Academics have been attacking auteurism since the 1960s, when it traveled from the pages of Cahiers du cinéma to publications, classrooms, and scholarly discourse everywhere. Polemicists like Andrew Sarris (zealously pro) and Pauline Kael (belligerently con) had heated debates about the theory, and eventually some of its inventors started easing back the throttle, as when Jean-Luc Godard admitted they had oversimplified the director’s primacy in the hugely collaborative enterprise of feature filmmaking. Yet the politique des auteurs remains alive and well, and if anyone doubts that, they should look at current book series on the market. At this writing University Press of Mississippi has published six dozen volumes in its Conversations with Filmmakers line; the BFI World Directors series lists ten; Wallflower Press has published two dozen Directors’ Cuts books; and Contemporary Film Directors, the University of Illinois Press series I focus on here, has produced a similar number.

So whether you admire the organizational clarity of auteurism or disdain its romantic notions of creative autonomy, the time has vanished when you could ignore its influence. Which is fine with me. As an academic and a critic, I’ve long agreed with Sarris’s observation (in his 1968 essay “Toward a Theory of Film History”) that directors are “capable now and then of a sublimity of expression almost miraculously extracted from [their] money-oriented environment.” It does seem miraculous, but it happens often enough to keep my faith in cinema plugging along.

Like the other series I’ve mentioned, Contemporary Film Directors takes for granted the legitimacy of its auteur-centered approach. No explanations, justifications, or disclaimers appear in its blurbs. Each medium-sized volume contains an interview or two with the director as well as a filmography and bibliography. In terms of international scope, gender balance, and boldness of subject matter the series is mostly middle of the road, reflecting choices made by general editor James Naremore, or the inclinations of the writers who have contributed so far, or both. By way of comparison, note that the filmmakers covered by BFI World Directors include Shyam Benegal and Yash Chopra of India and Youssef Chahine of Egypt, none of them famous names outside cinephile circles, while Directors’ Cuts includes Jan Svankmajer and Robert Lepage, who have solid avant-garde credentials. Naremore’s series gets as far as Wong Kar-wai, Abbas Kiarostami, and Nelson Pereira dos Santos in geographical reach and as far as Chris Marker, Abel Ferrara, and Claire Denis in stylistic derring-do. These and other, more predictable choices constitute an impressive roster but hardly a trailblazing one. The list will continue to grow, however, and its content may become more varied and adventurous.

I’ve read quite a few of the Contemporary Film Directors books, and for purposes of an overall assessment I’ve chosen five representative volumes to comment on. Jerry Lewis (2009), by Chris Fujiwara, is one of the most recent arrivals, dealing with a challenging and controversial director. Also very recent is Atom Egoyan (2009), by Emma Wilson, who focuses on a filmmaker still in his prime. Paul Schrader (2008), by George Kouvaros, takes on a director whose long, diverse filmography has ups and downs galore. Manoel de Oliveira (2007), by Randal Johnson, looks at a towering auteur who’s received much less in-depth attention than he deserves. The same goes for Abbas Kiarostami (2003), by
Mehmaz Saeed-Vafa and Jonathan Rosenbaum, one of the series’ first books. If you see gaps in my sampling, blame it on the product line; thus far only three volumes on women (Denis, Jane Campion, Sally Potter) and two on Asian filmmakers (Wong, Edward Yang) have appeared, and I’ve decided to concentrate on characteristic selections rather than exceptions.

Jerry Lewis has been sparking debate since the 1960s, when various Cahiers and Positif critics designated him an ingenious auteur (an idea shared by many French moviegoers) and various American critics expressed bewilderment at the idea of discussing him at all. I’ve always found him more interesting as a metteur-en-scène than as a comedian, and I enjoy recalling Godard’s appearance on The Dick Cavett Show in 1980, when a query about Lewis got him to put his impish obliquity on hold and articulately defend Lewis as a great cinematic stylist.

Chris Fujiwara, a gifted critic and lifelong Lewis aficionado, makes a robust argument in Lewis’s favor without overlooking the fact that some pictures work better than others, if only because studios often cranked his inventiveness. By radically reducing the importance of story and verisimilitude, Fujiwara contends, Lewis created a paratactic cinema (my term) whose structural logic is internal to each individual film. The emblematic Lewis character is “not merely inconsistent, he is discontinuous,” built upon “separate blocks of identity” (19–20) that are coextensive with segments of the movie he’s in. Since every block operates according to its own (il)logic, its workings reveal the incipient chaos that lurks within sociocultural order, thereby challenging “the order of orders, the regime of the order” itself (58).

If anything ultimately ties these blocks together, it’s the presence of Lewis’s movie-star persona, but even this is contradicted (in his Frank Tashlin films as well as his own) by the “infinite receptive capacity” of his typical character, who “always takes into himself, acts out, and extends the possibilities he encounters in other people” (28). This often involves self-reflexive gestures—saying “ooh, I’m scared” when he’s scared, for instance—that situate events “in the reality of bodies and in the quasi-reality of things reported” while presenting the body itself as “waver ing between these two spheres, proposing processes of thought, feeling, and sensation as purely optional aspects of experience and identity” (37). Fujiwara doesn’t mention Jacques Derrida or Michel Foucault, but their deconstructive spirits (and Bertolt Brecht’s as well) clearly preside over passages like these.

Now let’s get to the question that’s been nagging you and me for the last couple of paragraphs: what’s funny about all this? Fujiwara acknowledges that laughs are scarce in stretches of some Lewis movies—The Family Jewels (1965) and Hardly Working (1980), for example—but contends that the mercurial tone and generic discontinuity of the films create “an impure, shifting context within which such a lack need not be accounted a flaw” (51). In the same breath he defends Lewis’s moments of dramatic pathos, finding “sentiment and seriousness” where many viewers (sometimes including me) find moralizing and mawkishness. Films like The Ladies Man (1961) and The Big Mouth (1967) get away with such material, Fujiwara says, by harboring “a deep uncertainty that always stands ready to undermine what seems to be their own most firmly held values and basic imperatives” via an impulse toward parody and an ambiguity that is “ever-present . . . at least as a threat” (45).

A careful reading of Fujiwara’s whole argument is needed to evaluate these claims, and having made such a reading, I’m only half convinced by this part of it. Lewis’s speechifying about the value of being nice, the need to be yourself, and so on has rubbed me the wrong way ever since I was a kid and saw The Bellboy (1960), where the brief dignity-of-the-little-guy statement near the end struck me as the kind of responsible-adult propaganda that movies shouldn’t have and Jerry Lewis movies really shouldn’t have. And I don’t detect parody or ambiguity when Lewis remarks in Fujiwara’s interview with him, “If you can be an influence on young people with something that’s meaningful, I believe in it . . . I’m kind of idealistic, mid-Victorian, completely old-fashioned. I can’t help that” (108).

Speaking more broadly about the book, its analytical seriousness is a terrific strength and also something of a weakness, insofar as its critical tone and some of its conclusions are abstract and fastidious enough to seem semi-detached from the movies under discussion. (Terms like “Lewisian” and “Tashlinian” have an awfully heavy ring.) Fujiwara’s analysis of the films’ counter-comic elements (repetitiveness, elision of punch lines and payoffs, and the like) is the best I’ve seen, making me want more than he has space for here. I also wish there were more discussion of how Lewis’s films relate to the cultural and political contexts in which they were produced—e.g., his character’s reference to World War II as a “war to end all wars” in Which Way to the Front? has a bitingly sarcastic ring for a film of 1970, when the Vietnam conflict was raging furiously—and of the drastic psychological dislocations that make The Bellboy an authentically avant-garde film. My reservations...
are relatively minor, however. Jerry Lewis is a thoughtful, sharp-eyed study that offers valuable new perspectives on Lewis’s ever-intriguing career.

Abbas Kiarostami was written by two Chicago-based critics: Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, an Iranian American filmmaker and professor, and Jonathan Rosenbaum, an esteemed commentator on international film. The book comprises independently written essays—first Rosenbaum’s, then Saeed-Vafa’s somewhat shorter piece—followed by a dialogue between them about their conclusions, two joint interviews with Kiarostami, a string of faxes among the three of them, and a statement by Kiarostami about his film 10 taken from its 2002 press book at the Cannes festival. These ingredients add up to an unconventionally structured volume that makes up in complementary viewpoints what it loses in linear development.

Rosenbaum’s essay contains many keen observations, which isn’t surprising, since he has engaged with Kiarostami’s work as conscientiously as anyone I know. His comments on several early documentary shorts are especially valuable, given the paucity of English-language material about them. For one example out of many, Rosenbaum analyzes the use of recurring elements (particularly shots, camera positions, editing patterns, story situations) in films like So Can I (1975) and Orderly or Disorderly (1981), identifying them as the building blocks that later evolved into such classic Kiarostami tropes as the repeated takes in Through the Olive Trees (1994) and the multiple uphill drives in The Wind Will Carry Us (1999); he then notes that the parallel constructions he’s describing (which I liken to the iterative models of some minimalist music) often seem more interrogative than declarative, which places Kiarostami among such filmmakers as John Cassavetes, Jacques Rivette, and Otto Preminger, for whom “a shot is often closer to being a question than an answer” (10–11). A little later Rosenbaum points out the zigzagging visual patterns—a pathway in Where Is the Friend’s House? (1987), the trajectories of a kicked spray can in Close-Up (1990), and a rolling apple in The Wind Will Carry Us—that serve as a visual signature for Kiarostami, who takes unpredictability and happenstance to be key factors in the shaping of human experience (34–5). This is first-rate criticism by any measure.

Saeed-Vafa looks more deeply into Kiarostami’s roots in Iranian culture of the 1960s and 70s and into the role of cultural repression and self-censorship as spurs to creative ingenuity (61–2); the latter point is unoriginal in itself but has much resonance vis-à-vis Kiarostami, given his taste for elliptical storytelling and his cultivation of an “interactive cinema” in which (as Rosenbaum also discusses) moviegoers are encouraged to fill in narrative gaps with inferences and inventions of their own. Returning to the Close-Up spray-can scene, Saeed-Vafa gives a sensitive account of Kiarostami’s decision to insert a seemingly irrelevant interlude just when he “should” be following a dramatic plot development that’s happening a few feet away; her description put me in mind of W. H. Auden’s often-quoted 1938 poem “Musée des Beaux Arts,” which similarly places a momentous event into the background of life’s ordinary routine.

Moments like this are what made Close-up, as Saeed-Vafa accurately writes, “a film that changed the entire course of Iranian cinema” (55).

I strongly recommend this book for everyone who cares about Kiarostami and global film, but my praise is tempered by reservations about ill-considered remarks in the dialogue between the authors that follows the essays. At one point they go after Roger Ebert for disliking Kiarostami’s masterly Taste of Cherry (1997), a tough-minded existential drama about a man (Homayoun Ershadi) planning to commit suicide, and in a trice they’re wildly generalizing about “the films critics like [Ebert] tend to like . . . [which are] most often tearjerkers about pitiful little boys and poor helpless women” (95–96). That’s a false and unfair claim. Then an unidentified “they” are chastised for sometimes calling Kiarostami an “intellectual” in order to “dismiss him” (96). Who are “they” and what are their motives? No details are provided. In these and other dubious remarks, reasoned judgment gives way to emotion and indignation. The authors also let Kiarostami get away with a problematic remark in one of their interviews with him, allowing to pass without comment his statement that Iranians he’s talked with “who were illiterate and who didn’t have much understanding of social life . . . require some kind of government or governing body to dictate to them what to do and how to live—because they’re unable to decide for themselves what is right and wrong” (119). Kiarostami has
said nothing like that in any of my conversations with him, and if he had, I would certainly have challenged the antideocratic assumptions he seems to express here. The dialogue and interview portions of Abbas Kiarostami make for lively reading, but they fall short of the lofty standard set by the critical essays.

Atom Egoyan, written by British film scholar Emma Wilson, set me thinking again about the question of authorial tone that I mentioned earlier. Wilson analyzes ten of Egoyan’s movies, from Next of Kin (1984) to Where the Truth Lies (2005), diligently and intelligently. But approaching the halfway mark I began to feel that some aspect or quality of Egoyan’s work was being missed, and the section on Calendar (1993) made me realize what it was. Calendar is among the most personal of Egoyan’s invariably personal films. In a rare acting excursion, he himself plays the protagonist, a lonely photographer who has joyless conversations with paid escorts while moping in his Toronto apartment over the affair he imagines his wife (played by Egoyan’s wife and star performer, Arsinée Khanjian) is having with the driver (Ashot Adamyan) who recently guided them through Armenia while he photographed rural churches for a calendar. The film deals with several of Egoyan’s habitual themes, including the complexities of family life, the ubiquity of media in modern society, and his nostalgia for the Armenian culture, history, and ancestry that slipped away from him as the child of émigrés to Canada.

These are weighty subjects, and Egoyan is serious about them. Yet one of the most conspicuous qualities of Calendar is that it’s very, very funny—sometimes funny peculiar, oftentimes funny ha-ha, and marvelously wry throughout. You would hardly guess this from Wilson’s analysis, which makes the movie sound about as amusing as Taste of Cherry. She is accurate when she writes that Egoyan here “pursues his concerns with misapprehension and misconnection coupled with intuition and unspoken, uncanny knowledge” (64). But he also pursues them with humor, and Wilson’s failure to appreciate this undermines the thoroughness of her engagement.

Wilson’s earnest analytical style is more appropriate when applied to films with a less ironic touch. She says much of interest about Egoyan’s greatest picture, The Sweet Hereafter (1997); her explorations of The Adjuster (1991) and Exotica (1994) are frequently perceptive; and she makes a good case for Ararat (2002), sorting through historical concerns, structural layers, and cultural allusions in a film I find overambitious and unwieldy. The strength of her scholarship makes me hope all the more that she will give thought to matters of critical temperament, however. This includes paring away unnecessary references, as in the Exotica section, where she quotes bell hooks quoting Lawrence Chua quoting Egoyan in a single citation (79), creating a mise-en-abyme of needless clutter. Her quotations from Hamid Naficy, which tend toward triteness and ambiguity, could also have been chosen with more care, and she uses the word “televisual” so often that it seems like a tic. Most of all, Wilson needs to present her critical insights in ways that convey holistic involvement with all aspects of her subjects, up to and including the funny bits.

Every cinephile knows that Manoel de Oliveira is the world’s oldest filmmaker—as I write he’s almost 102 and still making a movie (or two) every year—but not all of them know he’s one of the greatest.

At the beginning of Paul Schrader, George Kouvaros summarizes the filmmaker’s perplexing qualities with a quotation that reads in part, “I can never really make anything that’s settled, because I just have always found that contradictory ideas exist quite well in my head” (1). This alone makes Schrader a challenging subject for concise critical treatment, and lots more must also be accounted for—his religious background, his activities as a film critic, changes in American cinema when he entered the industry in the late 1970s, the dialectical relationship of his commercial and experimental interests, and his unending fascination with obsession, criminality, psychosis, and sex. Kouvaros tackles all of this, commenting on every film from Blue Collar (1978) to Dominion: Prequel to the Exorcist (2005) and discussing such key issues as adaptation (e.g. Russell Banks and Ian McEwan), biography (e.g. his films on Patricia Hearst and Bob Crane), and design (e.g. the emphatic visuals of American Gigolo in 1980 and Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters in 1985). Remarkably, this transpires in less than 150 pages (excluding back matter) without ever seeming squeezed or hasty. Kudos to Kouvaros on this score.

Best of all, the study’s interpretations and explications are informative, imaginative, and to the point, incorporating the extensive array of cultural references that effective Schrader criticism must deploy. A few examples will suffice. Kouvaros explains how Irena in Cat People (1982) is spiritu-
ally descended (as Schrader has noted) from Beatrice in Dante Alighieri’s masterpiece of courtly love *La Vita Nuova* of 1295 (50–51); how Mishima and *Patty Hearst* (1988) are organized around the inseparable nature of identity and imitation, private life and public image (74); how “the self’s capacity to be taken over and made not its own” (88) provides a psychological tipping point in many Schrader films; and how the intrusion of false events into personal experience is central to *Light Sleeper* (1992) and *Affliction* (1997).

I’d prefer different emphases and inflections in some instances, and I wish Kouvaros brought in a few additional points about certain films—saying more about the extraordinary acting and intimate ambience of the underrated *Light Sleeper,* for example, and linking Schrader’s probing examination of personality and performance in *Patty Hearst* and elsewhere with the profound explorations of this domain by John Cassavetes, about whom Kouvaros has written in the past. And how can one discuss *Hard Core* without mentioning the religious convictions that propel the protagonist (George C. Scott) through the story? But these are quibbles about a first-rate study that deserves a wide and attentive readership.

Every cinephile knows that Manoel de Oliveira is the world’s oldest filmmaker—as I write he’s almost 102 and still making a movie (or two) every year—but not all of them know he’s one of the greatest. His directorial career has an odd configuration, with thirteen features and shorts between 1931 and 1975, then almost three times that number from the five-hour *Doomed Love* in 1979 to *The Strange Case of Angelica* in 2010. His finest achievements include *Abraham’s Valley* (1993), a romantic saga; *The Convent* (1995), a sardonic mystery; and *A Talking Picture* (2003), a paradoxically delicate drama about civilization’s decline and fall. I’m also very fond of *The Cannibals* (1988), an oneiric opera film, and *I’m Going Home* (2001), the bitter-sweet story of an aging actor. Portugal has a strong tradition of adventurous filmmaking, and Oliveira has been in its forefront for decades, also working in France and elsewhere on occasion.

All of which means that *Manoel de Oliveira,* the first English-language book on the director, is a needed and welcome contribution to the Contemporary Film Directors series. Its author is Randal Johnson, a scholar of Latin American literature with a firm grasp of Portuguese culture. His particular expertise in Luso-Brazilian literature is an especially good credential to have for comprehensive study of Oliveira, who makes productive use of *The Lusiads,* the Virgilian hymn to Portugal and its voyages of discovery published by Luis de Camões in 1572, in such historically based films as *No,* or *The Vain Glory of Command* (1990), *A Talking Picture,* and *The Fifth Empire* (2004). The most important of these is *No,* which signals Oliveira’s skeptical stance toward colonialism, imperialism, and other nationalistic vainglories by reversing the *Lusiads* agenda, focusing not on Portuguese triumphs but rather on the defeats its ambitions have suffered over the centuries.

Johnson traces the evolution of Oliveira’s stylistic signatures clearly and carefully, emphasizing the auteur’s long-time exploration of liminal zones where cinema overlaps with other aesthetic forms. Oliveira probes these areas via such devices as literary dialogue, minimalist acting methods, theatrical mise-en-scène, direct address to the camera, self-reflexive practices of various kinds, autonomy of words, music, and imagery, and camerawork that’s at once technically transparent and emotionally expressive. In my only formal interview with Oliveira, when *I’m Going Home* had its U.S. premiere in 2002, he explained his interest in conjoining film with other art forms in direct and plainspoken terms. “Cinema is the phantom of the moment,” he told me, “not life itself . . . Cinema is always memory, just as literature and history are memory.” Those words—literature, history, memory, cinema—encapsulate his artistry.

Oliveira’s large and novel body of work is a lot for a relatively brief monograph to handle, and Johnson lapses into vagueness at times. He observes that the shifting temporality of *My Case* (1986) “allows for reflection” on the role of art and other issues (55), but he doesn’t share any reflections that he might have had. Writing about paintings by Oliveira’s son Manoel Casimiro, seen in *About the National Flag* (1987), he says they are instances of “painting of intervention” (62) without offering a clue as to what that label means. Describing the music at the beginning of *The Letter* (1999) only as “contemporary” won’t be very helpful for those who haven’t seen the film. I encourage Johnson to revisit Oliveira’s cinema in a few years, bringing in films the auteur has completed since the delightful *Belle toujours* (2006)—two features and six shorts at last count!—and delving more deeply into his established masterpieces. But for now this volume, like most of the others in Contemporary Film Directors, will do very nicely indeed.

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