

Who the Hell is Howard Hawks?

Peter Wollen

There is an interesting story concerning Howard Hawks to be found in Barbara Leaming's Avon biography of Katharine Hepburn. In this book, Leaming tells the story of Hepburn's romance with John Ford, which began, apparently, during the filming of *Mary of Scotland* (John Ford, U.S., 1936). The following year, she was to make *Bringing Up Baby* (U.S., 1938) with Howard Hawks. The screenplay was written by Dudley Nichols and, according to Leaming, Hawks wanted it tailored for Hepburn, whose relationship with Ford was already well-known to Nichols. In fact, Hawks's set was full of what Leaming calls 'members of the Ford group'—Ford cronies such as Ward Bond, Barry Fitzgerald and D'Arcy Corrigan were all in the cast and the associate producer, once again, was Cliff Reid. Ford himself visited the set a couple of times. The relationship between Susan (Hepburn) and David (Cary Grant) in Hawks's film, Leaming argues, was based on Hepburn's relationship with Ford, whose dignity she was forever puncturing and who, in Leaming's words, possessed an 'exasperating ambivalence; he [Ford] is the sort of man who says, 'I love you, I think.' Howard Hawks, Leaming also points out, 'gave Cary Grant, who played David, the small round glasses that were Ford's trademark.' Also, it might be added, Harold Lloyd's.

It is a fascinating anecdote, not least because it underlines Hawks's liking for scenes which mirrored or even parodied the behavior of people he personally knew or knew of, their own mannerisms and relationships or just odd things that had happened to them, whether they were film people or aviation people or whoever. In the same way, Lauren Bacall's performance in *To Have and Have Not* (U.S., 1944) made soon afterwards, was clearly mod-

eled on Hawks's own new wife, 'Slim'. Hawks would direct actors by asking them how they would deliver a line if they were in the same situation, asking them to be themselves rather than characters, to re-live episodes from their own lives, even the most embarrassing and humiliating (and therefore the funniest) like the time Cary Grant somehow managed to get the dress of the wife of the head of the Metropolitan Museum caught in the zip of his flies (in a theater, of all places) so that, in Todd McCarthy's words, "they had to lock-step to the manager's office in order to find a pair of pliers."

This parasitism on real life was fundamental to Hawks's whole modus operandi as a director. It is why his films veer towards a strange kind of *cinéma vérité*, as Bogart and Bacall fall in love or Montgomery Clift learns to respect John Wayne. He also relied shamelessly on scenes and situations borrowed from both his own and other people's movies, for whose memory of which the screenwriter Jules Furthman was especially prized—thus explaining, perhaps, Hawks's many echoes of Von Sternberg. At the same time, Hawks was always inventing self-aggrandizing stories about his own exploits—how he told Von Sternberg how to dress Marlene Dietrich, for example, or how he gave the original idea for *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, U.S., 1942) to Michael Curtiz, a particularly audacious claim when you consider what he himself had blatantly borrowed from *Casablanca* in making *To Have and To Have Not*. Yet, in a way, Hawks's compulsion for purloining and collecting and mix-and-match and tall story-telling may have been his strongest quality as a director, the one that made his films look like the very essence of Hollywood.

On the other hand, in making films which looked like the essence of Hollywood rather than like original works of art, Hawks also made it difficult for dubious critics to accept him as an artist, an innovator or a director with a clear personal agenda. Hawks's style turned out to be no-nonsense studio professionalism, salted with a kind of Robert Altman talent for improvisation on the set. Notoriously, Hawks worked in almost all the genres, treating them pretty much the same—the group could be cow-punchers or pilots delivering the mail or Free French patriots—it didn't much matter as long as there was danger and loyalty and sacrifice and a romance, salted with wisecracks and gimmicks, or, in the case of a comedy, plagued by humiliation and misunderstanding and descent into chaos. Tragedy and comedy were the two complementary faces of fun—the fun that involved life-threatening danger and the fun that involved a cascade of embarrassing mishaps. Given all this, it is not hard to see why Hawks's reputation rode on such a roller-coaster—how he could appear the constructivist of film (Henri Langlois), the master of pulp, operetta and action (Manny Farber), the French classicist, the Corneille (Jacques Rivette), the Greek tragedian, the Sophocles (Andrew Sarris), the serious moralist (Robin Wood), the bard of the male group (Peter Wollen) or of the Hawksian woman (Molly Haskell).

It is because of this polyvalence and confusion about Hawks, of course, that he entered the canon so late in his career and why his promotion created so much controversy. Canons are created through a confluence of devious paths—1) the archival and curatorial path, 2) the cinephile and cultist path, 3) the critical and theoretical path, and finally 4) the path bringing tribute and homage from a future generation of film-makers. For a director to enter the canon, the very first prerequisite is that his films should be available. They should be preserved in archives and screened in retrospectives. In Hawks's case this was all the more important because he was not recognized as a great film-maker when his films first came out, despite the commercial success of most of his work. In fact, the construction of Hawks's subsequent reputation depended primarily on the efforts of one man, the enthusiasm of Henri Langlois, director of the French *cinémathèque* in Paris after the Second World War.

Langlois had first been struck with admiration for Hawks in 1928—in the silent days, the antiquity of film—when, at the age of 15, he saw Louise Brooks at the Ursulines cinema in *A Girl In Every Port* (U.S., 1928). He remembered the film vividly all his life, even if his main attraction was to Brooks and his life-long respect for Howard Hawks could almost seem a kind of by-product, praise for the man who launched Brooks's career. *A Girl In Every Port* was apparently something of a cult film in Paris when released in 1928. The novelist, poet (and film editor), Blaise Cendrars described it as marking "the first appearance of contemporary cinema" and the critic Jean-Georges Auriol praised it, in *La Revue du Cinéma*, as signaling the transfer of artistic leadership in film from France to America, thanks to Howard Hawks, 'a veritable magician,' a director whose 'simplifying style' underlaid the 'astonishing seductiveness of his images'. Looking back on *A Girl In Every Port* many years later Langlois still saw it as the first truly modern film. He celebrated Hawks as the consummate professional, the engineer and the contemporary man, comparing his film to a Manhattan skyscraper. 'Hawks, like Gropius,' he wrote, 'conceived his films as one might conceive a type-writer, a motor or a bridge.' *Ceiling Zero* (U.S., 1936), Langlois later observed, was 'assembled as a motor is assembled'—Hawks avoided pre-tentious trick-work and used, in his own words, "the simplest camera in the world."

Seven years after his epiphany at the Ursulines, Henri Langlois founded the French *Cinémathèque*, both an archive to collect lost films and a show-place to screen them at the *Cercle du Cinéma*. Soon afterwards, of course, screenings were interrupted by the second World War and it was not until after the Liberation that the *Cercle du Cinéma* was revived. Throughout the post-war Forties and Fifties, Langlois regularly showed Hawks films—his own favorites were *A Girl In Every Port*, of course, and then *Dawn Patrol* (U.S., 1938), *Ceiling Zero*, *Only Angels Have Wings* (U.S., 1939) (what we might call the 'aviation trilogy') together with *Twentieth Century*

(U.S., 1934), *Bringing Up Baby* and *His Girl Friday* (U.S., 1940), (the 'screwball comedy trilogy') followed by *To Have and Have Not* and *The Big Sleep* (U.S., 1946), (Hawks and film noir). It was at Langlois's makeshift little cinema in the Rue de Messine that the group of young cultists who wrote for *Cahiers du Cinéma* (and eventually launched Hitchcocko-Hawksianism upon a bemused public) first saw Hawks's work—Truffaut, Godard, Rohmer, Rivette, Chabrol, the new cinephile generation of critics, a group known teasingly as 'the godchildren of Henri Langlois'.

Despite the *Cahiers* group's reverence for Bazin, it was really Langlois who nurtured their taste and shaped their research into the history of the art they loved. Indeed, as Richard Roud has pointed out, 'their limited knowledge of English made them uniquely equipped to appreciate cinematic style: the American films often had no subtitles, thereby inviting a closer look at how movement is expressed through visual texture, composition, camera movement and editing.' It was due to the *Cahiers* group's cultist enthusiasm, combined with their taste for rankings, that the *politique des auteurs* (or 'auteur theory') was launched and Hawks placed in the forefront of a polemical new film canon. In 1953 Rivette published 'The Genius of Howard Hawks' and Rohmer, pro-American in contrast to the *Cahiers* leftist faction, wrote his glowing review of *The Big Sky* (U.S., 1952), also praising describing Hawks for showing 'genius' and 'courage', second only to Griffith as an American director. Later that same year, Rohmer cited *Cahiers* as a 'Hawksian' journal. The following year, he reviewed *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (U.S., 1953) and in 1955 André Bazin dubiously asked 'How Could You Be A Hitchcocko-Hawksian?', while a much sharper counterblast, 'Some Over-Rated Directors,' came from the rival and more political journal, *Positif*. Then, in 1956, Howard Hawks himself arrived in Paris, en route to the land of the Pharaohs with William Faulkner, and was interviewed in depth for the *Cahiers* by an eager Jacques Rivette and François Truffaut. In 1957 Hawks was an example of 'classical serenity.' In 1958 he was commended for showing 'not the slightest shadow of disdain for the popular form by which his work was inspired' and in 1960 Rohmer was citing Hawks along with Picasso, Joyce and Brecht! The perspectives of the *Cahiers* was unquestionably Hawksian. Hawks, Rohmer noted, had *genius*.

Outside France, however, there was still a very long way to go. In his recent book, *You Ain't Heard Nothing Yet*, the American cinephile Andrew Sarris—also author of *Confessions of a Cultist*—describes how he received a letter from his friend and mentor, Eugene Archer, asking plaintively, 'Who the hell is Howard Hawks?' Archer was a reviewer for the *New York Times*, now in Paris on a Fulbright scholarship and spending much of his time studying the new *Cahiers du Cinéma* and standing in line to attend screenings at the *Cinémathèque*, which had now moved on to larger premises, in the Rue d'Ulm on the Left Bank. 'In the Paris of 1957,' Sarris writes, 'Archer had been shocked to discover that the *Cahiers* critics were unim-

pressed by Ford, Huston, Kazan, Stevens, Wyler and Zinneman, up against their sacred cows, Howard Hawks and Alfred Hitchcock. Archer and I thought we knew all about Hitchcock. He was supposed to be fun, but not entirely serious. But Hawks? Who was he? And why were the French taking him seriously?' The progressive internationalization of the cult of Howard Hawks now began, with Archer and Sarris's search for an answer to that question.

One year later, in 1958, as a sideshow to the Brussels World's Fair, a poll was taken of 117 critics from around the world, each asked to name the ten greatest films in the history of cinema. Among American directors, 107 votes went to films by Ford, 44 to Vidor, 30 to Wyler, 22 to Milestone, 19 to Capra, 16 to John Huston. Only 8 went to Hawks, seven for *Scarface* (U.S., 1932), one for *Only Angels Have Wings*. The underlying problem, for a fledgling auteurist, was that Hawks's films were largely unavailable. The aging prints that Manny Farber had seen at the old 'Lyric-Pix-Victory' theatres and written about in *'Underground Films'* were dropping out of circulation—films from the Thirties and early Forties, from *Scarface*, to *The Big Sleep*. It was not until 1961 that Archer (now back in New York), Sarris and Peter Bogdanovich drew up a list of Hawks films they especially wanted to see (or re-see) and took it to Dan Talbot, who ran the New Yorker theatre, persuading him to launch a 'Forgotten Film' season, screening twenty-eight classics, eleven of them by Hawks. 'I saw all the Hawks films and was blown away,' Bogdanovich later reminisced. 'One Saturday we showed *The Big Sleep* and *To Have and Have Not*, and we had lines round the block.' Hawksianism was on the road at last!

Hawks fitted well into an aesthetic schema built on the foundation of personal enthusiasms. His body of work—as many critics have shown—was astonishingly coherent, given the length of his career and the fact that he never claimed to be anything but a professional entertainer, rather than a Huston or a Kazan, albeit one whose personality dominated his career. Sarris never specified his criteria in making his evaluations, never really theorized them in any serious way. Questions of value are notoriously difficult to theorize and Sarris was quite unashamed in trusting his own taste. In many ways, the underlying function of the *'politique des auteurs'* was to serve as a polemical instrument for revising the film canon. In fact, Sarris was not quite as extreme as he appeared to his opponents. If we study the fate of the 'Brussels favorites,' we find that John Ford stayed in the forefront of Sarris's pantheon, as did a number of directors from the silent era, alongside the *Cahiers*' new favorites, such as Hawks, Hitchcock, Welles, Ophüls and Renoir. On the other hand, Huston, Milestone and Wyler, the conventional favorites, were all judged over-rated and unceremoniously dumped as showing 'Less Than Meets The Eye.'

As a result of Eugene Archer's Fulbright, Hawks had become the rallying-point for a new generation of cultists turned critics, who quickly

grasped that one of Hawks's most significant characteristics as a director was that he worked in almost all the available genres (even including science fiction). Consequently, his strengths could be attributed only to his mastery over cinema as such, rather than any particular type of film. He was not an Anthony Mann who specialized in Westerns or a Vincente Minnelli who specialized in musicals. As the saying went, he transcended genre. In fact, once Sarris had grasped the thinking that lay behind the Hawksianism of the *Cahiers* critics, he began to frame his aesthetic judgments within the context of what he now called, shamelessly, the 'auteur theory.' He began to applaud directors' style rather than content, to show a preference for 'popular' as opposed to 'serious' art.

Following the success of the New Yorker's Hawks screenings, Bogdanovich suggested to the Museum of Modern Art that they should now put on a full-scale retrospective. As it turned out, Hawks was then releasing his new film, *Hatari!* (U.S., 1962), and Richard Griffith, at the Museum, agreed to hold a retrospective if Bogdanovich could get Paramount to pay for it as a part of their launch campaign. Bogdanovich proved persuasive and the retrospective took place in 1962, with a monograph, prepared by Bogdanovich, and then traveled across the Atlantic to both Paris and London, where it stimulated a special issue of *Cahiers du Cinéma* and a Hawks issue of *Movie* magazine, containing a crucial article by Robin Wood to which Lee Russell subsequently responded in *New Left Review*. My own Hawks-based attempt to turn the 'auteur theory' into a genuine theory followed in 1968 when *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* was published. In fact, my own interest in Hawks stemmed originally from Paris, through my friend Patrick Bauchau, who knew both Archer and Sarris well and formed a crucial link between cinephiles in Paris, New York and London. (For those interested, he appears with Eugene Archer in Eric Rohmer's film *La Collectionneuse*). It was under their influence that I frequented the Cinémathèque in the Rue d'Ulm after leaving university and began to develop from cultist to critic to theorist.

Returning once more to Paris, if we look back again at Jacques Rivette's pivotal essay, 'The Genius of Howard Hawks', we find that many of Sarris's criteria were already in use—Rivette discusses the Hawksian *oeuvre* as a whole, while noting that it was divided between two reciprocally related elements, madcap comedy and action drama. Laughter, Rivette points out, is inextricably bound up with a foreboding of danger and imminent tragedy. As he brusquely put it, "Scarface's secretary speaks comically garbled English, but that doesn't prevent him getting shot." In fact, he observed, many of the films that Hawks presented as comedies—*Monkey Business* (U.S., 1952) or *I Was A Male War-Bride* (U.S., 1949)—are also cruel, tilted towards degradation, debasement and demoralization. Hawks, in fact, emerges from Rivette's account as a somewhat sinister artist, whose positive values of community and responsibility and bravery and tenacity are constantly

undercut by an intransigent sense of bitterness, loss and the cruelty of life. Rivette appeals to the authority of Corneille and classical tragedy in defence of 'his' Hawks, but I can never avoid the thought that the genius Rivette describes is basically a genius for black comedy.

Seen in this way, Hawks suddenly seems very much closer to Hitchcock, with his own mix of cruelty and farce, and the *Cahiers* doctrine of 'Hitchcocko-Hawksianism', as Bazin dubbed it, begins to look more coherent and persuasive. In fact, it suggests to me that the elevation of Hawks within the canon, initiated as it was in France, bears a close relationship to the simultaneous elevation of his old friend and collaborator, William Faulkner, whose own nihilistic mingling of comedy with tragedy has frequently been noted. Hawks worked with Faulkner on repeated occasions from 1932 onwards and the two men became close friends, discovering that they shared many interests—hunting, fishing, flying, drinking and, of course, tall story-telling. The more I learn about the relationship between Faulkner and Hawks, the more I am struck by the way their professional partnership developed out of a fundamental bond of shared character traits, tastes, concerns and obsessions. I began to think that Faulkner and Hawks were first recognized as masters of their respective arts in Europe (and specifically in France) for essentially the same reasons, because of qualities that their novels and films had in common.

The crucial period for the establishment of their reputation, in both of their careers, came at roughly the same time—in the immediate post-war period. In 1944, when Malcolm Cowley began the research for his project of publishing *The Portable Faulkner* (which eventually appeared in 1946) Faulkner had only one novel still in print—*Sanctuary*, which was originally published in 1931, the year in which Hawks made his own most famous film, *Scarface*. Cowley, a long-time admirer of Faulkner, wanted to redress what he felt was the critics' patronizing indifference to Faulkner's true worth as a writer. The American literary establishment as a whole had never fully accepted Faulkner's work—the one positive defender was another writer, Conrad Aiken—and the most favorable and serious evaluations of Faulkner came, not from his own country, but in fact from France, where Malraux wrote the French preface for *Sanctuary* and Sartre published a celebrated essay on *The Sound and the Fury*, concentrating on Faulkner's literary techniques and especially his treatment of time, an essay which, as we shall see, André Bazin later cited in his own re-consideration of Hawks.

Cowley worked hard to change Faulkner's image in America, but the *Portable*, which came out just after the war ended, was neither a commercial nor even a critical success. However, it did remind the critics of Faulkner's existence and the situation began to change as American intellectuals started to take stock of America's own changed relationship to the rest of the world. America was not simply a victorious power but, in military, political and economic terms, it was plainly the only power which could defend

the newly liberated countries of Western Europe against a resurgent Soviet Union. To succeed in the battle of minds and ideas, intellectuals concluded, the United States must be recognized as a cultural power, one whose espousal of a free market in ideas was more successful and more attractive than the rival policy of the strictly regimented Soviet system. The time had come for foregrounding the achievements of writers—like Faulkner—whose work had previously been regarded as intense, violent, alienated, challenging, gothic and experimental, but who were already, as in Faulkner's case, well-respected in Europe, and enthusiastically so in France.

In this context, Faulkner began to look very like Jackson Pollock and, indeed, Lawrence Schwartz, in his book *Creating Faulkner's Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism*, acknowledges that his assessment of Faulkner's career strikes many of the same chords as Serge Guilbaut's assessment of Pollock's simultaneous rise to world fame, in his classic *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*. I believe Hawks's reputation benefited in exactly the same kind of way from the new political dispensation, except that the impetus for the re-evaluation of both Faulkner and Hawks came directly from Europe and specifically from France. As Schwartz noted, 'one of the first attempts to explain, in general terms, the new international importance of contemporary American literature appeared in the summer of 1947. It was an essay written by a Yale French professor, Henri Peyre: 'American Literature through French Eyes.' In this essay Peyre argued, as Schwartz notes, that 'the best French critics (Sartre, Camus, Claude-Edmonde Magny, Maurice Blanchot) had devoted careful attention to such writers as Hemingway, Faulkner, Steinbeck and Dos Passos—attention not given by American critics.' In fact, Magny actually linked Faulkner with film, commenting quite explicitly in her book on the *cinematic* quality and technique of Faulkner's writing.

The campaign which led to the apotheosis of Howard Hawks as one of the great film-makers was also launched in France after the end of the Second World War, although Hawks himself had been active in Hollywood since the pre-sound days, cinema's antiquity, having directed no less than eight silent films. In his classic essay, 'How Could You Be A Hitchcocko-Hawksian?' Bazin argued that, properly understood, the new *Cahiers* position should be interpreted as one which saw style as inherently embodying a world-view, so that, while we should not altogether discount the 'triviality' of Hawks's subject matter, at least in his recent comedies, his approach to filmmaking, his formal 'intelligence' as a director, as Bazin put it, actually masked his 'intelligence, full stop' and that, as Sartre had argued, in direct reference to Faulkner, 'every technique refers back to a metaphysics.' Bazin not only compared Hawks to Faulkner but used precisely the same argument to validate Hawks that Sartre had employed to justify Faulkner. Rohmer also acknowledged his debt to Sartre, recalling that it was 'the arti-

cles which appeared in *Situations* which discovered Faulkner' and 'contributed a great deal to my thinking.' In 1948 Rohmer was comparing Faulkner not only to Dostoyevsky and Balzac but also to Renoir and Bresson and describing *The Big Sleep* as 'by Hawks-Faulkner'.

Lastly, a word about the final stage of canonization—homage from a new generation of film-makers. As we might expect, we find such tributes earliest in the work of French directors—Godard's description of *Breathless* (France, 1959), as a re-make of *Scarface*, his invocation of the noir Bogart of *The Big Sleep* and prominent display of a poster for *Hatari!* in *Contempt* (France, 1963), soon followed by Bogdanovich's re-make of *Bringing Up Baby* as *What's Up Doc* (U.S., 1972), John Carpenter's re-make of *Rio Bravo* (U.S., 1959) as *Assault on Precinct 13* (U.S., 1976), and Martin Scorsese's *Who's That Knocking On My Door* (U.S., 1968), in which the two leads exit a revival of *Rio Bravo*, discussing the role of Feathers. The tribute I still await is the movie version of Meta Carpenter Wilde's memoir, *A Loving Gentleman*, the story of her long affair with William Faulkner while she was Hawks's script-girl and personal assistant and he, of course, was helping Howard to sharpen structure, dream up situations and flesh out the dialogue. The Faulkner book their affair inspired was *The Wild Palms*, itself an influence on such French directors as Agnès Varda and Alain Resnais. Oddly enough, a script of *The Wild Palms* was my own very first screen-writing job. It was commissioned by none other than Eugene Archer and its vicissitudes can be followed in Truffaut's caustic letters to Helen Scott. I am still sad he never made the film, although, knowing what I do now, I would write it very differently today.

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