

the book to capture the love Hamer felt for her family and the compassion she felt for her community.⁵

As you, the reader, may have surmised, learning is a very personal way for me to shape my reality and to fight against the oppressive forces of ignorance and racism. This life-long drive to develop the field of poverty studies is not a fascination with or adulation of the poor but a reflection of my genuine curiosity about and compassion for those in need, a constituent part of who I am. I am a Black historian.

What is Black history for Black scholars? Our gaze into the eyes of this misty mirror of rememory is above all an intimate, distinctive relationship, one we must claim as our own personal expression of self-care and self-love. This organic, deep-seated connection is a sacred transaction, forged through generations of sacrifice and sealed in bone and blood. To be a Black scholar is to strike a bargain with the past. In exchange for our commitment to do right by our unique heritage in the search for our ancestors and our history, we make one simple demand of the past – “please, don’t let us forget who we are.”

University of Bristol

NICOLE GIPSON

Journal of American Studies, 58 (2024), 1. doi:10.1017/S0021875824000094

RICHARD CORLISS, *TALKING PICTURES: SCREENWRITERS IN THE AMERICAN CINEMA*

Over the years, if one book has made me revisit its pages and think about its provocations more than any other, it is probably Richard Corliss’s 1974 treatise *Talking Pictures: Screenwriters in the American Cinema*.¹ Although a journalist by trade, Corliss was one of the few critics by the early 1970s who had studied film academically. For a time, this background led him to be editor-in-chief of the journal *Film Comment*, part magazine, part hip new American cinema periodical. In 1980, Corliss became the chief film critic of *Time* magazine until his untimely death in 2015. *Talking Pictures* was his first book and arguably his best. Its unprepossessing agenda was, in one sense, to do no more than subdivide a list of Hollywood’s most prominent – and principally male, it must be admitted – writers and writer-directors according to Corliss’s own tastes and qualitative standards. On publication and then subsequently, *Talking Pictures* proved to be more groundbreaking than anyone, least of all Corliss himself, could have expected.

Corliss’s book was, in effect, a major retort to the (directorial) auteur theory that had taken academic film studies by storm in the 1960s. That movement, emanating originally from the stable of critics and filmmakers at French magazine *Cahiers du cinéma*, enforced a theory of grand control by directors who were lauded for their vision of a movie to the exclusion, in most cases, of all others working on a picture.

⁵ Gipson, “Fannie Lou Hamer’s Legacy”.

¹ Richard Corliss, *Talking Pictures: Screenwriters in the American Cinema* (New York: Penguin, 1974).

Cabiers's projection of the director as singular artist, visionary and instigator of a film then helped consolidate the rehabilitation of what were supposedly the great directors of the Hollywood system once the theory got translated into American film. That translation came courtesy of Andrew Sarris, whose 1962 essay, "Notes on the Auteur Theory," and its influential follow-up book, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929–1968* (1968). The book especially cemented authorship among critics and filmmakers stateside, particularly those directors from an earlier time who saw new life being infused into fading careers because their filmography was getting a positive refresh. Corliss was in effect borrowing Sarris's argument and setting screenwriters up to be at least as important as directors in the creative process by giving them the equivalent of their own auteur credentials. Among the many interests in *Talking Pictures*, therefore, was the fact that Corliss cheekily asked Sarris to provide a preface to his book – as a way of setting up the debate about authorship presumably, but more likely intending to ignite a whole set of further hostilities between the auteurists and anti-auteurists that had already been simmering for quite a few years.

Sarris took up the invitation and proposed that, thanks to auteurism, people developed a serious interest again in old Hollywood pictures. He was quite right to point out that a slew of books subsequently emerged about directors and their films. Consequently, Sarris argued, screenwriters wanted their fair share of the glory and here was Corliss to help them along their way. Sarris was perhaps being disingenuous to suggest that Corliss was keen on rehabilitation simply to sidestep the dalliances with socialism and communism during the 1930s and 1940s that eventually led to the HUAC (House Committee on Un-American Activities) inquisitions in Hollywood. For writers like Dalton Trumbo, Herbert Biberman and Adrian Scott, however, who were part of the Hollywood Ten indicted for refusing to answer questions about their political allegiance, the Hollywood purge ruined their careers, and also derailed their legacy. It was a legacy Corliss was now intent on reappraising, along with a host of other writers, all of whom epitomized some of the antagonism at the heart of *Talking Pictures* and Corliss's debates with Sarris. The writers would have to take their turn in line, though, warned Sarris, because there were plenty more directors to laud first, not least those who had actually been maligned by the writers during those notorious communist inquisitions in 1947 and then again in 1951.

To be sure, Corliss's book had its own issues, then and now, not least in its content. Only one female writer featured within its pages and that was the lyricist and screenwriter Betty Comden. She was famous for her musical collaborations with Adolph Green on pictures such as *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* and *Singin' in the Rain*. In addition, the writers Corliss cited but left on the margins of his thesis – muttering outside the Acropolis walls, as he rather preciously framed it – might have had a word to say about their exclusion from the pantheon that he deemed worthy of attention. Corliss attempted to soften that blow by determining that virtually everyone named deserved a book or two about their careers. Thankfully, a few of us took him at his word and books on specific writers such as the Mankiewicz brothers, Herman and Joseph, Robert Riskin and others did begin to appear, as well as wider appreciations of the screenwriting fraternity, written by the likes of Tom Stempel and Marc Norman.

But, in a way, given the moment of its publication and the state of scholarship on Hollywood's past at the time, the debates about ranking and inclusion can be understood in the broader context of scholarly reevaluations of Hollywood and American film that took place in subsequent years. Corliss made the not unreasonable claim

that a director must have a screenplay before they can shoot, ruin, or improve it. Without a script, they have nothing. Hence Corliss's claim that the screenwriter was an essential cog in the authorial machinery. It's a debate that has raged on and has rightly expanded to encompass other collaborators such as cinematographers, set designers and producers.

Talking Pictures, therefore, enabled enlightenment, even if it lacked illumination itself. For example, the gaping hole in Corliss's story that was the paucity of female contributors in screenwriting was at least partly filled by Marsha McCreadie's work, including *Women on Film* in the 1980s and *The Women Who Write the Movies* in the 1990s. Along with Lizzie Franck's *Script Girls*, McCreadie addressed the criminally underrepresented accounts of female scribes in early Hollywood as well as their position within the modern industry. And while auteurism's list of detractors continued to mount in the years that followed, reports of its demise remained exaggerated. By the time of *Hollywood's Artists: The Directors Guild of America and the Construction of Authorship*, Virginia Wright Wexman's early 2020s reevaluation of auteurism, the question had come full circle. Wexman was interested in interrogating how and why authorship had survived the slings and arrows of the last fifty years in robust if not rude health as we moved past a century since some of the practitioners in Corliss's book had been working.

Talking Pictures is by no means a perfect work. It may not even be a great work of film scholarship in some ways. But its influence and legacy are undeniable. Film studies/history has constantly tried to veer away from auteurism as a concept for the obvious reason that, as movies have gotten bigger and more complex, and the credits for them ever longer, the idea of one artist having the means to singularly impose authorial control over every element – the screen, the cinematography, the postproduction editing, and corrections – seems on one level absurd. And yet that sense of being, as Sarris put it, the conductor of the orchestra and the attention afforded that position by a cinematic media voracious in its appetite for insight and comment mean that the director remains today at the centripetal heart of even the biggest projects and is acknowledged as such in popular criticism and review at least.

Today, talk is of “blockbuster auteurs” such as Christopher Nolan and Denis Villeneuve, who are the conductors of hefty projects like *Tenet*, *Dunkirk*, *Dune* and *Blade Runner 2049* with a small army of personnel working on their behalf who nevertheless bow to something signatory in these filmmakers' cinematic realization of stories. What Corliss helped create however, was a path to recognition for these cinematic collaborators. His argument that none have been more important in that collective forum than writers is borne out in the modern context by the success and screenwriting authorship attributed to the likes of Aaron Sorkin, Scott Frank, Charlie Kaufman, Nora Ephron and others. Even Nolan and Villeneuve would acknowledge a debt to cowriters like Nolan's brother Jonathan and Eric Roth. The legacy of *Talking Pictures* therefore has been to reshape the debates on so many issues of importance for film studies, and for the Hollywood industry more generally, then and now. Corliss's book remains instructive and important and has been an instrument of change in a profound era of alteration that the 1970s New Hollywood period, which Corliss was writing in and was a champion of, set in train.

University of Manchester

IAN SCOTT