

INTRODUCTION TO "THE FUTURE OF CINEMA"
BY ALEXANDRE ASTRUC

by Adrian Martin



Alexandre Astruc, who died on 19 May 2016 in France at the age of 92, is best known throughout the world for a single essay that he wrote in 1948, when he was only 25: "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: *La Caméra-Stylo*," first published in Nino Frank's popular tabloid-format, left-leaning magazine, *L'Écran français*.⁰¹ He is less known for his subsequent work as a filmmaker, beginning with *The Crimson Curtain* in 1952, and later mainly pursued within the context of television production.

What was the *caméra-stylo* or camera-pen? On the one hand, in 1948, it was an anticipation. One day soon, filmmaking equipment would become smaller, cheaper, more flexible (although Astruc was not yet able to imagine the advent of electronic videotape). But far more crucially, the *caméra-stylo* was also, for Astruc, the dream of a certain type of cinema, a “new avant-garde” that would come into being. He envisaged film as a kind of personal “writing” that captures the immediate impressions and thoughts of the artist-director — a style of cine-writing that could then be shaped into the philosophical form of a filmic essay. This dream took longer to materialize, and it subsequently manifested itself in diverse ways in the works of people scattered about the globe: Jonas Mekas, Chris Marker, Agnès Varda ... only it never materialized in the film work of Astruc himself, who went on to explore a quite different path than the one he had so boldly announced as a young man.

Many misunderstandings crowd around Astruc’s contribution to film culture, and its legacy. As Raymond Bellour has long insisted, the concept of the *caméra-stylo* soon gave way in its creator’s mind to a more classical conception: that of *mise en scène*.⁰² Bellour rightly asserts that it is wrong to tie the idea of the *caméra-stylo* too tightly to the collective destiny of the *Cahiers du cinéma* crew, leading to the exaggerated and oft-made (especially since his death) claim that Astruc is the veritable “father of the Nouvelle Vague.” This is because the path that Truffaut, Rivette, Chabrol, and Rohmer took as filmmakers, and earlier championed as critics, was essentially the path of the highly constructed, sufficiently financed, fiction feature, not at all the kind of cheap, freewheeling, off-the-cuff “film essay” that Astruc first envisaged. (Godard figures as the exception here, as his fictions frequently contained “personal essay” traces, but he too worked, for many years, within an essentially standard framework of 35 millimetre production.)

The 1948 essay “The Future of Cinema” returns us to this moment in Astruc’s development between the wild dream of the *caméra-stylo* and the more sedate craft of *mise en scène*.⁰³ Published only eight months after the appearance of “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde,” it is virtually a rewriting of it, except this time at greater length and with much more extensive elaboration. It is here that we find the fullest expression of Astruc’s hopes for a free and democratic cinema, as well as the seeds of his later aesthetic philosophy, with its clear affinities to what Jacques Rancière would ponder many years later in his *The Intervals of Cinema*: that there must always be a “gap” between the director and what he or she films, a distance that allows a particular viewpoint or attitude to emerge from the completed work.

Astruc summed up his own life and career trajectory in the title he gave to a collection of his critical essays in 1992: “from the pen to the camera, and from the camera to the pen.” By the 1970s, Astruc was finding it harder to set up film or TV projects, so he turned essentially to writing: columns (mainly for *Paris-Match* magazine), essays, memoirs, historical novels. He created a new persona for himself as a rather cranky cultural commentator.⁰⁴ Nonetheless, Astruc kept the loyalty of a wide group of friends, from Jean-Paul Sartre (to whom he devoted a celebrated 1976 TV documentary) to Raúl Ruiz who, failing to secure him a directorial project, worked from his script for *Savage Souls* (2001).

Astruc’s writing style, here as in many essays over his lifetime, is unique, and poses special challenges for a translator. He likes to pass from what he calls a sober, “speculative” tone to outbursts of wild metaphor and sometimes outrageous associations. On one level, this exactly mirrors his propositions about cinema as a medium that freely mixes the most concrete, physical detail of the material world with the most abstract, metaphysical ideas. (Back in 1959, Godard had already

praised him for his “uncouth” taste.) On another level, it was part of his particular, post-war culture and sensibility: he was a man of high culture, as his abundant literary references here prove, but he was also something of a dandy who liked to provoke his readers.

In this translation of “The Future of Cinema,” I have not hesitated to creatively use some idioms and allusions post-dating 1948 in order to convey for a 21st century audience the rude energy of Astruc’s prose. In a similar vein, I have revised a previous translator’s preference for the word “show” to the more literal “spectacle”—because Astruc’s incessant railing against “cinema spectacle” has a bracingly prophetic ring. But, in at least one important matter, I have respected the historical specificity of the text in order to address a common misunderstanding. Although we commonly refer in English today to the cinematic *auteur*, Astruc’s vision of the *caméra-stylo* predated the *politique des auteurs* developed by the *Cahiers du cinéma* gang in the 1950s. To state it plainly—and to correct the many manglings of this appearing in the obituaries—Astruc was not the inventor of the auteur theory. This is why I have retained the word author, in Astruc’s special sense of a liberated “writer of film,” in English, because as a notion it is quite distinct from that of the *auteur* working in the midst of the Hollywood system, for instance, while cryptically encoding his or her personality into the framework of an apparently conventional, generic fiction feature. Alexandre Astruc’s “dream film” was something quite other: a direct means of expression leading to a fully subjective, cinematic essay.

01—The best English translation, by Peter Graham, appears in *The French New Wave: Critical Landmarks*, edited by Graham and Ginette Vincendeau (London: British Film Institute, 2009), pp. 31-36.

02—See Raymond Bellour, *Alexandre Astruc* (Paris: Seghers, 1963). Indeed, when Astruc made a special guest appearance in the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma* in

1959, it was to ponder the very question, “What is *mise en scène*?” — to which he gave a range of answers drawing from largely classical examples like Kenji Mizoguchi, F.W. Murnau, and Max Ophüls. See Astruc, ‘What is *Mise en scène*?’ in *Cahiers du Cinéma: The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*, ed. Jim Hillier (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985),

pp. 266-268.

03—“The Future of Cinema” was published in issue 48 of the Parisian literary journal *La Nef*, which operated between 1944 (beginning in Algeria) and 1981.

04—Gérard Legrand (close collaborator of André Breton) began his entry on Astruc in *Cinemanie* (Paris: Stock, 1979) with the words: “The man has become odious, but he once

showed some good qualities...” (p. 353). A representative sample from one of his *Paris-Match* pieces on Howard Hawks gives a flavor of the later Astruc: “It is impossible to leave *Rio Bravo* [1959] without feeling proud of being a man. The films of Hawks go much further in the knowledge of man than so-called Underground analyses and studies do. Why? Because Hawks knows

what a man is’. Trans. Dorothea Hoekzema, “Sherrif Alexandre Astruc Does Justice to Howard Hawks’, *Wide Angle*, Vol. 1 No. 2 (Summer 1976), p. 6. Reprinted online at *Kino Slang*: <http://kinoslang.blogspot.ch/2016/07/the-sheriff-by-alexandre-astruc.html>