. . . . The poor, misunderstood, and typically male creator is the center of the Andersonian universe, true; in this respect, his films seem consistent with those oft referred to 1960s and 1970s modernist films that aligned spectatorial sympathies with the represented filmmaker/creator and against the “system” beleaguering the creative process. (44)

In several ways (perhaps even through my own voice as writer), this thesis acknowledges the parallelisms between film production, criticism, and reception to argue that the power ascribed to an author is, as Orgeron claims about Anderson’s character Dignan from Bottle Rocket, “guided by a desire to ‘justify staying inside the small range of experience of (his) boyhood and adolescence—that period when masculinity looked so great and important” (46). But, as through my analysis of the extra-authorial conditions that form the contexts in which we can identify authors, I hope to emphasize the idea that authors are created by people for people: they are myths of greater beings in whose history and iconography we can navigate the world while being implicated in that (hi)story, in which life feels more satisfying than the sum of its parts. “Authors” are anchors for the communities of spectators who authorize them by seeking nostalgic pleasure in stories of other, more complete lives.
Part One: Kubrick, Text, Affect

“It is the stated position of the U.S. Air Force that their safeguards would prevent the occurrence of such events as are depicted in this film. Furthermore, it should be noted that none of the characters in this film are meant to represent any real persons living or dead.”

Beginning Intertitle of Dr. Strangelove (1964)

1.1. Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the [Sign]

When the fictional United States President Merkin Muffley calls Soviet Premier Dimitri Kisov to warn him of the unsanctioned but imminent nuclear strike that could annihilate the U.S.S.R., he delivers the news in a way that eschews acknowledging the gravity of the situation: “You see, Dimitri,” Muffley begins, “one of our base commanders went...a little funny in the head.... It’s all very silly.” Muffley speaks in reference to base commander General Jack D. Ripper, who superseded the chain of command, locked down his Air Force base, and ordered the implementation of “Plan R,” in which American bombers, which cannot be recalled without a specific three-letter code known only to Ripper himself, will attack strategic sites in Russia. The rationale behind Ripper’s plan is strategically withheld for most of the film, as Kubrick orchestrates layers of genre, plot, and affect. “From the start,” write the editors of an anthology of essays on the director, “Kubrick was a careful strategic thinker. His love of chess was an expression of this love of strategy, and it carried over into his filmmaking” (Cocks et al. 12). And as Herr recalls, “[Kubrick] once told me that if he hadn’t become a director he might have liked being a conductor. ‘They get to play the whole orchestra, and they get plenty of exercise,’ he said” (65). This caricature of Ku-
brick as a highly strategic thinker and director is merely rhetorical if one were to remark that those are the qualities of any great director. However, it is the qualification “great director” (a dubious translation of the French “auteur”) that this work will seek to analyze and complicate by revisiting the 20th Century auteur theorists that distinguished the importance and elevated status of the director.

On the textual surface—that is to say, in light of the dialogue of this scene and of the narrative events preceding it—the exchange between Muffley and Kisov is absurd and satirical. The Russian premier is drunk and the President cannot seem to stay focused on the matter at hand: something went wrong with the bomb (which he repeats: “the bomb, Dimitri... the hydrogen bomb.”) Having already been educated by a voiceover during the opening scene of the film, the spectator knows that each bomber plane carries a payload that is more powerful than all the bombs used during World War II combined (and the “big board” in the War Room maps out over thirty of these armed bombers circling Russia). So when the President continues to put the news so delicately and allows himself to be distracted by arguments over whom “is sorrier,” it calls into question not only his aptitude at being President of the United States, but also his ability to handle a situation involving a nuclear device. The drunk Soviet Premier compounds the stereotype that Gen. Ripper later acknowledges: that communists only drink vodka, “never water;” with these qualifications, Kubrick suggests the idea that the Soviets are, too, incapable of handling a nuclear war.

And, as Ripper relays to British Colonel Lionel Mandrake, “War is too important to be left up to politicians. They have neither the time, the training, nor the inclination for strategic thought.” To supplement the tone that Kubrick is orchestrating, placed before Gen. Turgidson, who relays the news about the situation to the President, is a binder whose spine
reads “WORLD TARGETS IN MEGADEATHS”—that is, human deaths at strategic military targets measured in millions. So when the President is speaking to the United States’ Cold War enemy about how delicately “silly” the situation is, and that he is very “capable of being sorry about it,” it is likely that a chill would have run down the necks of spectators at the height of the Cold War in 1964.

When the system of political, social, and cultural values, and the ways of thinking, feeling, and performing to which one has ostensibly subscribed for a lifetime is thrown into question, the effect is usually disconcerting at least. When Dr. Strangelove suggests the hypothetical situation (even in satire) that the American government has no idea what it is doing, it is an affront to a culture’s ego, sense of security and, to paraphrase Clifford Geertz, the ideology that is based on the stories Americans have told themselves about themselves; the effect of this, as will be explained, is necessarily politically charging. As Kubrick biographer Michael Herr observes, “Two camps have always formed around each of Stanley’s movies, and no one in either camp could ever imagine what the other camp thought it was seeing.” For spectators of one of those camps, Herr suggests, “Dr. Strangelove was felt to be an unspeakable breach of etiquette” (83), and perhaps even in the face of the staggering wealth of information with which Kubrick’s film has thus far qualified the hydrogen bomb, questioned the preparedness and ability of the American government to participate in nuclear war (or even maintain its current state of nuclear armament), and represented its head of state as nothing more than a distractible child, doubt never crossed their minds. For “etiquette” not only meant believing that America is the greatest country on the planet, with the best military, leadership, and a sound rationale for pursuing an arms race, but it
also meant refusing to breach that etiquette, those values and ways of thinking, feeling, and performing listed above.

It is furthermore important to acknowledge the marked shift (in keeping with the connotations of nuclear radiation) by which Kubrick’s film represents a generic mutation of satire. As a result of Kubrick’s breach of “etiquette,” in which he depicts the very human shortcomings of a government that should run systematically (like a computer) when it has nuclear weapons capable of destroying humanity in its possession, the film equalizes the U.S. with its enemy, the U.S.S.R., vis-à-vis a common and very real threat—mutual and total nuclear annihilation via human-created technology that subscribes to neither politics nor culture; the bomb is an ambivalent tool that is manipulated by self-motivated and error-capable humans who are decidedly not ambivalent. The darkness of Kubrick’s comedy derives from semantic mutations to satire: whereas the latter takes up politics as the butt of jokes to reform it, Kubrick’s dark comedy instead jokes about that which, in a very real way, determines the very livelihood of the audience watching—nuclear bombs that, as has been proclaimed, should not be controlled by politicians. The result of this semantic—that is to say, textual—change to the satire genre is an over-production of meaning\(^1\), an excess that will later be explained as a function of affect.

This textual-affective tension may be best unpacked by holding it up to the theoretical light of Roland Barthes’ famous work on the study and analysis of photography. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes introduces two terms for the analysis of photographs: the *studium* and the *punctum*. In formulating the *studium*, Barthes writes:

\(^{1}\) See Rick Altman’s “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Genre” (*Cinema Journal* 23: 6-18), for more on the classification of genres.
The first [of the two elements]... is an extent, it has the extension of a field, which I perceive quite familiarly as a consequence of my knowledge, my culture; this field can be more or less stylized, more or less successful, depending on the photographer’s skill or luck, but it always refers to a classical body of information... Thousands of photographs consist of this field, and in these photographs I can, of course, take a kind of general interest, one that is even stirred sometimes, but intermediary of an ethical and political culture. What I feel about these photographs derives from an average affect, almost from a certain training. (25-6, emphasis original)

Barthes’ concept of studium consists of all the already-internalized cultural signifiers within the frame of a photograph. It is encompasses such characteristics as the photographer’s choice of framing, effects caused by shutter speed and aperture, and the contents of the frame, including the juxtaposition of visual signifiers that bear cultural, political or other connotations, and the visual jokes thereby produced. To encounter the studium, as Barthes claims, is to “encounter the photographer’s intentions... to approve or disapprove of them, to argue them within myself, for culture (from which the studium derives) is a contract arrived at between creators and consumers” (27-8). Whereas the studium consists of the agreed-upon significations of a given culture, the punctum is characterized by a much more personal feeling: it is an affective quality of a photograph that exists simultaneously and in addition to the elements of the studium, which are “read” and can be described textually.

Barthes recognizes the punctum as “a fulguration... something [that] has triggered me, has provoked a tiny shock, a satori, the passage of a void” (49). The punctum can be qualified as an aspect of a photograph that provokes an acute feeling that exists separately but in parallel to the textual significations of the studium. While Barthes goes on to describe his encounters with the punctum—to textualize his emotional and physical responses to the certain aspect of the photograph that has “punctured” him—it should be noted that the punctum cannot be called into signification. It is, as Barthes affirms, the “passage of a void,” a
void that does not figure into the *studium* and cannot be explained textually. Rather, it is the interruption of *studium*-text, a moment of feeling akin to Jentsch’s identification of the “frisson,” literally “a shiver” that one senses when encountering the uncanny.²

While Barthes’ *studium* and *punctum* may serve as useful critical tools for the analysis of a photograph, they may benefit from a reinterpretation of their application to the cinema, especially because Kubrick orchestrates *Dr. Strangelove* in a way that unravels textually over time, adding a temporal, experiential element that distinguishes it (among myriad other qualities) from the still image. In relation to Kubrick’s film, the *studium* is, like that of a photograph, the product of deliberate construction. Aspects of the mise-en-scène and the plot of the film serve to “frame” it as a Cold War-era film about nuclear warfare. Furthermore, the black-and-white filming serves to qualify the satirical narrative with a “darkness” that is reminiscent of film noir and German Expressionism, and thus establishes tone. The music of the film works similarly: during the opening credits, documentary footage shows one aircraft refueling another mid-flight, with gentle, flowing orchestral music to complement the footage; the music qualifies the image with the idea that modern technology is awe-inspiring, streamlined, and effective, a list of descriptors to which a retrospective viewer might add, “when it works.” Later, in the cockpit of the only bomber viewers encounter, as the crew is preparing to implement “Plan R,” the captain slaps on a cowboy hat and a bright trumpet rendition of the American folk song “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” begins. The captain makes an impassioned speech to his crew about the duty they

² See Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second* for a discussion of Jentsch’s formulation of the “uncanny”: the recognition of a deceased figure being revived in a motion picture produces the same overabundance of irreconcilable text that must be arrested and felt through—a *punctum* experienced as “frisson.”
have been called upon to perform, which they should regard as a noble duty to the homeland they believe has already been attacked (otherwise, there would be no reason to execute “Plan R,” because “it is the stated policy of the U.S. never to strike first with a nuclear weapon,” as President Muffley reminds Gen. Turgidson in the War Room). Toward the conclusion of the captain’s speech, the trumpets have faded to a low chanting of male voices, continuing the melody of the folk song. What began as a bright melody has adopted the grave connotations of the captain’s words, and the low chanting is befitting of the American “etiquette” wherein it is a sworn and solemn patriarchal duty to ensure the continued safety of those at home. When the crew begins to implement the plan by manipulating the aircraft’s controls, the captain issues orders that are always repeated by the crew members performing the action (CAPTAIN: “Stand by to set code prefix.” MATE: “Roger, ready to set code prefix.” CAPTAIN: “Set code prefix.” MATE: “Code prefix set.” CAPTAIN: “Lock code prefix” MATE: “Code prefix locked.”). Rather than elliptically editing to complete the action, Kubrick chooses repetitive dialogue with the monotonous “on-the-air” quality of voices being reproduced through radio-microphones (Chion 223) and cross-cutting to emphasize the regimented, standardized, and streamlined process by which one flies a bomber to drop a bomb on a target—an unalterable sequence meant to prevent human error and protect efficacy. This use of sound and dialogue reinforces what Mario Falsetto calls “the inevitability of the process set in motion,” a major theme of the film (41). The film’s patriotic music and mechanically on-the-air sounds add to the studium, “not only is this what nuclear war can look like, but this is what Americans going to nuclear war can look and sound like.” The sound situates the film within a framework of culturally recognizable codes; audiences understand the full extent of the situation in which Gen. Ripper’s actions have placed the
bomber crew, and they as military personnel are depicted as nobly obeying orders, with patriotic melodies to honor them and machine-like rendering of their dialogue to supplement their readiness for the task. The “etiquette” to which Herr refers is akin to the studium of the image of America in the Cold War, composed of Barthes’ aforementioned “average” (that is perhaps to say “ideal”) set of culturally agreed-upon beliefs.

However, since Kubrick “breaches” both the American “etiquette” with which he qualifies the bomber crew and the satire genre, the studium also encompasses what Louis Althusser calls a “knowledge effect.” In apparatus theory, a knowledge effect is the result of foregrounding the presence of the camera, the editing process, or the projection scenario—what Jean-Louis Baudry calls the “work” of the cinema (Baudry 40). While Kubrick’s editing and sound for much of the bomber scenes are rendered with machine-like repetition and “on-the-air” monotony, what is being foregrounded is not simply the apparatus but the studium itself—the American wartime etiquette that the flight crew is dutifully working to uphold, which the gentlemen in the War Room and the audience in the cinema knows has the potential to be nullified by mutual nuclear annihilation.

The cinematic punctum is related to the affect that is produced when the etiquette that Kubrick interrogates is denaturalized, and when the film continues to breach and deviate from the generic rules of satire. The cinematic punctum is the moment of release of affective tension that is provoked by the breaking down of conventions and defying expectations, and is thus dependent on the cinematic studium as its origin and the historicity of time as its catalyst. The cinematic punctum is a moment (and there can be several) over the span of the cinematic studium, and in this way they are both inherently phenomenological elements of spectatorship.
1.2. *La Politique des auteurs*

This reading of *Dr. Strangelove*, which states that Kubrick’s strategic unraveling of text that breaches both the “etiquette” of the film’s contemporary culture and the genre it employs to make evident the textual natures of both—and whose excesses are experienced affectively—forms the basis of a criticism of Kubrick’s authorship. Addressing the topic of film authorship in 1957, André Bazin observed in *Cahiers du Cinéma* that “it follows that the strictest adherents of the *politique des auteurs,*” the practice by which critics favor the works of a given director based on a (subjectively determined) set of criteria, “get the best of it in the end, for, rightly or wrongly, they always see in their favorite directors the manifestation of the same specific qualities” (20). François Truffaut, writing for *Cahiers* in 1954, set the foundation for this kind of critique. He preferred “non-conformity, ...‘advanced’ ideas, [and] wild anti-clericalism,” as can be found in the work of Claude Autant-Lara. “Let us recognize in this cinéaste,” he wrote, “the virtue of always remaining...honest with himself” (11). According to Truffaut, a director of an adaptation that remains more insistently “true to the spirit” than “to the letter” of the original text should be regarded with greater importance. “Talent...is not a function of fidelity,” he professed, “but I consider an adaptation of value only when written by a *man of the cinema*” (12-3, italics original). That is to say, a man (or woman) of the cinema will create a series of works over his or her lifetime, all of which ostensibly share certain criteria (i.e., for Truffaut: honesty, and the preference for poetics and aesthetics over textual fidelity) that can be “read” as derivative of the author’s craftsmanship, personality, and artistic sensibility. By extension, we can infer that
the studium of each of a director’s films should exhibit these qualities and that the director should be an integral component of and a textual presence within the film.

Andrew Sarris’ “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962” reifies these criteria into a critical theory of film authorship. Sarris crafts a set of three concentric circles, each with its own governing criterion, that determines whether a director can be named an auteur.

There is no order in which the criteria of the circles must be fulfilled, but only auteurs, the greatest directors, will fulfill all three. The outer ring represents “the technical competence of a director as a criterion of value,” for a well-meaning but poorly constructed film holds less value than one made by a director who has mastered managing the many facets of his craft. The second ring values “the distinguishable personality of the director,” the criteria that most closely links Sarris to Truffaut’s set of values established a decade previously.

“Over a group of films, a director must exhibit certain recurring characteristics of style, which serve as his signature,” a term that serves as the most important element in auteur criticism. “The way a film looks and moves,” Sarris goes on, “should have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels” (Grant 43). In accordance with Truffaut, Sarris believes that a film should exhibit recurring stylistic tropes that viewers and critics alike can “read” as representations of a director’s personality. Finally, the inner circle of Sarris’ theory is concerned with “interior meaning:”

Interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension between a director’s personality and his material. This conception of interior meaning comes close to what Astruc defines as mise en scène, but not quite. It is not quite the version of the world a director projects nor quite his attitude toward life. It is ambiguous, in any literary sense, because part of it is imbedded in the stuff of the cinema and cannot be rendered in noncinematic terms. Truffaut has

3 Sarris lists “the subject, the script, the acting, the color, the photography, the editing, the music, the costumes, the decor, and so forth,” (43) as examples.
called it the temperature of the director on the set, and that is a close approximation of its professional aspect. Dare I come out and say what I think it to be is an élan of the soul? (Ibid.)

Here another connection between Sarris and Truffaut becomes evident: their struggle with a certain aspect of the director that cannot be called into signification. Whereas Truffaut was concerned with the way that critics of the time were writing about directors, in which he lamented the trend by which a director who stays “true to the letter” was consistently elevated to a status equal to or above that of one who is “true to the spirit” of the story, what he struggled to articulate is the same abstract concept that Sarris tries to get at. Truffaut seems to have sought the poetic and affective qualities in narrative cinema that French Impressionists had mastered decades earlier. He and Sarris both acknowledge that there is something “cinematic” about communicating more than mere textual narrative—something that only a “man of the cinema” would understand. Perhaps the reason that this abstract élan “cannot be rendered in noncinematic terms” is because it cannot be rendered in any objective terms, and that it dwells within the semiologically and semantically ambivalent realm of affect. Perhaps, too, this is why Bazin wrote that “the politique des auteurs seems to me to hold and defend an essential critical truth that cinema needs more than the other arts, precisely because an act of true artistic creation is more uncertain and vulnerable in the cinema than elsewhere” (Grant 28, emphasis added). And perhaps it is speculative to say that the “honesty” Truffaut valued in Autant-Lara’s work was actually the affect that his films evoked within Truffaut, and that in light of the elusive nature of the “tension” that Sarris identifies, he misclassified affect as a representation of an author’s personality. However, the dichotomy of “seeing” and “feeling” persists here: if an author’s personality can be used as an evaluative criterion in determining the value of his or her work, there
must be a way of “reading” or “textualizing” that personality, because the failure to do so would mean that directors would be measured against a rubric that exists only in the subjective. The following sections will pursue the notion that the classical auteur theory of Truffaut and Sarris cannot continue to function logically in our contemporary context without reworking it to include the anti-structural element of affect.

1.3. Affect and the Politics of Humor

The dynamism of the relationship between text and affect becomes evident in Kubrick’s use of humor. Telling a joke is the performance of resignification: semantically speaking, a joke takes a signifier with a commonly accepted signified and the teller performs the act of maintaining the signifier but changing the signified. ("You can’t fight in here!" says President Muffley, "This is the War Room!") What is funny about jokes has often less to do with the actual words than what lies beyond, but always parallel to them. Dr. Strangelove’s success as a dark satire and Stanley Kubrick’s authorial signature both depend on the affect that is produced between the words (signs).

In “The Autonomy of Affect,” Brian Massumi constructs a language that we can use to evaluate the not-so-straightforward relationship between signs and affect, terms that he here replaces with “content” and “effect.” In defining “content,” Massumi points out “its indexing to conventional meanings in an inter-subjective context, its sociolinguistic qualification. This indexing fixes the determinate qualities of the image” (24-5). This indexing, or integration of the defined and organized structures of the image, into the “intersubjective” and “sociolinguistic” aligns “content” with the image’s studium. Just as a sign represents both its denotations and connotations, everything that is seen in a photographic or cine-
matic frame has a quality, and thus everything with a quality signifies. However, not all of the content produces the same “effect,” which Massumi defines in terms of “intensity:”

The strength or duration of the image’s effect could be called its intensity. . . . The level of intensity is organized according to a logic that does not admit the excluded middle. That is to say that it is not semantically or semiotically ordered. It does not fix distinctions. Instead, it vaguely but insistently connects what is normally indexed as separate. When asked to signify itself, it can only do so in a paradox. There is disconnection of signifying order from intensity—which constitutes a different order of connection operating in parallel. . . . It is a state of suspense, potentially of disruption. (Ibid.)

“Effect” and “intensity,” which will here be collectively referred to as “affect,” are closely related to the cinematic punctum in both definition and function. Whereas the cinematic punctum is a moment of stasis, a rupture in the flow of signification provoked by the over-accumulation of historically informed work of the studium over time, it is important to emphasize the “purely autonomic,” or unconsciously and involuntarily physiological, “reactions most directly manifested in the skin—at the surface of the body, at its interface with things”—reactions that characterize the effect. The effect is an intensive event, in which it “resonates to the exact degree to which it is in excess of any narrative or functional line.” This relationship between affect and text is dynamic, and it in turn resonates or interferes with, and amplifies or dampens the way that the viewer experiences this excess (25-6). As Massumi observes, “linguistic expression can resonate with and amplify intensity at the price of making itself functionally redundant” (26). So when Kubrick renders the scene concerning the implementation of “Plan R” in the bomber cockpit with repetitive dialogue between captain and crew, he carefully prolongs an affective moment by dampening the intensity of any effect with extra words that may immediately seem meaningless, but in retrospect supplement the studium by qualifying the military personnel with the added signification of machine-like (i.e., automatic and unstoppable) action. Whereas Massumi
argues that of all the stimuli and overabundant textual information that a brain and body can interpret at a given moment of textual interruption, only one action in the form of autonomic response can be expressed, with all other possibilities being deferred and remaining only as traces of potential action—traces of intensity—which serve to historically contextualize both future cognition and physiological response. This is why Massumi claims, “intensity is incipience, incipient action and expression” (30 emphasis original).

One may describe Kubrick’s repetitive dialogue as “building suspense,” however “suspense” can only be identified as such after the event, because part of suspense involves the physiological tightening of muscles, the slowing of breathing, an increased sensitivity of the skin. It is only immediately after this moment that the viewer can reconcile (i.e., textualize) his or her bodily reactions with the cognitive linearity of the film. The viewer identifies “suspense” only immediately after experiencing it. Thus is the dynamic, parallel tension between text and affect that Kubrick orchestrates throughout Dr. Strangelove.

By the final scene of the film, Kubrick edits footage of nuclear explosions forming mushroom clouds to the tune of Vera Lynn’s crooning sing-a-long “We’ll Meet Again,” whose ambiguous tone makes for an uncomfortable juxtaposition with the formally beautiful yet undeniably sinister plumes of radioactive smoke. There is no one universal “effect” to be felt here, because, as Massumi states, affect is the product of the tendency of traces of intensity to actualize (30). Herr’s two camps should rather be innumerable, for each spectator, as theorists of cognition since Wolfgang Iser would attest, has undergone an entirely unique viewing experience, with subjective belief (e.g., the viewer’s personal relation to the “etiquette”) intertwining with the constant tendency toward affective response and a mul-
tipplicity of opportunities for a *punctum* of textual stasis being offered by the unraveling *studi-rium* throughout the film.

Therefore, with each viewing experience, wherein Kubrick’s text *tends* to provoke affective intensity for each viewer, the film politicizes the viewer to the degree that he or she experiences affective intensity, which is in turn dependent upon that spectator’s relationship to the “etiquette” he breaches. Furthermore, Massumi cites research that shows a correlation between “sadness” and “pleasure” in the experience of watching a film without words (images, where the affective has “primacy”), and conversely a correlation between “happiness” and “displeasure” when subjects were shown the same film with “factual” narration. The factual version was remembered for the shortest amount of time (24). The idea that a “factual” film, in which words become redundant and thus temper the potential for affective intensity, can provide a less pleasurable experience than a film that provokes more affective intensity by strategically knowing when (and when not) to use words. Perhaps this is the origin of the “value judgment:” it is based on affective intensity and not on words. Perhaps, too, this affective pleasure gets at the ideas that Truffaut and Sarris were trying to articulate. There may not be any universally, objectively “good” or “bad” film, but there may certainly be an affectively “good” or “bad” one. Finally, since time continues to move on after watching the film, with new experiences to change perceptions and provoke new tendencies of feeling, *Dr. Strangelove* becomes a political benchmark against which viewers compare their own developing beliefs, thereby providing a unique experience each time. It implicates the viewer in a political dialogue that operates on feeling as well as words.
1.4. *Eyes Wide Shut*, or: How I Learned to Start Worrying

While this analysis of *Dr. Strangelove* can be used to set the foundation of Kubrick’s authorial signature, which states that Kubrick breaches culturally internalized “etiquette” through his strategic orchestration of “texts” (the narrative, audiovisual, and generic systems of signs that that comprise the *studium*, because we recognize how they signify) to produce an “intensity” that tends to politicize the viewer, it is an incomplete assessment of Kubrick’s *oeuvre* if we do not consider “over a group of films,” as Sarris second circle reminds, the exhibition of “certain recurring characteristics” (Grant 43). *Eyes Wide Shut* was posthumously released after the director’s 1999 death, and is a work against which we can begin to juxtapose these preliminary findings.

*Eyes Wide Shut*’s narrative unfolds over a period of about two and a half days in New York City some time around contemporary 1999. In the opening credits and the first shot of the film, Nicole Kidman slips out of her slim black dress in front of a full-length mirror. Cut to the film’s title. As the credits begin, so does a waltz in a minor key with deep down-beats and a smooth saxophone carrying the melody as Nicole Kidman pulls the dress off of her shoulders. Here we already begin to experience a certain sense of teasing: Nicole Kidman’s name has just been announced (along with that of Tom Cruise and Stanley Kubrick), but we do not know the name of her character, and she is already getting undressed. In her chapter about star iconography in *Death 24x a Second*, Laura Mulvey offers insight about this seemingly out-of-context presentation:

The star’s image on the screen is inextricably woven into the narrative by performance, in gesture and action... Just as the time of the still frame coexists with the time of fiction, so the symbolic iconography of the star is indelibly stamped onto his or her presence both as ‘character’ and as index. These different kinds of signification oscillate and change places with each other. (174)
Mulvey argues that star-status necessarily inflects the spectator’s experience of the film because he or she must necessarily consider the juxtaposition of “Nicole Kidman as star” with “Nicole Kidman as Alice Hartford in Eyes Wide Shut,” two discrete images (consisting of two distinct *studia*) of the same physical—“indexical,” to use C.S. Peirce’s term—Nicole Kidman. This first shot seems to be guilty of falling in line with Mulvey’s earlier landmark charge that mainstream cinema privileges a male spectatorship position that either fetishizes or forcibly corrects women through narrative into becoming “acceptable” objects of the male gaze.4 The film’s bold opening seems to invite this solely voyeuristic spectatorship, and it importantly acknowledges that type of spectatorship as its precedent, suggesting that—if we were to base an assumption about the previous reading of Kubrick’s directorial style—he will work throughout the film to complicate and breach this etiquette of looking.

The opening titles, serving to elide a short span of time (as does a brief establishing shot of a New York street at night), lead into the next shot that focuses on Tom Cruise in front of the window next to the mirror where Nicole Kidman just disrobed. The lights are off, and he is dressed in a full suit. He calls to her: “Honey, have you seen my wallet?” She answers from off-screen, “Have you checked on the bedside table?” where he discovers it. Then, Cruise’s character walks into the bathroom and, as Michel Chion notes in his eponymous book about the film: “When she asks him, ‘Is my hair OK?’ she is just getting up from the toilet seat, where she has been sitting to urinate, wiping herself discretely afterwards beneath her lifted dress and...whether out of indifference or a certain sense of decency, he hasn’t looked at her” (7). Chion goes on to say that since the film is, “after all,” called *Eyes*

4 Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in *Screen* 16.3 (1975)
Wide Shut, and since we have just been shown a brief glimpse of Kidman’s body, “Viewers who have come with the intention of seeing and keeping their eyes wide open... may well have said to themselves that, if they were Bill Hartford, Alice’s husband, they would not have missed the chance to look at her” (7-8). While Chion’s observation may be apt to describe a certain demographic of spectators—namely, the privileged male spectatorship position about which Mulvey has written—his preliminary interpretation of Kubrick’s title and opening scene seems to miss the point. The Brechtian quality of Kubrick’s filmmaking assumes a post-feminist political valence that teases out a distinction between “eroticism” and “sexuality” and invites a different type of spectatorship: one of viewing with “eyes wide shut,” an oxymoronic activity that depends entirely on the interplay between text and affect. As Michel Foucault wrote about the difference between the visual and the verbal:

It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other’s terms: it is in vain that we say what we see: what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of their images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying: the space where they achieve their splendor is not that deployed by our eyes. (qtd. in Cocks et al. 13)

The film, over time, becomes not a presentation of objects “to be looked at,” but an experience in learning how to temper the visual with the affective, an experience in looking differently.

In this first scene, we observe a couple in their mid-thirties who are completely comfortable with one another and in their domestic space. Bill, who does not even look at his wife when she asks how her hair looks, exemplifies the confidence and security that one feels when firmly established in the world, with a successful career and an ostensibly happy family. He both expects his wife to look beautiful and is confident enough that she
will satisfy his desires that he does not bother to look at all. He seems to be preoccupied with the thought of being late to the party they are invited to attend that evening, as his facial expressions, vocal delivery, and body language remain stoic toward his wife, but his brisk movement through the bedroom, bathroom, and later down the hallway to exit the apartment (all of which are followed faithfully by the camera), suggest that he is pressing to move the action beyond his wife’s simple questions; he is concerned about another issue.

Chion is not wrong for expressing the same frustration as Alice when Bill does not look, but not because her sitting on the toilet connotes sexuality or eroticism. Alice is surely “to-be-looked-at,” if only a brief moment, but in a way that challenges the spectator who is looking: the moment is a private one that is rarely displayed in the cinema, so does the spectator look away from Alice to Bill (out of courtesy? Embarrassment?), or does he or she take adopt a voyeuristic gaze and look anyway? On the one hand, this scene has established a rhythm for the film, wherein Bill drives the plot (and the camera) and Alice causes the camera (and the spectator, through the camera’s privileged position) to stop and gaze. On the other hand, the answer depends on the individual spectator, who must ascribe a quality to this image whose studium is overabundant with textual information; the practice of looking in the cinema, to recall Massumi, is in part based on an autonomic reaction that, when reflected upon and defined (i.e., textualized), “qualifies” this shot and sets up expectations about the way he or she will be provoked to look throughout the rest of the film. Fidelity to formal and narrative filmic conventions, the spectator may deduce, will be challenged throughout Eyes Wide Shut.

Kubrick already breaches the convention of the film’s first shot by displaying Kidman in an moment of equal privacy as when she undressed for the camera, but in a setting
in which words that amount to no more than platitudes (in Bill’s opinion) are exchanged. As with the bomber cockpit sequence in *Dr. Strangelove*, where a superfluity of words creates suspense by building affective intensity, the constant talking throughout the shot and the camera’s fidelity to Cruise’s movement tempers the “to-be-looked-at-ness” of Nicole Kidman/Alice Hartford as suggested by the film’s first glimpse of her. It becomes a moment in which Bill looking or not looking at Alice would have no effect on him either way.

She exists to him as an object with a defined set of “qualities,” and he has internalized her into his worldview, his *studium*. As we have seen, the camera is faithful to Bill’s movement—he drives the plot, and so Mulvey would suggest that we should “identify” with him, but by the very nature of the two-shot that composes the scene in the bathroom, we must look at Alice, if only briefly (as in the first shot). The spectator must make a choice in looking in this scene because Kubrick has already established a tension—a contradiction—in the spectator’s activity, between voyeurism (in the first shot) and taken-for-granted disinterest in looking (via Bill’s actions and his control of the camera and plot). The undoubtedly different ways in which a spectator may experience this scene depend both on the spectator’s own ideas about privacy and propriety, as well as on Mulvey’s argument that there is an extra-diegetic “star factor,” an iconicity that must be reconciled with the character in the film. This scene evokes the idea that it is not always comfortable to look, but through the privileged viewpoint of the camera we look anyway in opposition to pleasure or etiquette. Mulvey argues that these early moments function “like re-baptisms, when a star’s name and image, always instantly recognizable to the audience, are replaced by another name within the order of the fiction” (175). Kubrick takes the beauty of “Nicole Kidman as star” and the pleasure associated with looking at her in the first shot and compli-
icates it, teasing the spectator by re-qualifying that image to become "Nicole Kidman as Alice Hartford in *Eyes Wide Shut,*" a different image of the same woman, and looking at her in the bathroom becomes the spectator’s conscious choice in this ritual of diegetic re-baptism. Perhaps this politicization of the camera’s privileged gaze acknowledges the presence of the third name listed in the opening credits, or the one on the film’s promotional materials (Fig. 1) that is not preceded by any professional title: Kubrick. Not only must we reconcile what we know about Kidman’s multiple personas both in and outside of the film, but we must do so in the context of what we know about Stanley Kubrick’s directorial style, for the simple "Kubrick" billed on the poster suggests that audiences are already familiar with his work—namely with his authorial signature—and the whole act of looking is qualified by the fact that Stanley Kubrick is presenting this spectacle; he becomes a veritable third character, a looming absent-presence that tempers (and excites) our expectations as he performs its orchestration (not unlike telling a joke). For viewers familiar with Kubrick’s work, they may expect to have their own worldview—their *studia*—challenged, and for those who are yet unfamiliar, they may ostensibly learn the signification of “Kubrick” as a trademark for that work that he will perform: a re-baptism of stars and spectators into a different kind of looking relations.
1.5. Masks

When the couple leaves their home to attend the Christmas party at the Zieglers’—wealthy friends for whom Bill pays house calls—we begin to experience the ways in which Kubrick teases distinctions between the genders, especially as they concern husband and wife and, furthermore, distinctions between socioeconomic classes, which are important components of Bill’s psychology. As Sharon Carnicke has observed, we also begin to experience Cruise and Kidman’s very stylized and gendered acting, performances for which Kubrick directorial style allowed great flexibility, and the effect of which is a pair of nuanced performances that qualify the plot a sense of hyperreality.
When the couple arrives at the lavish mansion, Bill, in a display of bravado that is distinctly more performative (with wide gestures and dramatic facial expressions) than his temperament at home, shakes Victor Ziegler’s hand while Alice greets his wife. After exchanging pleasantries, Bill and Alice go out onto the dance floor. As they dance, Alice asks, “Why do you think Ziegler invites us to these things every year?” to which he replies, “This is what you get for making house calls.” Alice has introduced an underlying tension that will resonate throughout the film: Bill Hartford works for Victor Ziegler, and is therefore hierarchically lower. Bill’s response defends his feeling of comfort and his sense of entitlement, but he almost immediately notices that the piano player to whose music they are dancing is an old medical school classmate of his, Nick Nightingale. When the song ends, the couple parts ways, and Bill goes over to speak to Nick. In the same style of performance with which he greeted the Zieglers, Bill asks Nick about how he became a pianist, and reminds him of his own profession: “Once a doctor always a doctor,” to which Nick responds, “or in my case: ‘Never a doctor, never a doctor.” This repetitive dialogue serves to textually characterize Bill as a man who seems to need to undermine the position of another to reinstate his own feeling of comfort as breadwinner and husband.5 How coincidental (how dreamlike) that not a moment after Alice identifies this difference between Bill and Victor that Bill perceives Nick onstage, and that their conversation addresses the topic that had seemingly been under the surface of Bill’s consciousness—as exemplified by his acting style and the camera’s fidelity to his movement—since before he and Alice left their home. In this interaction with Nick, as with the Zieglers, Bill performs with great expression, even

5 See Michael Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity” for an analysis of how men assert identity (and relative superiority) by “othering” each other along the lines of class, sexuality, race, athleticism, etc.
clapping both of Nick’s arms with his hands and shaking him, and he stereotypically adapts the register of his language (“How are you, man?”) for the person of a lower stratum with whom he is speaking.

All of these early interactions characterize Bill as a man who places stability and success at highest importance, and he associates these qualities with comfort: he is comfortable in his marriage, so he does not look when his wife asks him to; however, when she identifies that they are “others” at the party of people with whom (aside from the Zieglers) they do not always belong because they are of a lower class—a worry that his and the camera’s movement seem to underline—he immediately seeks to regain that sense of comfort by asserting his superiority over Nick. Cruise has thus far performed the character of Bill wearing three distinct “masks,” three different performances of differing expressiveness that all serve a defined purpose—to demonstrate his desire for and expectation of comfort. Their conversation ends when a butler appears and asks Nick, who has just revealed (in an instance of narrative foreshadowing) that he would be playing at the Sonata Café that week, to follow him elsewhere. This is the first example in the film of *deus ex machina*, the director’s supersession of Bill’s narrative control by using an indirectly related character to change the course of the plot, a device that seems to be metonymic of Bill’s impending conflict with comfort and identity—it is not solely he who controls it.

The point at which the couple parts ways at the soirée marks the beginning of Kubrick’s orchestration of text and affect that will frustrate Bill’s desire for and rationale behind this expectation of comfort. Before we see Bill speak with Nick, Kubrick cuts to a temporally simultaneous tracking shot of Alice walking briskly and confidently into another room (supposedly on her way to the restroom—but hasn’t she just done that?)
where, without stopping, she plucks a flute of champagne off of a waiter’s platter and downs it in one gulp, demonstrating its effect and necessity by gesturing with the glass, almost as if to toast with the viewer, who has just witnessed the couple’s (especially Bill’s) unnatural performance of belonging at Ziegler’s party. After we return to Bill and his conversation with Nick, the film cuts again to Alice, who has walked over to the bar and is standing alone, holding another glass of champagne. Almost immediately, an interested man walks over and picks up the glass that she has set down, tells her playfully that he is “absolutely certain” that it is her bubbly, and finishes it in one drink. Alice, who is beginning to feel the effects of the alcohol, speaks very slowly to the man, Sandor Szavost (who comically introduces himself, “I’m Hungarian”), and her facial expressions bespeak her interest in him. The camera dances along with and around the forbidden couple, complicit with their actions that mark a breach of Bill’s sense of etiquette.

She flirts with Szavost, talking about Ovid and Renaissance bronzes, dancing close to him and often with her eyes closed and a smile on her face—suggesting the autonomic response that we recognize as pleasure or desire—until the moment when he suggests they leave to have sex, when she interrupts, reminding him that she is married. She has been emotionally swept away by a man who indulges in conversation about her own areas of interest (for, as she tells him, she used to direct an art gallery that “went broke”), but the word “married” and the symbol of her wedding ring—with which she gestures while excusing herself from the situation—prevent Alice from acting upon a desire that her body language clearly suggests she wants to experience. It is in this scene that we recognize the dramatic irony that the Hartfords’ marriage is not as solid as Bill believes it to be. The spectator, who now knows more than Bill, must reconcile this narrative tension with the
idea that the film had been formally aligned with him. Kubrick is here resignifying “mar-
riage,” which becomes divorced from “pleasure,” “desire,” and “comfort” (exemplified by
Alice in the arms of the Hungarian man), and “fidelity” becomes an impediment to achiev-
ing them.

While Alice dances with Szavost, two models approach Bill and begin to flirt with
him. As they walk through the party, they sway their bodies sensually, accentuating their
curves and providing a visual cue to Bill that, as they later insist, they intend to take him to
“where the rainbow ends.” Throughout this interaction, Bill is charming but not overly flir-
tatious, preferring instead to make claims such as “that is the kind of hero I can be,” rather
than entertaining the notion of being intimate with them. When they finally proposition
him, Bill completely resists, removing his arms from around theirs, and a butler appears to
request that Bill follow him upstairs to see Ziegler, who is in an awkward situation involv-
ing an overdosed prostitute. Again, Bill has lost control of the plot to Kubrick, the increas-
ingly evident orchestrator of the plot.

In Ziegler’s upstairs bathroom, a nude prostitute lies unconscious in a chair. Here
again, Kubrick displays a woman who is to-be-looked-at, but in a way that deviates from
the cinematic standard that Mulvey outlines because the tendency for affective pleasure in
looking at her is tempered by the knowledge that she could die from an overdose on what
Ziegler struggles to identify as “Speedball, or snowball, whatever you call it—it’s heroin
and coke.” Bill slowly repeats the statement, “Heroin... and coke,” in effect demonstrating
that the repetition and superfluity of words, as a very result of their delivery, serve to re-
signify “prostitute” with grim connotations, and also reinforcing the trend by which Ku-
brick manipulates symbols to invite a different feeling within the spectator.
When the couple returns home from the party, the first shot shows Alice standing in front of the mirror in their bedroom. She wears nothing but round eyeglasses, and she sways while looking at her reflection, mimicking the movement of the models and the dancing camera from the previous scene. Bill comes into the shot from off-screen, and as she takes off her earrings, they look at themselves together in the mirror. He begins to kiss her, and as he does so (with his eyes closed), she looks again into the mirror to see the image of the couple. The duration of her look and the expression on her face underline the ambiguity of Alice’s psychology: we have just witnessed her being flirtatious with a man who is not her husband, and her look at herself and Bill together seems to serve as a symbolic reminder of fidelity, re-qualified with connotations of restriction. Her mind is partly elsewhere. Here again the camera presents Nicole Kidman in the nude, but it is Alice Hartford’s ambiguous look that tempers the gaze of the male spectator position—it compels viewers to reconcile her look with theirs.

After a brief montage in which Kubrick presents Bill and Alice going about their daily routines—Bill going to work (and acting equally professionally with both nude women, old men, and young children), and Alice getting ready for the day with their daughter. At the end of the day, the couple smokes a joint and lies on the bed. When Alice exhales her last drag, her vocal delivery becomes very slow (reduced in time by at least half), and she asks Bill about “those two girls” from the Ziegler’s party. He dismisses them as “just a couple of models” for whom he felt nothing, and then asks her about the man with whom she was dancing. “What did he want... what did he want?” she repeats before answering, “Sex.” The ensuing conversation formally states the work that Kubrick’s narrative

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6 See Figure 1, which uses a screenshot from this scene.
and cinematographic work up until this point have been building up: Alice, in a grand, histrionic fit of laughter, seizes control of the camera as it jerks downward twice as she doubles over. Bill has just claimed that he does not, in contrast to all other men, find any desire in other women because he is married and has a family, and he is convinced that women operate the same way—that they do not, either, have the desire to stray. Fidelity is paramount, to Bill, in the sacred institution of marriage. Alice sharply denounces his claims, delivering a lengthy monologue in which she reveals that the previous summer, just a brief glimpse of a naval officer (reminiscent of our first sight of her) had excited her fantasies so intensely that she was willing to throw away her marriage, family, and everything that Bill does to provide for her for only one night with the other man. Alice’s confession underlines one of the key themes of the film: that signifiers and their significations are never fully faithful to each other. In this scene, we witness several divorces: of “marriage” and “fidelity,” of the cinematographic apparatus and the phallocentric gaze and, most importantly, in looking and experiencing comfortable pleasure.

Periodically throughout the rest of the film, Bill experiences imaginary visions of Alice and the naval officer of whom she spoke in the act of adultery. Variations on the same shot are rendered in black-and-white with deep blue toning. When the shot returns to Bill’s face, which is more often than not expressionless, the spectator—à la Kuleshov effect—reads onto Bill’s character the emotions we expect him to feel about the situation. So when Bill leaves home after being notified of the death of a family friend, is kissed by a woman for whom he feels nothing, is called a “faggot” by young guys on the street, and solicits a prostitute with whom he never achieves having sex, a wealth of textual overabundance qualifies the very sensual cutaways of his imagination with the feelings associated
with one who has been emotionally emasculated and has lost his feeling of comfort and security. Bill’s worldview, the *studium* of his marriage (to which he devotes his work and by which he formulates his identity) has fallen apart. The camera that follows him on the streets of New York keeps its distance, framing Bill in long shots more frequently, observing rather than participating with him.

When Alice calls Bill and interrupts his rendezvous with the prostitute, Domino, to ask when he was planning on returning home, he uncharacteristically lies and says he will not make it home for hours. While walking the streets, he happens upon the Sonata Café, the club where Nick Nightingale said he would be performing. Bill enters, listens to the rest of Nick’s set, and has a drink with him. Nick’s ringing cell phone interrupts their conversation, and he immediately says that he must depart. Out of curiosity, Bill asks where he is going, and the response piques his interest. Nick reveals that he is set to play at a mansion on Long Island, where rich guests wear masks and cloaks and perform “wild” acts. He further mentions that while playing, he is blindfolded, “but sometimes they don’t put it on very well, and I can see things. . . .” Bill, with whom I have thus far equated with the conventions of spectatorship aligned with Mulvey’s privileged male gaze, is intrigued the prospects of witnessing and experiencing the carnal desires of an anonymous, “wild,” high-society party. He coaxes the password to the house out of Nick—“Fidelio,” the name of the Mozart theme that returns throughout the film, an ironic title in light of the prevalent narrative theme—then rents a costume and mask, and hires a cab to drive him to the mansion and wait outside until his return.

Bill reaches the gate to the mansion, recites the password to the guard, and gains entrance to the house. Inside, a long opening ceremony takes place. A man in a red robe and
mask surrounded by masked, nude women and with Nick blindfolded in the background, chants while the women kiss around the circle. Bill, whose face is covered by an “expressionless” mask, can offer no guidance to the spectator as to how to “feel” or react to the situation. His face/mask has become a signifier without a signification—he embodies free-floating signification within this masked realm of the affective. However, we do see his eyes: at one notable moment, Bill looks up to a man on a balcony wearing a tri-cornered mask, and they exchange nods. The shot, which adopts Bill’s point of view, zooms from an extreme long shot to frame the tri-cornered-masked man in medium close-up. It is uncertain who controls what the spectator sees—Bill or Kubrick’s camera—for no one knows who the masked man is, nor do we know why they notice each other out of the many people in the crowded room. The interactions in this mansion—this audiovisual space whose studium, for ostensibly most spectators, can be outlined as no more than a lavish, cultish orgy where Bill is an intruder—can only be reconciled (i.e., textualized) within the order of the outside world with which we are familiar. When a gaze between people who do not know each other is extended for a long time, the effect is ambiguous and disconcerting, but in its insistence suggests incipient meaning: does the tri-cornered-masked man know it is Bill (and how?), and thus knows that Bill does not belong? Spectators can only interpret how Bill responds to this situation based on how they would respond themselves. In the mansion, the focus is on the gaze: Bill knows that people look at him, but with the same (masked) expression as when they look at each other having sex (both heterosexual and homosexual couples, echoing the insinuations about Bill’s sexuality), or when they finally see Bill being forced to remove his mask after it is revealed that he used the pianist’s password at the gate. (Bill had furthermore acted out-of-the-ordinary when a butler discovered
him speaking to one of the masked women, who urged him to leave before something terrible were to happen. Later, after Bill is found out, she “redeems” him so that he does not have to take his clothes off in front of the crowd. The gaze becomes homogenized within the time-space of the mansion: there is no singular, culturally accepted pleasure in looking, nor is there a defined object to look at. The spectator, who cannot be guided by Bill’s body language, is not directed to feel a certain way about what he or she sees, and the experience is therefore affectively intensive and dependent upon the individual’s response to “qualify” the scene’s *studium*.

After Bill is shamed in front of the room of masked and cloaked party guests, he leaves in the cab and returns home in the early morning hours. He spends the next day and evening struggling to piece together the events that transpired the night he went out. It is his attempt to establish cause and effect—to narrate and textualize—so as to escape his dark and deeply affectively intense experiences. However, his urge to find answers was predicted, and a man follows Bill around the city as he tries to uncover the identity of the woman who “redeemed” herself for him, as well as what happened to Nick Nightingale. He receives no definitive answers until Victor Ziegler invites him to talk at his home. Ziegler admits that the woman who sacrificed herself for Bill at the orgy was the prostitute who had overdosed in his bathroom the night before, and that he had hired a man to tail him for his own safety. However, when Ziegler attempts to convince Bill that the whole sequence of events at the mansion was an elaborate ruse, a conspiracy meant to prove to Bill that he was entirely out of his league by attending the party, is one of the most conflicting moments of the film. For that answer to his inquiries underscores all the fear, apprehension, tension, and dread that Bill (and ostensibly we) felt as a result of not being in control or
comfortable and secure. If Ziegler were telling the truth, it would only exaggerate that sense of lack of control.

Perhaps it is not the divine orchestration by which the events occurred, but the ways in which Bill (and we) experienced them that qualify the work that Kubrick has done. It is the lived experience, comprised of all the autonomic sensations that in retrospect have determine our “view,” “reading,” or “understanding” of life and the world around us—the fact that Bill was scared, felt dread—that shape who we are and will become. The lived experience of the unfamiliar and hardly assimilable billionaires’ orgy, Bill’s visions of Alice and the naval officer, and the constant undercutting of his sense of identity and masculinity all serve to change Bill’s view of the world via the way these events caused him to feel. And while Kubrick’s camera, too, was sometimes faithful to him and often not, the foregrounding of its presence invites spectators to feel along with him, forever shaping our views of the world based on experiences that may or may not have ever occurred via a medium that is only the image of life. But like Bill, we, too, are unalterably shaped by the audiovisual experiences we encounter because they also invite us to feel and then think. Both of Kubrick’s films that I have analyzed thus far provoke thought about essential, primal questions (e.g., love and war) by inviting us to think about the way we instinctually, autonomically feel about them.

1.6. Criticism as an Art

Since the printing of Sarris’ “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962,” a wealth of counter-criticism has worked to debunk the notion that film history and criticism should be director-centered, or even that it is possible for an “author” to be identified at all. Some ar-
Arguments claim that many films—especially those produced in Hollywood—were directed by individuals who did little more than call “action” and “cut,” or who were added at the last minute to replace someone else, and that the director’s contribution fell well short of “authorship.” Others, such as Chris Darke, have observed that “a ‘politi
cue,’ as a politics and a policy, became, through mistranslation, a ‘theory’” (423). Darke traces Bazin and the Cahiers critics who coined the term “la politique des auteurs” to the writings of Alexandre Astruc—namely, his concept of the caméra-stylo:

After having been successively a fairground attraction, an amusement analogous to boulevard theatre, or a means of preserving the images of an era, [cinema] is gradually becoming a language. By a language, I mean a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel. That is why I would like to call this new age of cinema the age of ‘caméra-stylo.’ ... The cinema will gradually break free from the tyranny of what is visual, from the image for its own sake, from the immediate and concrete demands of the narrative, to become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language. (quoted in Darke 401)

The idea that film could be a revolutionary medium of personal expression exerted great influence over the criticism of films thereafter. “In this way,” David Gerstner summarizes, “Truffaut reiterated Astruc’s stylistic concern and assertion: The cinematic is expressed by the visual (mise-en-scène), not the literary word” (7). As Darke observes, the critical adoration of personal vision in film arose following the heavy censorship and strict control of film and production apparatus in Nazi-occupied Europe during World War II, but as film authorship anthologist Janet Staiger points out, “tracing the handwork of production is a Western, Judeo-Christian obligation. What (godly) source produced this writing?” (30).

Soon after Italian Neo-Realism’s portable cameras and street photography gained worldwide renown and its French relative, cinéma vérité, was leading forth into the nationalist French New Wave cinema, with the implied “presence” of the director almost always self-
consciously looming near or within the borders of the frame, Truffaut created a famous distinction in 1957: whereas a metteur-en-scène—a term derived from the mise-en-scène criticism of the theater involving that which is “put into the scene” as being indicative of a director’s personal vision—faithfully adapted a screenplay into a film, while an auteur remained faithful only to his or her own personal vision. “When [the screenwriters] hand in their scenario, the film is done,” writes Truffaut: “the metteur-en-scène, in their eyes, is the gentleman who adds pictures to it” (Grant 15). The subsequent criticism printed by Cahiers throughout the 1950s and 60s thus favored the works of directors who, in contrast to the derisive “Tradition of Quality” upheld by metteurs-en-scène, expressed a strong and consistent personal vision.

With the success of nationalist European cinemas (both at home and internationally) that developed almost hand-in-hand with the popular and academic criticism that supported them, Americans, too, became interested in the idea of the author. In 1960, Cahiers du cinéma was among the most influential film publications globally, and an effort by Andrew Sarris brought an English version of the journal to America for a short time (Darke 423). Next, a critical storm began brewing around Truffaut’s article and Sarris’ reification of his policy into a theory—notably, that a practice was developing by which directors who had been critically “canonized” as auteurs could not make a “bad film” according to the critic who canonized them, or even that an auteur’s worst film was better than a metteur-en-scène’s best, or that an auteur’s œuvre only grew more refined as he or she aged (as opposed to the idea that they were no longer true to their original vision). As the debates

7 See Kael, “Circles and Squares” and Buscombe, “Ideas of Authorship” in ed. Grant’s Auteurs and Authorship, and David Kipen’s The Schreiber Theory (52-3).
raged on, the purpose of a *politique* by which *Cahiers* favored original vision over submissiveness to screenplay or narrative (in part to support the national European cinemas that were successfully competitive with Hollywood) became lost in translation. The simultaneously rigid rubric of Sarris’ first two concentric circles with the addition of the fundamentally subjective determination of the third—the “interior meaning...extrapolated from the tension between a director’s personality and his material”—made it difficult for Sarris’ classical auteur theory to hold water in comparison to other critical theories developing in England and France (such as Peter Wollen’s structuralist approach to *auteurism*), against which I will later juxtapose his and the *Cahiers* criticisms. David Gerstner’s reading of Sarris’ criticism does, however, reclaim the legitimacy of his efforts. As Gerstner points out, *la politique des auteurs* and the *Cahiers* critics’ (sometimes permanent) moonlighting in filmmaking helped revive and secure a place in the cinema for the idea of a Romantic, unique creator as a result of producing films outside of a studio industry.⁸ “Clear,” he states, “Sarris’s methodology slipped dangerously into overly subjective analysis. What Sarris provided, however,...was an analysis of Hollywood cinema that prescribed...the possibility of creative agency in the industrial arts. ...Foreign films, documentary films, and avant-garde films...were not morally superior. The Hollywood auteur existed once discovered by the rigorous critic” (9). The effect of a director-centered and subjectively based “theory” of authorship, however, bore implications on the recognition of other players in the industry, and perhaps even the rightful organization of the American film canon.

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⁸ This “moonlighting” also importantly signaled the rise of a film-historically and –critically knowledgeable generation of directors, which I will address later.
In his hyperbolic 2006 manifesto, *The Schreiber Theory*, David Kipen revisits and interrogates the methodology of the auteur theory: “Biographical criticism can be defined as the presumption that patterns recur when [one] studies works of art by the same person together rather than separately. But stare at anything long enough, including clouds and stucco ceilings, and patterns begin to emerge” (52). Rather than focusing on the director as creator of meaning or origin of text, Kipen argues that American critical analysis and the organization of a film canon would better be situated around screenwriters, who he argues are most responsible for the formation of a style that has made American pictures so popular throughout history. For example, Darke defines the term "‘movie brat’ generation" as a “generation of American filmmakers who, following the decline of the Hollywood studio system in the 1950s, began to make films independently and were heavily influenced by the French New Wave and European ‘art cinema’ of the 1960s. Such *directors* include Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola” (406, emphasis added). However, Kipen asserts that this period of 1970s American cinema might better be organized according to the “men and women who merely wrote all those illustrious directors’ movies for them.” He cites Robert Getchell, who received sole screenwriting credit for *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* and *Bound For Glory*, but who received less critical and popular attention than William Friedkin, director of *The Exorcist*. Kipen goes so far as to propose that a trend by which Americans export films to France and import French theory to criticize its own works has never given the true “author” due credit:

*Of course* it makes sense to look at Godard’s *Breathless* or Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows* as *auteurist* headbirths. Their directors wrote their own scripts... Without getting all bollixed up in Platonist categories of Americanism and French-ness, it’s not too far-fetched to suggest that what used to make American films recognizably American was not at all how they looked, but how their screenwriters made them sound. Between all the ex-journalists
and ex-playwrights, American screenwriters gave the talkie a style that valued word above image, verbal swagger over visual sweep—not *mise-en-scène*, but *persiflage*. (46-7, emphasis original)

While dubiously hailing the 1960s and 70s movie brat generation as a revival of the American golden era of 1930s screenwriting, Kipen also importantly urges a long-past-due divorce based on the irreconcilable differences between French and American critical theory. He does, furthermore, acknowledge the futility and arbitrariness of his own critical politics: while the elusive “personality” aspect of an American film may, to him, find its origins in the screenwriter more logically than in the director, this distinction, too, is subjectively defined. Barbara Klinger, in an essay addressing the academic reception of Douglas Sirk’s films, points out that if a critical framework is the “product of historically-specific academic practices, then its assessment of the ideological status of Sirk’s films does not comprise the definitive reading; it is a reading produced from a certain discursive locus and set of circumstances. By questioning the definitiveness of this paradigm, we can better consider other readings as more than a hindrance to the realization of a transgressive identity” (5-6). However, putting aside the paradox of addressing non-academic receptions of a film or director in an academic publication and thereby maintaining the locus of ideological power, the final paragraph of Kipen’s manifesto illustrates the idea more vividly by citing Oscar Wilde’s *The Decay of Lying*: “Just as nobody noticed London fogs until painters pointed them out by painting them, I’d contend that most screenwriters have gone disproportionately unnoticed for the simple reason that no disinterested party has bothered to state (or overstate) the case for their centrality… No, the true author of any film—the only one with the power to fix its image in the public mind, and to determine its lasting worth—
remains the critic” (172). In later sections, I will examine the extent to which Kipen’s assertion holds its ground.

1.7. Napoleon and Unfinished Business

NAPOLEON (V.O.)

*The art of war is a simple art. Everything is in the execution. There is nothing vague in it. It is all common sense. Theory does not enter into it. The simplest moves are always the best.*

While Kubrick based most of his films on twentieth century novels, he also shared credit for most of the screenplay adaptations, having enlisted writers only after doing research about the novels himself. Over twenty years before *Eyes Wide Shut* was projected in the darkened hall of the cinema, Kubrick had purchased the screening rights and all available English print copies of Arthur Schnitzler’s 1926 *Traumnovelle* (Castle 16). Kubrick further developed ideas about how the film should look and sound, and he employed writers such as Michael Herr and Frederic Raphael to rewrite several treatments of a script before production. During their work on *Full Metal Jacket*, Herr wrote that Kubrick’s “proverbial cheapness” meant that he demanded a great output of work from his most highly paid crew (“slaves,” Herr hyperbolizes, “building his next pyramid” (19)). Herr writes of his own experience during production:

I may have rewritten a few scenes twenty or thirty times, I would have done that anyway, but I never had to go through the number of takes Stanley would require. It was everything anyone ever said it was and more, and worse, whatever it took to “get it right,” as he always called it. What he meant by that I couldn’t say, nor could hundreds of people who have worked for him, but none of us doubted that he knew what that meant. (41)
Not only did Kubrick demand much effort for as little money as possible from his writers, but he also continued to refine the script even while shooting. Nicole Kidman spoke about her experience working with Kubrick on her eleven-minute monologue in which she confesses the moment she was willing to leave Bill for the naval officer in *Eyes Wide Shut*:

> We worked on it for three weeks. It’s rare as an actor that you’re asked to speak for more than two or three minutes, and that speech is a major monologue. Stanley rewrote and we worked on it again. It was incredible how he decide to shoot it—he constructed the shot watching us. We got to play the whole scene without having to cut—so it was more like theater. Stanley liked extremes. (Cocks et al 12).

Perhaps the most important example of Kubrick’s directorial authority comes in the form of a screenplay about a subject that several critics are only too happy to compare to Kubrick in both personality and strategy. By 1971, four years after the release of *2001: A Space Odyssey* received mixed critical reviews but made pronounced developments in the technology of the cinema, Kubrick’s work on what he intended to be “the best movie ever made” was well underway (Castle 26).

In 1967, Kubrick began researching the life and history of one of the greatest conquerors and strategists of the early modern era, Napoleon Bonaparte. As historian Eva-Maria Magel notes, he had by then read Oxford historian Felix Markham’s *Napoleon*, bought the screening rights to prevent other writers from claiming that they influenced the film, and enlisted the help of Markham and an army of graduate students to find all pertinent information about Bonaparte and 50 importantly related people (Castle 25). In executive producer Jan Harlan’s introduction to the *Napoleon* screenplay (part of Allison Castle’s huge research compendium of artifacts relating to the film), she notes, “Kubrick’s research for ‘Napoleon’ was monumental. Not only had he read almost every book on the subject that existed in the English language, but he had amassed 17,000 images from the period of
1769 to 1830” (16), and in addition to Kubrick’s 500 volume library about Napoleon, notes Eva-Maria Magel, “the material left behind by Kubrick is possibly the largest of all private archives on Napoleon,” which “notably continued growing long after the attempts to make the film had finally foundered” (24)—all indexed and key-tagged for easy access with a circa-1960s IBM computer (16).

In addition to the massive wealth of images and literature, Kubrick also sent his staff to scout locations in Europe for places Napoleon could be shot, as well as for the technology that would aesthetically shape the film and the costumes and actors who would be featured. In his November 22, 1968 treatment of the film (appended to the screenplay), Kubrick notes that the bulk of the production expenses consisted of hiring extras, purchasing uniforms, building sets, and featuring “over-priced movie stars” (“COST” n.p.), and subsequently lists the prices of hiring extras and entire armies of various countries. Romania and Yugoslavia, Kubrick notes, were “very, very interested in getting dollars” because their own currencies were worth no more than “monopoly money” and were willing to hire their men for two to five dollars per soldier per day. Filming in Eastern Europe would dramatically reduce the cost of extras, since French and Italian extras would have each cost upwards of $24 per day. In an interview with Joseph Gelmis, who questions the possibility of hiring an army of as many as 40,000 to reenact the historical battles, Kubrick responds that he could make do with fewer men, but qualifies his answer with reservation:

I wouldn’t want to fake it…because Napoleonic battles were out in the open, a vast tableau where the formations moved in almost choreographic fashion. I want to capture this reality on film, and to do so it’s necessary to re-create all the conditions of the battle with painstaking accuracy. (Castle 44)

The narrator of Kubrick’s screenplay further enunciates the director’s attention to the historical and technical accuracy of Napoleon’s military campaigns during a voiceover, which
was intended to bridge a visual montage consisting of (1) French troops forming a line to prevent Italian soldiers and civilians from fleeing their conqueror, (2) French troops removing livestock and food from a farmhouse, (3) a grand shot of “200 cavalry crossing a stream,” and (4) shots of soldiers carrying pets on their march across Italy:

Napoleon now introduced a new era of wars of maneuver. Everything would be sacrificed to mobility. The complicated battle formations of the 18th century would be abandoned, and the army freed from clumsy baggage trains. War would be made to feed on war. The armies opposing him were still committed to the rigid ideas of the previous era, and their soldiers were treated as automatons.

Both Yugoslavia and Romania also offered to make uniforms for all of the costumed troops for $40 apiece, but the shrewd Kubrick discovered a New York firm who could “produce a printed uniform on a Dupont, fireproof, drip-dry, paper fabric, which has a 300-pound breaking strength, even when wet, for $1-$4 depending on the detailing,” and that, after performing film tests, “from a distance of 30 yards...looks marvelous.” To avoid the projected three-to-six million dollar cost of constructing a large number of historical sets, Kubrick had located a number of “authentic Palaces and Villas of the period” that could be rented for a much more conservative price. Kubrick had also created a list of “overpriced” stars that he would be interested in casting for the film, including Audrey Hepburn, Peter O’Toole, Alec Guinness, Peter Ustinov, Charlotte Rampling, Jean-Paul Belmondo, and even Jack Nicholson as Napoleon himself (24-5). To curb the costs of the project, however, Kubrick even entertained the notion of casting on location in Romania and Yugoslavia instead of using stars at all. Finally, Kubrick noted that he intended to continue developing a new technique that would render location shooting sometimes unnecessary: “In addition to this, I intend to exploit, to the fullest, the Front Projection techniques I developed during the
production of ’2001.’ I have several new ideas for enhancing its usefulness and making operations even more economical.” Harlan explains Kubrick’s preproduction goal:

The idea was not only to re-photograph projected 8 x 10 plates...as was the case for the “Dawn of Man” scenes in 2001, but to project 70mm film and re-photograph it with the actors on a studio set or air building (a large balloon held up by air pressure without the support of obstructing pillars). (Castle 16)

Shooting on a 70mm format allows for greater visual clarity and detail, two necessary benefits that allow for Kubrick’s desired aesthetic featuring natural lighting, and especially nighttime interiors:

We have found an F.95 50 mm lens, made by the Perkin Elmer Co. who specialize in making lenses for the Aero Space Industry. This lens is two full stops faster than the fastest lens presently available for 65 mm cameras and should even allow interiors to be shot by candlelight. Despite the extremely high speed of this lens, the resolution is very good. Research has also been carried out to find means of increasing the speed of color film by special laboratory techniques.

No camera would ever expose a single frame of the film, however, as Kubrick struggled to push the projected $5,000,000 film through negotiations with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer between 1969 and 1971 until the release of Sergey Bondarchuk’s Waterloo in 1970 led MGM to back out altogether. Facing a similar fate in dealings with United Artists, one of the many studios suffering from a cash crisis at the end of the 1960s, the Napoleon project was indefinitely pushed aside.

Traces of the work Kubrick put into the preproduction of Napoleon endure in his other films: the 70mm format and space program lens, when tested, delivered “disappointing results” during the Napoleon years, but was corrected and successfully used in 1975’s Barry Lyndon to film candlelit scenes, and actors such as Patrick Magee, who had played a

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9 70 mm format consists of 65 mm for the image and 5 mm for the sound track.
role in 2001 and interested Kubrick for *Napoleon*, instead played a role in *Barry Lyndon* (Castle 28). Additionally, Kubrick wrote in his 1971 screenplay treatment that not only had his ideas for the film changed significantly since preproduction had begun, but that he would be enlisting the help of someone else—who, suspect the film historians, was Anthony Burgess, the author of *A Clockwork Orange* and who had been in contact with Kubrick and eventually wrote *Napoleon Symphony*, a screenplay manuscript that is part of the Kubrick estate (ibid.).

With the vast amount of information about Napoleon, the preproduction work that Kubrick directed amassed, and his contacts with influential collaborators such as Burgess, film historians Alison Castle, Jan Harlan, Eva-Maria Magel, and Felix Markham’s Oxford successor, Geoffrey Ellis, enjoy a unique position where it is possible to speculate as to the way *Napoleon* would have looked, sounded, and felt if it had been made. Writing about her conversations with Kubrick about the film, Harlan offers:

Kubrick’s film would have used the character of Napoleon and the historic background to tell a story about the inherent complexity of humanity. Stanley often said that in times of panic or acute crisis, rational thinking tends to fall apart. . . . Passion and emotions dictate our actions in the end. These are banal and uncomfortable observations. (19)

Harlan makes use of autonomic responses—“panic,” “crisis,” and “uncomfortable”—to describe some of the affective responses that she believes Kubrick’s film would have incited within spectators. Eva-Maria Magel, relying on Kubrick’s previous works to make a prediction as to the possible themes that the film could formally and narratively embody:

An era of breaking with old ways, and of new beginnings pointing forward to the modern age, the 18th century had always had a peculiar appeal for Kubrick. The life of Napoleon, military commander and politician, reflects many of the themes Kubrick dealt with in his other films. [Markham’s Napoleon] biography is full of issues that fascinated Kubrick: power, war and violence, individual responsibility, and the question of happiness, not forgetting love.
The situations his characters are forced to grapple with are highly precarious. Since Napoleon was a real-life figure of such extraordinary character, in whom all these tensions are so clearly reflected, it seems inevitable that Kubrick would seize upon him as a prime subject for a film. (24)

Magel goes on to qualify her treatment by even linking similarities in the personalities of Kubrick and Bonaparte, pointing out that in the screenplay, when Napoleon is shocked by the bill declaring the cost of his throne and chairs, he resembles the “chess enthusiast” Kubrick who obsessed over “every Polaroid shot of the dress rehearsals, every move made in the location filming, and every item of correspondence” (26). Even more, Magel points out that while both Bonaparte and Kubrick played chess, the latter draws an important distinction (implied between him and his subject): Napoleon was not a “chess master,” he was a “genius gambler” (26): In the screenplay, Kubrick’s Napoleon relies on the theatrical element of surprise, gut instinct, and a well-founded understanding of the psychology of the enemy. During one scene of the scenario, as a royalist mob attempts to unseat the new government of the Convention with a force of 40,000 rebels, the frightened military commander charged with defense, Barras, gives command to Napoleon, who claims he could defend the Convention with a force of 5,000 horsemen and 30 cannon. “The numbers are not particularly relevant,” Napoleon explains to Barras, “You are not up against soldiers – this is a mob, and they will run as soon as things become sufficiently unpleasant.” With the wager placed—Barras stating he will only stay if “we stand a very good chance of carrying this off”—Napoleon explains in voiceover (with the script note: “There is no sound of the guns”) the strategy behind his bet:

I ordered the artillery to fire ball immediately, instead of blanks, because, to a mob, who are ignorant of fire arms, it is the worst possible policy to start out firing blanks. When they first hear the terrific noise of the guns, they are frightened, but, looking around them and seeing no effect from the cannon, they pick up their spirits, become twice as insolent and rush on fearlessly. It
becomes necessary then to kill ten times their number to make an impression.

Napoleon’s strategy against the enemy, in its reliance on the orchestration of affectively intense events to provoke certain reactions (i.e., to immediately dampen the will to fight), resembles the formal and narrative strategies that Kubrick had so far employed with spectators of his oeuvre to incite affect and political opinions.

However, it is implied that when Napoleon discovers that Josephine—his one true love—was unfaithful to him, his passions cloud his sound judgment and signal the beginning of an extended chain of strategic mistakes that would eventually mark his downfall. The recurrence of Josephine (whom Napoleon divorces) throughout the film as the ostracized, promiscuous woman who could not bear him a son creates a tension between Napoleon’s desire for and revulsion by his true love, maintenance of pride in the face of embarrassment, and national duty to produce a successor. When the enemy Tsar Alexander knew that Napoleon had grown more emotional (especially after having chased Napoleon across Russia through a winter with few resources), he knew he could be conquered. In Dr. Strangelove, such human susceptibility was the reason a streamlined computer and mechanical system by which war could be waged automatically was institutionalized, and the implications of pure logic without emotion eventually and counter-intuitively spelled death for humanity. The apocalyptic effect of the oxymoron “logic ad absurdum,” thematically offered by a formal and narrative analysis of Dr. Strangelove, finds its humanity in the conflicted character of Napoleon, whose gradual inability to logically keep his emotions in check spells his demise.
Kubrick even offered a glimpse into his poetic and aesthetic vision for the film—and especially the battle scenes, which he considered to be among the most important components—in an interview with Joseph Gelmis:

I think it’s extremely important to communicate the essence of these battles to the viewer, because they all have an aesthetic brilliance that doesn’t require a military mind to appreciate. There’s an aesthetic involved; it’s almost like a great piece of music, or the purity of a mathematical formula. ... You know, there’s a weird disparity between the sheer visual and organizational beauty of the historical battles sufficiently far in the past, and their human consequences. It’s rather like watching two golden eagles soaring through the sky from a distance; they may be tearing a dove to pieces, but if you are far enough away the scene is still beautiful. (44)

With the historians’ deductions about Kubrick’s oeuvre, the wealth of documentation and recollections from his “obsessive” pre-production work on Napoleon, and his own depositions stating (albeit vaguely) his ideas for an aesthetic, a critic can form links between his personality and his films and subjects. However, as Gerstner reminds, these readings that ostensibly fulfill Sarris’ concentric-circle criteria for an “auteurist” reading of Kubrick’s authorship border on W. K. Wismatt and Monroe Beardsley’s “intentional” and “affective” fallacies (11). The former “makes clear that ‘the design of the author or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of work of literary art,’ leaving the critique and the critic at ‘fault [for] writing the personal as if it were poetic.” The latter directs the critic to acknowledge that while art and poetry are “[discourses] about emotions and objects,” the analysis “must be clear that the ‘emotions correlative to the objects of poetry become a part of the matter dealt with—not communicated to the reader like an infection or disease” (11). Instead, as I will discuss in the next section, all that can be deduced from this wealth of information is an idea, an image, of
what Kubrick’s *body of work* represents, and how this image may function politically, critically, and historically, while necessitating revision as time goes on.
Part Two: Realignments

2.1. “Authors” and Author-Functions; or: Criticism as Science

Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” describes a scission of the director and the authorial signature—which, in a less specific classification, he refers to as “the text”—as an automatic and necessary part of the writing process (écriture). As soon as the writer puts pen to paper (figuratively speaking), he or she extracts from systems of signification—languages, in this case both verbal and cinematic, that are not specific to the author but instead culturally defined. Since language is a cultural construct (to which the dialogics of Mikhail Bakhtin and others attest), the process of creation is necessarily bricolage, assemblage of fragments, not originality. The author is the one who reassembles fragments that are not his or her own, and in doing so, relinquishes his or her authority over the text.

Barthes writes that the reader-receptor of a text ultimately determines its meaning:

A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not...the author. Yet this destination cannot any longer personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted. (100)

Just as the author—because he or she exists a priori the text—cannot pretend authority over the reception of the text, neither can the text assume a specific reader who will interpret it in a certain way. The text is subject to continuous revision, reinterpretation, acceptance, or rejection.

Yet, as these chapters will explore, other (academic) critics like Jeffrey Sconce and Daniel Cross Turner recognize the bricoleur function of the author but, in contest with Barthes, attribute a definite psychology and history to the viewer, constructing a demo-
graphic to which a director’s films would be most effectively marketed. In both cases, criticism seems to “flatten” auteurs and audiences into symbolic objects, effectively serving as a catalyst between signature product and demographic consumer.

To formulate a distinction between the author and the authorial-signature-as-commodity, it is useful to invoke Peter Wollen’s seminal work on film semiotics, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*. In his chapter, “The Auteur Theory,” Wollen seeks to “elaborate in programmatic terms” a critical theory of film authorship, reclaiming the value of such a meaning-adding endeavor from the “ignorance...hostility...and taste for travesty and caricature” engendered by critics such as Sarris, Kael, and their contemporaries of the 1960s academic press (77). Wollen—channeling Barthes’ distinction between author/text/reader (but here reworking the triad to be director/oeuvre of film-texts/spectator)—also creates an analogy between the director and the musical composer to argue that while the meaning of the work of a metteur-en-scène is constructed *a priori*, the meaning of the work of an auteur is constructed *a posteriori*:

The distinction between composition and performance is vital to aesthetics. The score, or text, is constant and durable; the performance is occasional and transient. The score is unique, integrally itself; the performance is a particular among a number of variants... The cinema, like all these other arts, has a composition side and a performance side. On the one hand, there is the original story, novel or play and the shooting-script or scenario. Hitchcock and Eisenstein draw sequences in advance in a kind of strip-cartoon form. On the other hand, there are the various levels of execution: acting, photog-

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Wollen implicitly refers to the “hallucinatory critical extravaganzas” of the infamous *Film Quarterly* debates between Sarris et al and Kael, which devoted as much attention to making bigoted remarks about one another as it did discussing the virtues and limitations of each critic’s theoretical and methodological approach. See Sarris, "The Auteur Theory and the Perils of Pauline." *Film Quarterly* 16.4 (1963); Kael, "Criticism and Kids' Games." *Film Quarterly* 17.1 (1963); Ernest Callenbach, "The Auteur Policy." *Film Quarterly* 17.1 (1963); and Ian Cameron, Mark Shivas, Paul Mayersberg, and V.F. Perkins. "'Movie' vs. Kael." *Film Quarterly* 17.1 (1963).
Wollen argues that the purpose of a critical theory of film authorship is to observe structures of repetition—whether formal, narrative, or otherwise—among the films, with great directors’ (or, auteurs’) oeuvres offering dynamic structures consisting of seemingly antonymous qualities to be discerned. Whereas Truffaut was concerned with the metteurs-en-scène of the “Tradition of Quality” limiting the cinema as an institution of audiovisual authors being subordinate to textual ones, Wollen’s auteur theory relegates the critical-textual as subordinate—and entirely dependent upon—the work of the auteur, who is seemingly paradoxically constructed after-the-fact. He quotes Jean Renoir, who “once remarked that a director spends his whole life making one film; this film, which it is the task of the critic to construct, consists not only of the typical features of its variants...but of the principle of variation which governs it” (104). Based on Wollen’s placement of the director-as-composer as a priori the film-text (for Wollen does seek, ultimately, to analyze textually what can be seen and heard onscreen), the auteur must necessarily exist as a construction a posteriori. He cleverly notates the difference between, for example, Hawks and “Hawks,” the former representing the director himself, the latter representing the structure of dynamic repetitions for which the symbol “Hawks” acts as semantic locus. The distinction between person and structure, which Wollen reminds “should not be methodologically confused,” represents the “scientific” auteur theory’s work of specifying “partially how any individual film works. . . . Nor is it the single reading, the one which gives us the true meaning of the film; it is simply a reading which produces more meaning” (168-9). The goal of
the critic, for Wollen, is to recreate the author—or, here, create the “author”—based on the audiovisual/textual creations of the former.

Similarly invested in identifying what Wollen calls the “Author,” Foucault was contemporarily describing and revising the “author-function” as a term representing the textual and critical constitution of that structure. “It would be as false to seek the author in relation to the actual writer as to the fictional narrator,” writes Foucault; “the ‘author-function’ arises out of their scission—in the division and distance of the two” (Screen 23) Reflecting Barthes’ notion of the immediate “death” of the author during the process of creating text, both Wollen and Foucault seek to explain the reader/spectator’s activity of reconstituting the being whose intentions cannot be known, replacing the director with a “director” as locus of discrete phenomenological facets.

Arising from the “scission” between author and text, Foucault argues, is a “plurality of egos.” The first ego (in phenomenological succession) represents the “unique individual who, at a given time and place, succeeded in completing the project.” A critical comparison of this individual with Wollen’s ideas of the author (as director-composer) is slightly problematic in that it does not account for the “scission” between the author and the text. Rather, I interpret Foucault’s first ego as representing the text—or, as Wollen would analogize, the musical score. Next, “an instance and plan of demonstration that anyone could perform provided the same set of axioms, preliminary operations, and an identical set of symbols were used,” constitutes the second ego of the author-function. Like Wollen’s analogy of the performance of the score, with all of the individual nuances, enunciations, and other subjective qualities, I argue in turn that this ego represents both the affective quality of the text and receptive spectator’s work of distinguishing the unique qualities (to use
Massumi’s term) of the text’s performance. Finally, Foucault’s third ego is constituted by the “One who speaks of the goals of his investigation, the obstacles encountered, its results, and the problems left to be solved” (23). This reflective ego represents the spectator who has engaged the performance of text, which has altered his or her conceptualization (studioium) of it and, as I have argued, has been politicized by its spectacle.11 On the one hand, this is not to assume that all spectators derive the same pleasures from a director’s film as the film critic. On the other hand, of course, the “Author” is also a commodity.

11 See Table 1.
# Table 1: Ideas About the Phenomenological Construction of the “Author”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A priori: Individual</th>
<th>Director as composer (involving the production of a score, code, or text)</th>
<th>Performance of a score, code, or text given the qualities of its re-presentation.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Foucault</strong> (Three Egos)</td>
<td><strong>Barthes, Massumi</strong></td>
<td><strong>Wollen</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A unique individual who, at a given time and place, succeeded in completing a project.”</td>
<td>Not the individual, who has “died,” but Text</td>
<td>Not an instance, but a quality of an instance determined by the senses of the spectator—Affect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“An instance and plan of demonstration that anyone could perform provided the same set of axioms, preliminary operations, and an identical set of symbols were used.”</td>
<td>演出 Text</td>
<td>Text tempered by the affective qualities of its performance becomes politicized text—Criticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“One who speaks of the goals of his investigation, the obstacles encountered, its results, and the problems left to be solved.”</td>
<td>The critical spectator who seeks dynamic patterns of repetition, and organizes these patterns into structures.</td>
<td><strong>A posteriori</strong>: Structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Author”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.2. Film Buffs and Other Spectators

To this point, I have considered several apologist theories that seek in some way or another to attribute, reinscribe, or construct systems of meaning about a film or body of films and locate their origin with an individual author, the director. In the cases of Astruc, Truffaut, and Sarris, I argue that the national and political scene of the post-war era, the film-industrial investment in individual “voices” in the cinema (in part because of massive industrial conglomeration and economic struggles in Hollywood), and a Romantic and even Judeo-Christian tradition of seeking an authentic individual as creator of meaning had led these critics to organize a film canon around individuals who had been responsible for shaping the history of the cinema. These aesthetic and poetic individual voices, I argue, were not simply beatified in and of their own right, but because the continuum of political, national, and economic influences that was shaping cinema the world over fostered an environment in which such a situation could occur.

Sarris’ quasi-theory of the *auteur* has since then been systematically debunked as a subjective, even sexist mistranslation of a policy generated by Romantic French film critics who sought to explain the rationale behind their editorials and reviews. I argue, furthermore, that a vocabulary of affective response (offered by Massumi and Barthes)—which is today often brushed off as a fashionable trend in the academy—may have more accurately enunciated the qualities of the directors that he valued so highly, and posit that it was only with the academic institutionalization of Levi-Straussian structuralism in the later 1960s that Sarris’ pantheon was critically dismantled. Both Foucault and Wollen succeed in formulating phenomenologically grounded structures by which we can identify and construct systems of meaning that stand in for the author/auteur, evading charges of intentional and
affective fallacies, and inviting numerous “readings” by as many critics. As Dudley Andrew explains about Wollen’s method in “The Unauthorized Auteur Today,” structuralism “made room for the individual as ‘catalyst,’ that is, as an element, innocuous in itself, having the potential to initiate a complex reaction when dropped into the proper mix of other elements” (21). The *auteur*, for Wollen, was the catalyst in his “scientific” theory of authorship, the one being who, Warren Buckland defines, “as conscious agent actively mixes together in a chemical reaction the reactants (script and his/her thematic preoccupations) to determine the final composition of the product: the film” (33). This “Author” structure, it may be inferred, is the product of another catalyst: if the director, along with the “technology, film language, cultural precedent, and so forth” (Andrew 21) exists *a priori* the film as catalyst, the spectator acts as catalyst in the construction of an affectively influenced textual “reading” of the film, reconciled in the structure of an *a posteriori* “Author” constituted by the drawing of links of repetition of stylistic tropes.

I argue, too, that this constitutes a certain phenomenology of spectatorship, but not one that is all-encompassing. As Andrew points out about the critics who formulated *la politique des auteurs*,

...[T]he French remind us even today that properly speaking the author is not one who employs a completed language system but stands as the function that reaches back to the silence before language and draws out in birth pangs an expression shaped to feeling and thought. To read a poem or a novel is to participate again in this struggle for expression, what today we call *écriture*, the quest for the state of wordlessness through words. *Écriture*...involves temporality and interiority, whereas the postmodern media world is one of pure spatiality and externality, the display—the spectacle—of the social. (26)

For some spectators—and certainly for Wollen—“the word ‘auteur,’” concludes Andrew, “and the occasional signs left by whatever this word signals, can thicken a text with duration, with the past of its coming into being and with the future of our being with it” (27).
This process of *écriture* bears similarities to the Foucault’s third ego of the author-function, that of the one who reflects upon the performance of a work. It involves a critical spectator who “reads” films, reflects upon them, and takes ideas away from the experience—one who has received training in distancing him or herself from the spatial and temporal immediacy of the spectacle. Kubrick’s films, by virtue of their philosophical and satirical/ironic qualities, as well as their slow pace, not to mention largely being adaptations of novels, lend easily to the practice of *écriture*—translated literally into English as “writing.” Semantically, the spectator attributes structures of meaning to a specific “Author” who exists in the symbolic *a posteriori* the viewing experience, and who comes to represent the activity in which “expression [is] shaped to feeling and thought.”

These “Author” structures, observes Noël Carroll, can also identify a “point of view on the material at hand and thereby comment, with the force of an iconographic symbol, on the ongoing action,” and that we can say, for example, “that the invocation of the Hawksian world view serves as a privileged hermeneutic filter for informed film viewers, who can use it to bring into sharp focus the filmmaker’s attitude or ethos” (53). Carroll marks a “boom of allusionism” in the 1950s and 1960s, an era in America when future directors (he writes about the 1970s and 1980s) became familiar with the popular canonization of directors by figures such as Sarris, as well as the aesthetic theories of early filmmakers and critics such as Eisenstein, Bazin, and Godard. He notes that a “frenzy for film” characterized a generation of critics, directors, and hybrid critic-directors who were intensely invested in an “orgy of connoisseurship” of the major players in film history that were being identified by critics in the press during their youth. It became commonplace during this time to hear of a film with “a Fordian view of history, a Hawksian attitude toward women, an Eisensteinian use
of montage, and a Chuck Jones approach to the body,” Carroll illustrates (54). These directors later became the auteurist voices of the 1970s and after—“movie brats” who rewarded “the select” spectators who had “knowledge of the allusions” to canonized directors and could “grasp their sub rosa connotation[s]” (70). Identifying intertextuality and allusion became sources of pleasure, and the iconographic and symbolic value of the auteur had been established as an intrinsic element of the narrative cinema. This culture of allusion legitimized a spectatorship of écriture. Coinciding with the “massive ‘teenaging’” of Hollywood’s revised marketing strategies in the late 60s and into the 70s, writes Timothy Corrigan,

The global encounter with traditional forms of authority on campuses and on the streets opened doors in academia to nontraditional disciplines like film studies, and this in turn helped create a crucial forum and platform for a new international art cinema identified with auteurs like Ingmar Bergman, Luis Buñuel, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Jean-Luc Godard, as well as American auteurs like Arthur Penn, Peter Bogdanovich, and Robert Altman. (40)

The youth who had grown up throughout the development of Cahiers' politique and Sarris’ pantheon and had at least some knowledge of film history had reached a critical mass, and filmmakers could freely (in part because of the conditions of the film industry) engage with viewers in “allusionistic interplay” (Carroll 55).

Though college-educated film buffs amounted to a sizeable portion of the cinema-going audience, Carroll observes, “the queue at the box office is dominated by teenagers seeking a hearth away from home” (56). He claims that, instead of appealing solely to the “cognoscenti in their ranks,” the allusionistic auteurs of the 1970s were able to attract audiences without formal “training” by reworking generic conventions. The genre film could become newly appealing through syntactic or semantic mutations—and understood by film buffs as a director’s personal “spin” on an already-understood style—leading to the
success of films such as *Star Wars* (a “space Western”) and *Easy Rider* (with its pop soundtrack, drug use, and Kerouac-ian picaresque plot appealing to teens and young adults). Any homage inscribed within the “text” of the film could just as easily be passed by unacknowledged, and the film would still be enjoyable. This is in part because “Americans did not seek to drive the kind of wedge between their fictions and the process of filmmaking that was at the heart of Godard’s enterprise. . . they preferred the smart-alecky, wise-guy distance of a precocious film buff to the cerebral intensity of Godard’s progressively more modernist phases” (72). This embrace of cinematic illusionism—the subject of the apparatus theories of Baudry, Lacan, Althusser and others—marks the divergence of modernist European avant-garde cinemas with the postmodern American film industry.
Part Three: “Anderson,” Commodity, Identity

3.1. Toward Consuming the “Author”

In America, films such as The Graduate bridged the gap between the film buffs and the teenagers seeking a hearth and proved, as Carroll claims, that “popular film could be self-consciously, cinematically ‘intelligent,’ and that assertive stylization was authorized so that the audience could be expected to perceive and decipher stylistic choices” (79). In this section, I will analyze ways in which Wes Anderson’s films revisit and amplify this Graduate-era scenario of bridging popular consumption with film buffery. This 1960s youth generation came to be defined by “the attempt to create a common cultural heritage” through the movies, because they selected movies “as an emblem of self” and as ideological catalysts for rebelling and asserting identity. American auteurism, concludes Carroll, “is best understood as part of a quest for identity through the construction of a new and, needless to say, improved culture, one to be implemented by political and alternative life-style activism, one whose common vocabulary would be found at the movies”—one that is, importantly, “customized to order.” This section will evaluate how the utopian ideals of such a culture based on Wollen-ian abstract structures, which are meant to stand in for sentient beings and serve as catalysts for the assertion of identity, tend to decompose into feelings of “mere affectation, nostalgia, and, at worst, self-deception” (80), and that films are no longer (but were they ever?) made for allusionistic, critical, meaning-making value, but find their sole authority in their marketability.

“You either get him or you don’t,” says NPR critic David Edelstein about writer-director Wes Anderson in a review of The Darjeeling Limited, his fifth feature. “Well, I get him and I like him,” he continues, “but I’m not in the cult” (NPR). Edelstein has also
charged Anderson with “capturing the narcissistic bubble of a gifted adolescent,” but as The New York Times’ A.O. Scott qualifies it, Anderson accomplishes this in such a way that “the whole enterprise begins to feel more arch than artful, a gilded lily that spoils its perfection by insisting on it.” Likewise, contemporary critics have identified Anderson’s authorial signature as characterized by “slow-motion shots set to 1960s British pop..., Owen Wilson as a melancholy loser, robotic tracking shots that glide sideways for comic effect, excitable whip-pans” (Gilbey 59-60), almost shameless Orientalism, as well as warm color temperature (with a penchant for including anything golden-yellow) and symmetrical widescreen framing, not to mention a handful of recurring narrative themes, including the absent-present father’s responsibility for his family’s dysfunction and the difficulty of geniuses producing anything equal to their supposed potential. (See Figure 1 for an example of how these repetitive tropes can be used to parody the signature of “Anderson’s” films).

This signature of recurring characteristics, coupled with an assumed “technical competence,” fulfills the first two of Sarris’ concentric circles for auteur status. The third, the existence of interior meaning to be “extrapolated from the tension between a director’s personality and his material,” is where modern criticism seems to revolve about its own circular logic: criticism of and interviews with Anderson seem to be simply reiterative of the signature with which the public is ostensibly already familiar. The predictability of tabloid and even, to a certain degree, academic criticism—consisting of (1) a brief synopsis of one or more films, (2) an observation of the ways in which the film(s) in question deviate or conform to the pre-existent determination of authorial signature, and (3) an evaluative judgment of the work—continually, teleologically reifies Anderson as an auteur. Because Anderson furthermore admits to his meticulousness and concedes to observations in his
signature—a truly self-conscious cultivation of his image in the public eye—critics seem to assume that it must be a reflection of his personality.

Timothy Corrigan’s “Auteurs and the New Hollywood” reframes the goals of the auteur theory to depict one who “must now be described according to the conditions of a cultural and commercial intersubjectivity, a social interaction distinct from an intentional causality of textual transcendence,” marking a shift from the auteur who grew up in a society of spectators who were largely practiced in écriture in the 60s and 70s: “he or she has rematerialized in the eighties and nineties as an agent of a commercial performance of the business of being an auteur.” The author—or, rather, the “Author”—becomes what Corrigan terms a “model of agency,” or “a model of action in which both expression and reception are conditioned and monitored by reflective postures toward their material conditions” (42). As such, the success of an auteur is dependent upon his or her ability to market a film-product through an industry where audiences are identified through pre-release screenings and tests. The value of promotional technology “foregrounds” the agency of the auteur and “preempts and forecloses the value of the film in and of itself,” argues Corrigan (43). The director, in making his or her film appeal to not simply as large an audience as possible, but to all audiences, must become an auteur-star.12

12 “As Godard has parodied so incisively in his films like King Lear (1987),” Corrigan writes, “in today’s commerce we want to know what our authors and auteurs look like or how they act; it is the text and not its author that now may be dead.” Even an anti-self-promotional director such as Terrence Malick is co-opted by Corrigan’s model: “Malick” is unique in that his authorial signature connotes this quality of secrecy; it is an expected, already “foreclosed” text that spectators accept as a given and serves as part of a frame through which they might experience his films.
Figure 2: Wes Anderson Bingo

(Source: Blogspot via Buzzfeed)
If *auteur* status is now determined by commercial success, “the incessant flow of televisual images has eroded the stability of texts and seeped like an acid to break up the last signs of their authors as authorities who hover over the experience of their work and exert a moral pressure on its interpretation,” and that we are now “in the midst of ‘A Cinema Without Walls’ spilling out into the world” (Andrew 23). Corrigan cites the example of Michael Cimino’s *Heaven’s Gate*, which was an *auteurist* production that went far over projected expenses and ended up destroying its production company due to “universal bashings.” The film, however, enjoyed success in the movie rental arena after having been released as a director’s cut, proving that the new industrial standard wherein “the making of successful movies and identifiable auteurs falls outside the promotional formulas of the studios and the critical pronouncements of the Establishment” (45). Summarily, the “Author,” for Corrigan, exists *a priori* the film’s release: this iconographic, symbolic structure is shared through the dissemination of advertising and marketing campaigns about a film, and is taken as an already-given framework that qualifies the spectatorial experience of a film. The value of the paratext—e.g., director’s cut DVDs that are packed with bonus features often including the director’s commentary, or interviews in which an author explains his or her agenda, or other projects that highlight the director (e.g., Tarantino famously directed an episode of *E.R.* in the 1990s)—serves to amplify the importance of the director’s self-cultivated persona in the marketability of his or her films. It is as if Wollen’s logic of structure-as-authorial-identity has become internalized in the American narrative film market, and directors must now openly advertise themselves along with their works.

In “The Life Obsessive with Wes Anderson” (subtitled “On a spur-of-the-moment train ride to Rome with the filmmaker whose reality bears a distinct resemblance to his
movies”), David Amsden embraces this approach, to the point where Anderson parodies the New York Magazine interview itself:

At one point Anderson complimented [co-writer and star of The Darjeeling Limited Jason] Schwartzman’s new sunglasses, and then suddenly turned to me, concerned with how I would interpret the seemingly banal exchange. “Oh God, I bet that’s the first line of your piece, isn’t it?” Anderson said. “Wes Anderson, notorious for his attention to detail, carefully observes the black retro sunglasses that the young Schwartzman has pulled from his pocket…”

Despite attempts to find sociological, psychological, or other meta-narrative connectivity within an author’s oeuvre that is reflective of a greater societal relevance, today’s method of criticism especially seeks the input of the living director him- or herself. As Catherine Grant observes, “Many [critics]…have confessed to fears that they were resurrecting essentialist critical concepts and practices that ought to remain dead and buried. Despite this habitual queasiness…it is especially difficult to now disavow the effect…of the increasingly reifactory and commodifying processes of contemporary auteurism” (101). In light of Grant’s argument and Anderson’s self-conscious jest, it becomes increasingly clear that the auteur’s signature is a commodity that replaces the person him- or herself.

The commodification of his authorial signature serves Anderson well, especially in the creation of a cult following. As Jeffrey Sconce points out in “Irony, Nihilism, and the New American ‘Smart’ Film,” Anderson’s work is aesthetically, narratively and aurally tailored for a Generation X audience of “master semioticians, hyper-aware of how and what objects (clothes, cars, colas) signify” (365). This generation is more apt to “get” Anderson’s overwrought mise-en-scène, his actors’ deadpan delivery, and his narratives of familial dis-function. He explains the origins of this “Gen-X” culture of irony to which Anderson’s work is appealing:
The term derives from Douglas Coupland’s...story of smart, highly educated men and women, born in the 1960s and 1970s, who missed out on the post-war US gravy train of unlimited economic growth and opportunity enjoyed by the baby boomers who preceded them. Baby boomers...saw the younger generation as lazy, apolitical, cynical, sarcastic, and without purpose, especially when compared with their own self-perceived dynamic role in the social revolutions of the 1960s. Post-boomers...saw boomers as greedy hypocrites who had “sold out” to the very forces they once claimed to fight, all the while lecturing Gen-X for its lack of “commitment." (355)

In such an educated culture that has internalized the linguistic, cultural, and commercial structures of irony, there is an “intuitive understanding of the ‘commodity fetish’” (365), of the omnipresence of marketing and advertising and the desire to possess objects of culture as a means of asserting identity. Thus, when an auteur whose signature resonates with a cultural or subcultural ethos, members of that culture materialistically (i.e., by spending) participate in the marketplace in a way that supports the artistic or political values promoted by that auteur. As Foucault writes, “The fact that the discourse has an author’s name, that one can say ‘this was written by so-and-so’...shows that this discourse is not ordinary speech that comes and goes, not something that is immediately consumable. On the contrary, it...must be received in a certain mode that, in a given culture, must receive a certain status” (ed. Lodge 201). By Sconce’s logic, Anderson is certainly favored in one culture, that of those who “get it,” those Gen-X and later who have been attuned to the mode of commodified irony and participate in the mode’s perpetuation by “buying in” to the image through consumption of films and their associated products, discourses, and aesthetics.

While not nearly as aggressively didactic as many of Anderson’s Gen-X contemporaries (e.g., Fincher’s Fight Club), Anderson’s films still engage in often-sardonic critiques of white bourgeois culture and its consumerist ethos. In Bottle Rocket, his first feature, three upper-middle-class young men—Anthony (Luke Wilson), Bob (Robert Musgrave), and Dig-
nan (Owen Wilson)—fail to follow a meticulously-crafted 75-year plan for a life of excitement, adventure, and ultimate success. The very irony of creating such a plan lies in its own making; each event is a simple formality for moving down the to-do list and not a means of self-discovery. The narrative of three sedentary middle-class boys embarking on a journey with the illusion of danger (as if they have nothing to fall back on) shows Anderson's antagonistic-parodic stance toward the banal culture of white suburbia. It is not the act of self-discovery that Anderson parodies, but the empty performance of danger and recklessness (complete with bright yellow jumpsuits) that is nostalgic for boomer-generation activism.

Manifested in the list—figuratively, a shopping list—the performance is really of three upper-middle-class boys with more ambition than determination and more money than problems. Anthony, Bob, and Dignan never catch on to the dramatic irony that doubles as narrative theme: each of the characters moves closer to self-fulfillment coincidentally. Anthony falls in love with a motel housekeeper and, as a result of miscommunication, receives confirmation of her love too late, when he has already moved down the list. Bob's sense of fulfilled autonomy is granted only when someone else sticks up for him and belittles his tormenting older brother. Dignan's humbling comes when he is imprisoned for failing to fully grasp the illegality that his plan constituted, giving him an unexpected, yet startlingly more realistic experience than he intended. Anderson's ironic portrayal of bored post-Gen-X, who would rather possess the idea of excitement (in the form of a completed shopping list, signifying a historical catalogue of life experiences) rather than be excited, seems to comment on the banal practice of consumption in lieu of finding the spontaneous in the everyday, of replacing affective experience with symbolic commodity.
An overarching structure of Anderson’s corpus involves the symbolic and material replacement of life experience. As Sconce describes, there is a “Gen-X penchant for exacting consumer classification and quotation, including [the use of] decade blending (‘In clothing, the indiscriminate combination of two or more items from previous decades to create a personal mood...’)” (365). This leads to another often-observed critical talking point about the datedness of Anderson’s mide-en-scène (Margot Tenenbaum’s 1980’s Lacoste polo and Nico’s 1960’s cover of Jackson Browne’s “These Days” in The Royal Tenenbaums are ubiquitous examples). As Daniel Cross Turner goes on to point out about Tenenbaums (an observation that arguably applies to all of Anderson’s films):

The film purposely constructs a world of artifice, but one that is connected...by those things that “we” (white, middle-class, and coming of age in the 1980s) shared growing up. . . . The music, as a “jukebox of bedsit melancholia” that arranges “glum little epiphanies,” does indeed put quotation marks around our emotions and memories, alluding to our social unconscious, the almost unrecognized strands of our collective nostalgic past. (168)

Turner’s statement suggests an awareness of the processes of irony at work—with a specific target audience in mind—through the placement of objects and narrative moments in the film in quotation marks: the semantically aware Gen-X is apt to recognize the datedness of the polo (“from the 80s”) and the Nico songs (“from the 60s”) and instead read them as allusionistic selections from other generations that serve to simultaneously invoke the tone of their respective decades as well as to call awareness to the bricolage of nostalgic artifacts that is characteristic of Anderson’s work. An irony, of course, lies in the recognition of the temporal dissonance between those nostalgic artifacts, as well as the same tension between the mise-en-scène and the fashions of the current day. The use of consumable products to signify a past temporality is what Turner terms “‘mode’ nostalgia.” In keeping with
the patterns of Gen-X consumption, “nostalgia as mode converts the past into a consumable image, one that flattens out memory [and time] into a random sequence of metonymic adjacencies. . . . The past becomes hollow at its core: it merely evokes a sleek and fashionable ‘pastness’ for public consumption” (161). The Lacoste polo in *Tenenbaums*, the analog recording systems in *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, the stop-motion animation (and the choice to adapt Roald Dahl) in *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, and the quest to save Latin (and get the girl) in *Rushmore* are all examples of how nostalgic artifacts (both physical objects and narrative tropes) are easily recognizable products for consumption—antiques with recognizable semantic values that acquire ironic value when used together in modern film—that serve as ironic souvenirs, nostalgic potpourri; and who uses potpourri anymore?

Interestingly enough, today’s critics also seem to be caught up in this creation of nostalgia through their unintentional resuscitation of *la politique des auteurs*. In an era when “authenticity and time have themselves become victims of postmodern speed, space, and simulacra” (Ibid), criticism arguably seems to participate in the cultivation of authorship as a way of preserving its own authenticity. A.O. Scott of *The New York Times* admits, “By now...Mr. Anderson’s methods and preoccupations are as familiar as the arguments for an against them.” Richard Brody, writing about *The Darjeeling Limited*, parallels the Whitman brothers’ “childlike esprit de corps [that reveals] authentically epic underpinnings” with “the storyteller’s own far-ranging quest for his own identity.” Rather than using criticism as a tool for producing new knowledge, as Wollen would have it, modern popular press critics flatten the myriad possible distinctions between Anderson and “Anderson,” with each critic instead equating their own affected deductions as intentional projections of the man himself. “Anderson” as abstract, dynamic structure of repetition becomes instead
“Anderson” as commodified brand name and self-conscious *bricoleur* of affective symbols that attain a value in the marketplace.

Among the elements of Anderson’s paratextual materials that self-consciously qualify his authorial signature (and mark an even more self-conscious internalization of the *au-teur* theory) are Criterion Collection DVDs (authorized as legitimate versions by the director’s signature on a sticker on the packaging, and including extras dealing with everything between his films’ music to his brother’s artwork used in the films), his popular press interviews (such as the self-conscious exchange between Anderson and Amsden) and, perhaps most notably, his commercials. In one “My Life, My Card” commercial for American Express credit cards, Anderson takes the viewer through the process of directing a film. Almost like playing “Anderson Bingo,” the director, consistently in the center of the frame, guides the camera through a movie set and his authorial signature, interacting with members of his crew (including frequent collaborators Jason Schwartzman and Waris Ahluwalia), making decisions about props, checking in on makeup and wardrobe, giving his opinion about rewritten dialogue, greeting a young fan, and renting a helicopter ($15,000 that the budget doesn’t allow for) out of his own pocket—on his American Express card. The commercial ends with Anderson’s signature, superimposed in the frame, in the style of the security box on the back of a credit card. Anderson has authorized the commercial, associated his name with American Express—a company that facilitates consumerism—and put his face and signature on the aesthetic and quirky style of the commercial’s diegesis. The “excitable whip-pans” of the camera provide the rhythm for Anderson’s depiction of his busy life, but they also insist on themselves, calling attention to the fact that these movements are commonly used in Anderson’s films, and revealing the constructed nature
of the commercial as a re-presentation of his directorial style. In this commercial, Anderson endorses an image of himself and his aesthetic as “Anderson,” as well as the act of consumption.

Citing Francis Ford Coppola’s final interview with *Playboy*[^13], Corrigan outlines a trend by which authors,

Place[d] before, after, and outside a film, and in effect usurping the work of that film and its reception...are agents who, whether they wish it or not, are always on the verge of being self-consumed by their status as stars...A large part of auteursim has become, that is, both a provocative and empty display of material surface, subject to almost indiscriminate circulation, befuddling those more traditional auteurist relations based on models of writer/text/reader...[P]leasure lies in being able to already know, not read, the meaning of the film as a product of the public image of its creator. An auteur film today seems to aspire more and more to a critical tautology, capable of being understood and consumed without being seen. Like an Andy Warhol movie, it can communicate a great deal for a large number of audiences who know the maker’s reputation but have never seen the films themselves. (50)

In both the writings of Corrigan and Carroll, the language of the “self-conscious,” of “self-consumption” and of “self-deception” pervades their analyses. The overarching theme of the post-New Hollywood *auteur* is one of self-commodification, rendering the “text” of the *auteur’s* films meaningless to any spectator who resists critical viewing and listening, and transferring representation of authorial identity into a commodity that can be known primarily and *a priori* through the marketplace. The author, to be appealing to all audiences, must distinguish himself through print, televisual media, and product associations so that he or she may be distinguishable. It is as if the industrial model for identifying an author today is the progeny of the semantic mutations to genre that gave directors distinction in

[^13]: Coppola is also the uncle of Jason Schwartzman, with whom Anderson has created multiple commercials, co-written scripts, co-produced films, and who has starred in most of Anderson’s features.
the 1960s: the allusions to other directors’ styles may still exist, however they are allusions to other directors’ products, forever co-opted within the marketplace. (When Jason Schwartzman as Jack Whitman turns on Peter Sarstedt’s “Where Do You Go To (My Lovely)?” at the beginning of Hotel Chevalier, he plays it on an iHome, quietly but clearly insisting on the song’s availability in, for example, the iTunes Store, flattening the 1970s song into just another commodity available in the always-all-the-time accessibility of the Internet). Allusion no longer needs to carry the weight of history to be understood, for a reference to Tati or Roald Dahl in an Anderson film serves only to broaden the marketability of both. In an age when credit cards and online movie purchasing outperforms box office revenue, the Cinema Without Walls exists as a heterogeneous but equally accessible market by which no literary or allusionistic qualities of a film represent objective superiority (i.e., the greater structuralist dynamism of “Ford” over “Hawks” no longer bears influence outside of the “cognoscenti”); the films in the marketplace allude to other products in the marketplace. The self-erasure that Coppola felt as his public image solidified into a structure of expectations that affected the marketability and critical response to his films (i.e., those of his films that challenged previous notions of his signature were lambasted as failures) is seemingly both acknowledged and eluded by Anderson’s self-conscious presentation. Both in the content of his films and in his extra-filmic work such as commercials, Anderson acknowledges the power and the superficiality of the marketplace in the projection of the self. The shopping list of Bottle Rocket thematically embraces this idea, while the American Express commercials allow him to literally connect his face with his signature, formally promoting the many layers of himself (both Anderson and “Anderson” simultaneously), and thus preventing the loss of authenticity that Coppola felt. Anderson embraces
his own commodification; he internalizes it and in his commercials performs himself in the movie of his life.

Figure 3: Anderson's American Express Commercial

As I have noted above, critics also work to attribute a definite psychology and history to the viewer. The demographics that they deduce—based on the describable *studia* of Anderson’s films—are most apt to “get it” become flattened into “Audiences” to which the aesthetic products of “Anderson” are marketed. This analysis of how criticism serves to flatten human authors and audiences into linguistic signs—each becoming signifiers of their demographics and aesthetic preferences—does seemingly fall apart: the Gen-X meta-awareness of its role in consumerism, in spite of its supposed antipathy toward it, becomes
ironic because it still participates in the propagation of the commodified cinema. People still go to multiplexes and art houses, purchase Anderson’s Criterion Collection releases, blog about his films online, and watch his commercials on YouTube. The subversive irony characteristic of the Gen-X seems to be either (1) outsmarted by the cunning of “the corporate machine”—or, in the corporation’s willingness to maintain control over the structure of the author cult, has incorporated it; (2) deferred in favor of a spectatorship of identification, of losing oneself in the diegesis of nostalgia; and/or (3) accepting of the paradox that consumerism as irony is still consumption, and instead embracing a spectatorship of cinephilia, of engaging in the cult of the auteur in an age where postmodern thought stifles individuality in favor of a bricolage of cultural artifacts standing in for identity, the trace of the individual left on the check that pays the credit card bill.

3.2 Works of Art in the Age of Persistent (Re)Presentation

A semantic construction of “Anderson” based on the works of Turner, Sconce, and Grant observes a trend of creating an aesthetic that is made for consumption—one in which the image of reality supplants the “actual” reality about which Gen-X-ers and the like may find themselves disenchanted. However, as the editors of Cineaste write, because “a marketplace...omnivorously co-opts whatever it catches in the cross hairs of its profit motive in order to produce a standardized product” (Briggs et al, 43-50), the idea of a film speaking to a subcultural discourse seems almost oxymoronic. Instead, a new consumer ritual evolves, one that extends farther into history than the advent of la politique des auteurs, that of religion itself.
Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” complicates the possibility of an authentic *auteur* cult. “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art,” he observes, “is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.” Benjamin argues that proximity, presence, and the possibility for tactile interaction with an “authentic” original (a work of art, a landscape, a person) inscribe the subject with an “aura,” which is lost “by making many reproductions, [substituting] a plurality of copies for a unique existence” (220-1). Furthermore, by transporting the reproduced work from its original setting (in a museum, cathedral, or other location), the consumer experiences the work of art in a different-spatial-temporal context. Instead of going to the original, a copy is instead consumed in the consumer’s own space.

This authenticity characterized by the physical presence of the original as well as the geographical and temporal conditions under which we may consider it—the conditions under which it acquires “unique value”—is based, according to Benjamin, in ritual. “For the first time in world history,” he wrote in the 1920s, “mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. (To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility)” (224). This erasure of space-time between the original and its reproduction is a common trope of “Anderson.” For example, in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, the title character takes refuge in the 375th Street Y after Henry Sherman, his wife’s new suitor, exposes his fakery of being afflicted by stomach cancer. As I have argued, the nostalgia for an outdated aesthetic (a characteristic of nearly all Anderson’s films) “flattens” temporalities; bringing back consumer items that were fashionable nearly “to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular
situation,” according to Benjamin, “reactivates the object reproduced,” but at the cost of a historical progression of culture. Invoking elements of the past and presenting them as items for consumption catches “Audiences,” young (the semantically aware who ironically appreciate an aesthetic) or old (those who may be literally nostalgic for old times), in the co-optive crosshairs of capitalism, recycling history as a profitable object. In addition to the temporal flattening in *Tenenbaums*, Anderson’s film literally recreates a location and presents it as real: the 375th Street Y, as Jonathan Romney points out, is “located somewhere off the edge of the known map of Manhattan,” and is part of a “wholesale customized reinvention of New York” (12). Benjamin’s theory seems to rest on placing emphasis on the indexical quality of the cinema, of the moving-image film transporting audiovisual reproductions of real objects to consumers. However, Anderson’s film shows that visual copies of locations that have never existed (constructed sets, locations “designed for reproduction”) or ambiguous temporalities complicate Benjamin’s announcement of the cinema’s freedom from the cult of the original, the aura. Yet, as Michel Chion observes, “When an image has more presence than reality it tends to substitute for it, even as it denies its status of image” (103). If a place that has never physically existed in a time that can never truly be determined—but were nevertheless presented as *real*—was there ever an aura to be lost? Whereas Benjamin argues for cinema’s characterization as a catalyst of reproduction, Chion’s writing on film sound argues for emphasis on cinema as that of representation.

On the one hand, in spite of this seeming exception to Benjamin’s theory, “Audiences” participate in *la politique des auteurs* in a way that reactivates cult rituals, unconsciously affirming a cinematic aura that Benjamin thought was lost. But, what is the cost of participating in ritual and the implications of placing a monetary value on an aura? This
question echoes back to early religions and sacrificial god-offerings, which have characterized human ritualistic participation for millennia. Through the ritual of consumption, “Audiences” buy into “Anderson” as a representation of their subcultural discourse and, by possessing these representations, project identity: the idea of sacrifice (money) being exchanged for an object of proof of discursive identification (e.g. DVDs and other paratexts [clothing, collectibles, Criterion editions]) through the ritual of viewing and subsequent spending in the name of someone who represents a certain favorable ideology (“Anderson”). Physical proof via consumption becomes necessary in projecting identity, flattening the traditionally sacred and profane into a number on a price tag. In his Situationist manifesto, The Society of the Spectacle, Guy Debord observes this trend of possessing commodities that come to stand in for identity:

Waves of enthusiasm for a given product, supported and spread by all the media of communication, are thus propagated with lightning speed. A style of dress emerges from a film; a magazine promotes...various clothing fads.... The fetishism of commodities reaches moments of fervent exaltation similar to the ecstasies of the convulsions and miracles of old religious fetishism. (68, 1983 ed.)

This seemingly polytheistic—or, rather, poly-auteurist—ritual of consumption is not entirely so: the co-optability of subversive or subcultural products relegates them as variables under the hierarchy of the Hollywood-influenced (and entwined) industry of commodities. The aura that was seemingly lost in the flattening of space and time is instead displaced into a ritual of consumption and identification, with the “Author” functioning as brand name, and identity amounting to a bricolage of cultural artifacts. If, according to Benjamin, “the aura [is] a ‘unique phenomenon of a distance however close it may be,’” and the cult is founded on this “unapproachability,” (243) then the aura of cinema and its “Author” cults is displaced and diffused into the many artifacts that consumers purchase in their quests for
identity-formation through the marketplace. The aura of a film such as Tenenbaums whose space and time has been flattened into the image of reality, is also unapproachable because of the spectator’s inability to totalize (completely possess) all of the paratextual products that accompany the film; the aura is diffused into the market, where the essentially unlimited possibility of selling commodities related to an “Author” precludes (and depends on) the audience’s financial limitations. The democratic, widespread availability of cultural commodities guarantees the life of both the cult discourse and the market. Like the series of static frames (whose fate is now, too, a nostalgic subject for some) projected at 24 frames per second, the formation of identity via fragments of culture is nothing more than the sum of its parts were it not for a continual and dynamic market of cult products. Identity-formation is an ongoing motion among the universe of cultural fragments, especially in a world where social networking allows individuals to share purchases, “likes,” and preferences instantly. These dynamic elements demonstrate the individual bricoleur’s ability to resist total objectification. Identity is more than the sum of its parts if it continues to move and evolve; stasis becomes akin to the still image, the index, and the death of the self.

On the other hand, this stubborn effort to re-inscribe the cinema and its auteur cults with an aura is symptomatic of a cinephilia that is inherently counter-cult. Where economically perpetuated cults are driven by the desire to own objects representative of discourse (a “possessive cinephilia,” to use Laura Mulvey’s term (Death 24x, 161-79), identity becomes a function of the relative obscurity (or popularity) and monetary value of all the cultural commodities one possesses. These possessive cinephile becomes a collector, not only of post-production objects but also of items used in the mise-en-scène of the films themselves (for example, the Marc Jacobs for Louis Vuitton luggage used by the Whitman
brothers in *The Darjeeling Limited* are highly sought after), with the items more closely associated with the *auteur* and the film being more culturally and, therefore, economically valuable. However, another manifestation of the cinephile—a suppressive one—exists in the individual (or group of individuals) who preserves the relative obscurity of a certain film or set of films by a director. By keeping the film out of the critical spotlight and the commodity market, this audience of suppressive cinephiles is more able to totalize on the film as a cult object. Yet, possession and circulation of obscure films within small groups of cinephiles prevents the use of the film as a projection of identity toward the larger whole of society, especially at the risk of exposing the film to the mainstream where it may be co-opted. Only within this limited group does the obscure film serve as an object of identification—that group who is familiar with it, those who “get it.” In contrast to the possession of a multitude of mainstream objects, it functions as a unifying and homogenizing object rather than one used to assert an aspect of difference. An aura, which Benjamin argues was never present in cinema because its atemporal nature—that is, its being comprised of discrete shots and scenes being arranged in a way that is not faithful to “real time” (via the use of editing for narrative arrangement/progression)—is reinscribed by suppressive cinephiles, a small cult community is based on a sacred object that is kept from the masses.

In *The Darjeeling Limited*, Anderson explores the themes of cult, ritual, and consumption. In the film, three brothers—Jack, Francis, and Peter Whitman—take a journey to India in search of a spiritual enlightenment that will hopefully rekindle their relationship, which diffused after their father’s death, and allow each of them to heal from their loss. Equipped with their hand-painted designer luggage, tickets for a first-class compartment on a train across the Orient, and a laminated itinerary of religious excursions (à la 75-year
plan of *Bottle Rocket*), the white, bourgeois thirty-somethings embark on a misguided adventure where some cult rituals become aesthetic products for consumption and others are inscribed with a different meaning. At a Sikh temple, the brothers kneel and bow during a ceremony. Jack asks, “Do you think it’s working?” as the Gurdwara chants and waves a tassel (the purpose of which is clearly unknown to the three Whitmans). “I hope so,” Francis responds. At another temple, Peter excuses himself after having an argument with Francis over borrowing a designer belt, saying “I’m gonna go pray to that deity over there,” where he proceeds to make the sign of the cross, a humorous but blatant disregard for religious propriety. The religious sites across India serve as little more than iconographic markings of “Indian-ness” into which their undoubtedly expensive trip buys in; the brothers become possessive spectators of a foreign world in the sense that they consume fragments of that culture with the hope that it will transform their identities into being fraternal and “whole.” The real healing, however, occurs only after Francis’ face heals from his motorcycle accident, after Jack completes his short story about his family and unfaithful former lover, and after Peter, in a failed attempt to save a drowning Indian boy, attends his funeral, which changes his outlook on his soon-to-be life of fatherhood. Real life, affective experience has broken through the flattened image of “India” as exotic land of ritualism.

Then, after the brothers track down their mother—a missionary nun who sounds like she is “trying to sell us a vacuum cleaner” in her letter to them (suggesting that she, too, ran away to India for the idea of spiritual enlightenment)—she runs away in the night. Distraught by her absence at their father’s funeral, the brothers once again face their mother’s abandonment. However, they perform (for the third time) a ritual involving a peacock feather—which they had previously botched while they still had “more healing to do”—in
an act of renewed solidarity. Finally, after they decide to stay in India for a longer time, they ceremonially shed their designer baggage (in slow motion, no less) and board a new train, reinvigorated with fraternal unity marked by a peacock feather buried beneath three stones on a remote mountain in India—a cult of three whose relic’s aura is preserved forever in the obscurity and unattainability of time and space.

3.3 Moonrise Kingdom and Nostalgia

Nostalgia, or a longing for the past, is arguably another of the most characteristic thematic motifs of Anderson’s work. His latest film, Moonrise Kingdom is set in 1964 on the fictional island of New Penzance off the coast of New England. The main character, 12-year-old Sam Shakusky, is an orphan who escapes boy scout camp to go on an adventurous tryst across the island with Suzy, a troubled pre-teen girl whose mother is unfaithful to her depressive and alcoholic father. When he realizes Sam has escaped, Scout Master Ward (played by Edward Norton) notifies Captain Sharp (played by Bruce Willis), and together they deputize the other scouts and instruct them to track down the runaways. They succeed in finding them, but a violent duel resulting in a stabbing wound and a dead dog allows Sam and Suzy to escape. Meanwhile, Sam’s foster parents learn about the situation and decide not to allow him back home. The rest of the film deals with how Sam faces being placed in a foster home by Social Services if he and Suzy are caught, and how none of the adults can bear the idea of allowing this to happen. In a classic feel-good ending, Captain Sharp adopts Sam, who will now be able to be with Suzy every day.

Nostalgia films comment more about the present than the past, since the figurative world of children and the literal environment that they explore, which is full of adventure
and excitement, represent a time and place we can relate to and “remember” fondly. However, Sam and Suzy are also very troubled—primarily as a result of decisions the adults in their lives have made. The adventure they embark on is also very “adult”: they seek validation as individuals, and also as individuals who love each other in spite of the opposition they face from others. The adults, in contrast, demonstrate that the goals that the children are pursuing have not led them to fulfillment, and as the film goes on, we witness the same “childlike” behavior from them that suggests their own feeling of nostalgia for the kids’ adventure. When presented in this light, Anderson’s film seems to suggest that nostalgia’s “golden years” may not have been quite so perfect after all.

In *The Society of the Spectacle and Other Films*, a hybrid manifesto-screenplay version of the Situationist work, Debord enunciates this concern: “The images that detach themselves from every aspect of life fuse in a common stream where the unity of life can no longer be re-established” (Debord 1992, 61). This “common stream” becomes the spectacle of the marketplace-facilitated exchange of representations, of “stories we tell [and have told] ourselves about ourselves:"

>The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as instrument of unification. As a part of society it is specifically the sector which concentrates all looking and consciousness. Due to the very fact this sector is separate, it is the common ground of the deceived gaze and of false consciousness; and the unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of generalized separation. (63)

>In all its specific forms, as information or propaganda, advertisement or direct entertainment consumption, the spectacle is the present model of socially dominant life. It is the omnipresent affirmation of the choice already made in production and its corollary consumption. (64)

>The website *Gawker* has called Anderson “the voice of our generation, the hipster messiah.” The relationships between Anderson, “hipsters,” and the rest of us all converge at
the issue of nostalgia. “We” (I speak of youth in the post-Gen-X not limited to Sconce’s assumptions of race and class) laugh at those who claim to “have done things before they were cool,” but what they actually do is recycle things that were once “cool” and blend the outmoded with the contemporary. Not only hipsters, but society as mediated by the cultural exchange of the marketplace, has become paradoxically caught up in a cycle characterized by addiction to nostalgia (with “hipsters” serving as the perpetual epitome of this paradox). The resurgence of Polaroids, or better yet, the “Instagram” app for smartphones, is an example of an old, analog technology that was adapted to the 21st Century digital age, but that still preserves the aesthetic of the past (or, more accurately, re-presents “past-ness”), and its digital state allows it to be quickly shared with friends online. Anderson himself employed this “dated” aesthetic by filming Moonrise Kingdom on 16mm, which produces a grainy, old “look.” This look enjoys popularity because it connotes not only the one-of-a-kind, “authentic” quality of a Polaroid, but also because the Polaroid was manufactured before many (if not most) of its users were born, and we fallaciously assume that this product that bears the aesthetic of a past time that will fulfill our need to be unique and authentic if we adapt it to life today. Therefore, we do learn from history by making things more rational, but when the “look” or the “sound” of this recycled past becomes cool again—or as Walter Benjamin would have it, when things become reproduced and the “aura,” or the personal feeling of fulfillment that authenticity produces, is disseminated into the market—we almost literally “keep digging” for something else to make us feel nostalgic. We replace broadening our experiences with momentarily stimulating our senses, and the result is rarely one of fulfillment. But rather than learning from this cycle, we young capi-
talists jump from one “presently cool and relevant” train to another, and we feel disappointed when a style we adopt or a trend we subscribe to is no longer unique.

The past was never qualitatively “better” than it is now. The implicit problem with nostalgia is that we consider times past “better” (more simple, less mediated, more “human”), but we always necessarily see an incomplete picture because, as Linda Hutcheon writes, we can never “totalize” or completely understand the past. The past never objectively, totally symbolically was. Instead, when we watch Moonrise Kingdom, we see curious, ingenuous and un-cynical Sam and Suzy going on adventures and falling in love as something that we used to know, and we tend to mourn the loss of what we never knew. However, the progressive and libratory potential of nostalgic affect in film, especially as Wes Anderson uses it, is that it qualifies a world full of artifacts that “remind” us of happier and more fulfilling times that actually weren’t as happy and fulfilling as we remember them. What the nostalgic aesthetic does is set the present in sharper relief—it frequently points out that we allow ourselves to live in a “present” environment, whether personal, political, environmental, or otherwise, that prevents us from feeling the fullness and innocent curiosity about the world that Moonrise Kingdom’s 12-year-olds felt.

Buying in to the aesthetic and symbols offered in Anderson’s myth of history demonstrates the cathartic activity—an affectively charged instance—of buying into “nostalgia as mode.” Retail therapy, it might be said, amounts to a type of writing of the body—the textualization of the self with symbols that, when taken from a spectacle that offered an affective experience, embodies within itself the trace of this experience. “Buying in” is the nostalgic act of ex post facto trying to “flatten” an affectively intense, temporally and spatially limited experience into a symbol—a commodity—that has an already-defined value.
in the marketplace and invites a “reading” from others. We are already-always nostalgic for affective experiences that are never intrinsic, but always parallel to, symbols. This re-presentation of affectively charged symbols is an attempt to preserve the aura of the spectacle; it has a value in the marketplace (anywhere from the obscure cult film of great monetary value, to the Louis Vuitton bags by Marc Jacobs, to Harry Potter-franchise trading cards), and it gives the consumer the ability to gauge its relative obscurity and to decide whether to present it or withhold it as a strategy of maintaining its value. The acts of possession and collection are measures of individual market value: the possessive cinephile, for example, shows certain films “not just to anyone,” but to those upon whom it will likely offer a similarly affective experience as it was felt when that cinephile first experienced it. The selective re-presentability of an object of spectacle reinscribes a source of authority to the consumer-spectator: the carefully orchestrated selection of objects for representation—marking an instance of repetition by which an auteur is identified—double as a projection of identity, the idea that “I am known by these things,” and forms a community that has shared similarly affective experiences. For, as Foucault reminds, the author “must be received in a certain mode that, in a given culture, must receive a certain status,” and the selective orchestration of the revelation of affectively charged symbols allows the spectator to authorize such a mode for such a culture. The spectator is the new author, and the marketplace is the ever-present plurality of iconoclastic symbols of spectacle, the flattened spatial and temporal abstract structure of all (always-already iconographic) texts; our communal activity within it disperses the affective aura through the process of perception, feeling, and reflection that have become unconscious and automatic. We organize a communal culture through the performance (consumption and orchestrated revelation) of
affectively charged symbols. In our era, commodities become semantic in the syntax of the aura of identity. In representing ourselves, we write the spectacle.
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