From its inception cinema has been divided between its status as procurer of imagined reality based on tenets of Western illusionism and its status as an art form. The instability and ambivalence of these ideological and aesthetic categories leave unresolved questions that lie at the core of cinema’s placement vis-à-vis reality. In order to delineate this placement, the birth of cinema must be conceived within a fin-de-siècle context of loss and anomic wherein the status of reality was highly problematized. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were widely perceived as times of fragmentation and disintegration following the collision of imperial powers, rapid urbanization and industrialization and finally, world war. Yeats described the era in his poem “The Second Coming” when he wrote: “The centre cannot hold/ Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world/ The blood-dimmed tide is loosed/ And everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned.” Anarchy had displaced the bourgeois status quo and announced a temporal split between history and reality in which the Western ceremony of innocence/illusion was lost. The displacement, however, was somewhat tempered by the scramble to replace a lost reality with the frenzy of the visible.

The crisis of the visible (the “real”) manifested itself in a series of art as well as literary “isms”—all trying to recover a lost reality, recreate a center, and recapture a sense of meaning. The technological invention of cinema seemed to satisfy this desire, and soothe the displacement of the “real.” According to proponents of Realist film theory, cinema was in a unique position to recreate meaning in its (re)appropriation of “Reality.” These theories proposed an ontological conception of the “real” wherein cinema served as excavator, unearthing a real world that was “always-already.” Bazin’s “Myth of Total Cinema” suggested the disclosure of reality reflected an a priori desire or myth akin to Nietzsche’s conception of a mythical home.

While the sense of loss is a dominant feature (if not a defining factor) of modernism and modern art forms, each “ism” has handled the loss in its own way. Cinema can be viewed as an art medium and a form of modernism that, like other representational media, gives credence to human existence and notions of “reality.” One may say, however, that while cinema itself is a form of modernism, it cannot be categorized exclusively as such, i.e. as a modern art form. At the risk of oversimplification, I will distinguish between the terms modern(ism) and modernist, the former denoting a general movement, an era preoccupied with what has been perceived as a crisis and loss of reality, the latter denoting a theoretical development and style, an aesthetic system, a self-conscious pre-occupation with what has been acknowledged as lost. The history of cinema and the history of modernism run parallel to one another, while the modernist style in cinema arose (decades after other art/literary movements) during the New Wave movements and the development of art cinema in the late 50’s and early 60’s. The main distinction of this comparison lies in the perception of reality and its treatment in the medium. It can be argued that modernist cinema takes the response of modernism one step further by stylizing it, by making modernism self-conscious. In other words, modernist cinema is a style rather than a mere response which reflects a loss.

It could be argued that variations on cinema’s modernism surfaced earlier in cinema history in the films of Gance, Eisenstein, Dreyer and the German Expressionists. While these
experiments in cinematic form serve as valid examples of modern art and an obvious grappling with questions of reality, they are not supported by a discourse (i.e. la politique des auteurs/Auteur Theory) which strategically announces a cinematic language independent of realist cinema. Nor do they question the limits of the cinematic medium in claiming a self-conscious position vis à vis the work of art. Cahiers canonized auteurs through a politique—a maneuver designed to foreground the director's independence and his/her creation of high (cinematic) art. This cultural cause spawned the New Wave movements of the late 50's and was perpetuated by the banner of art cinema in the 60's. The New Wave and art cinema movements hailed (hail) the auteur as a protagonist who could strategically mediate the site of spectatorial identification. The auteur thereby became an international figure who could transcend the preoccupation with reality, confront cinema's (and the filmmaker's) burden of representation and perhaps even relinquish the real. This essay will examine a group of films/filmmakers in order to discern the relevance of the discourse labeled auteur theory, and thereby perhaps broaden its application. The films discussed will provide an historical framework within which to situate the politique and subsequent discourses on the auteur. The rise of a self-conscious auteur discourse as well as the self-conscious experimentation of filmmakers will thereby be situated within a precise historical moment. Without essentializing this discourse, I will attempt to show how it can be read within an inter-theoretical framework that foregrounds a shift from modernism to postmodernism.

The modernist style defines a new reality, one which privileges perception and subjective response, thereby denying the ontology of Realist theory. While this style still shows concern for (and even grief over) a lost reality, a fragmented, disintegrated, and anarchic conception of modern times, it discloses an alternative response (a counter-response, perhaps). In comparison to Bazinian Realism, the modernist style, while often still nostalgic and sentimental about what is lost, does not attempt to recapture reality, but rather foregrounds its loss. This style is perhaps most explicitly reflected in the auteur theory of Cahiers du Cinéma and the French New Wave, as well as the films of European art cinema. Cahiers and the French New Wave trace their roots and the announcement of la politique des auteurs to Astruc's 1948 article on le caméra-stylo and Bazin's essentialist doctrines of mise-en-scène. While Bazinian Realism represented a form of modernism, the modernist art cinema and the New Wave movement perhaps better represented the 'real' tone of what Rimbaud called the "Century of Hell." Truffaut and Bazin's other Cahiers disciples sought to untie cinema's traditional "strait-jacket," and allow cinema to achieve its own specificity as an art form. It remains to be seen whether these critics and filmmakers merely demythologized one Romantic aesthetic only to replace it with another, or whether auteur theory and cinematic modernism reflected a historical moment, a new style of filmmaking beyond mere remythologization.

The differing views of reality exhibited in Realism, the New Wave and European art cinema in general stem from varying conceptions of art and the function of the real. Bazinian Realism was preoccupied with what Jean-Luc Comolli has termed "the ideology of the visible." Jean-Louis Baudry further positions "the ideology of the visible" in relation to the power of cinema to enforce a misrecognition of the real. Baudry employs psychoanalytic theory when he argues,

It is indeed desire as such, that is desire of desire, the nostalgia for a state in which desire has been satisfied through the transfer of perception to a formation resembling hallucination, which seems to be activated by the cinematographic apparatus.
It is this desire which was satisfied by Bazinian Realism and exposed by the New Wave and other art cinema directors who became conscious of their own modernism.

Cinema hails its spectator, according to an Althusserian model, as ideology hails its subject. In forcing a misrecognition of reality and an illusion of personal freedom and choice, cinema enforces an ideology that, as Walter Benjamin argued, can wield a dangerous influence. In his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin suggests that all cinema is potentially fascist in its ability to appease our desires and force an imaginary sense of our own primary significance in the world.⁶ While directors of modernist cinema could not escape ideology, they could perhaps undermine the habitual misrecognition of conventional, classical filmmaking, and thereby affirm a negotiated ideology rather than a monolithic one. The directors of art cinema and the New Wave, therefore, did not cater to ideologies and desires; they exposed them, and thereby revealed the conflicts and oppositions inherent in their world. They unmasked modernity, disclosing the social crises of “reality.” In this disclosure, they manifested a conscious, if not psychoanalytic, desire to end desire. Propelled in part by the tenets of the auteur theory, these directors glorified themselves and their films as (works of) genius. Thus, the image was still valued, yet it served a new end. The genius status and self-glorification often yielded a highly self-conscious, artificially constructed auteur, rather than a Romantic one.

The aesthetic substitute for reality was acknowledged as a prosthesis, and the cult of the artist celebrated art for art’s sake. The artwork/artist thereby replaced the camera in its privileged position as redeemer and potential mythmaker. The auteur became an artificial constructor who recreated a sense of time, history and tradition through self-expressive myths. Rather than upholding an ideology of the visible and training the spectator to live in an illusion of reality and suspended disbelief, these directors were training the spectator to live in a culture where the real had been consciously replaced by the image. Cinema thereby became a quest through images to regain or redefine reality wherein the spectator must work in order to uncover meaning. S/he had to be un-trained in the expectation of traditional

narrative and conventional temporality. Thus, spectatorship itself became a creative as well as a critical act.

Unlike other avant-garde/modernist movements in painting and literature (as well as cinema), the films explored here are not so much united by an aesthetic fetishization of form. Rather, the films of European modernist cinema from the late-1950’s onward deal with a core of themes and psychological states that privilege the subjective voice over conventional narrative, discourse over story. The thematic conceptions therefore rely on psychoanalysis and a theory of the subject, for the modernist challenge to reality marks a contemporaneous revolution in the history of the subjective. Through psychoanalytic theory the subject is revealed as split from the moment it enters culture. The subject is alienated, yet seeks the totality and security it once possessed. It attempts to “procure a certainty of happiness and a protection against suffering through a delusional remolding of reality.” Psychoanalysis, therefore, is itself a theoretical form of modernism, as it defines humanity as essentially lost/split, and perpetually yearning for wholeness in the shape of reality.

Michelangelo Antonioni examines the subjective voice in an alienated world on the verge of self-destruction. In The Adventure (L’avventura, 1959), he manifests his penchant for abstraction and modernist rhetoric. This film entangles its characters (and the spectator) in a web of bourgeois ennui and an (ironically) indifferent, if not passive, existential quest. The beginning of the film foregrounds a disparate relation between a father and his adult daughter, between the old world diplomat and the new bourgeoisie. L’avventura, therefore, seems at first to tell the story of an old world dying in the face and shock of the new. The narrative, however, soon degenerates into an absurd and useless search for a vanished character who never materializes before the end of the film. Anna’s disappearance and the impending search thereby serve as a metaphor for a lost reality and the futility of uncovering meaning in the world.

The mysterious disappearance and search provide causal motivation for Claudia and Sandro’s affair. This affair allows Antonioni to criticize the self-torturing bourgeois, and further, to explore a modernist discourse on time. Within a few days, Claudia and Sandro become so entangled in their search and their affair that they begin to forget what they are searching for—what they want. Words and emotions become as meaningless and ephemeral as the artifacts of classical antiquity which, while strewn across the Italian countryside, have lost significance in modern consumer culture. In this, perhaps Antonioni also comments on his own status as auteur, for the concepts of genius and creativity, too, have become problematic in this world.

Like many of the modernist directors of this period, Antonioni used “Time,” and its various mutated forms, as a central theme in L’avventura. While still interested in presenting a notion of temporal reality, many of these modernist directors were often concerned with representing the momentary nature and endurance of time (as in Bergson’s conception of durée\(^8\)) as it related to the subject. Time was therefore not a mere element of the cinematic representation. It had an integral power that evoked the transformation, mutation, and evolution of the subject, and became the focus of such films as Hiroshima mon amour (1959).

In this film, Alain Resnais incorporates the major tenets of modernist cinema. He uses individual characters and personal memories in order to evoke a subjective history that is perhaps more “real” than those official stories recounted by governments, text books, and newspapers. Hiroshima mon amour doesn’t so much tell a story as reveal the mental processes of remembering and forgetting. The female character’s memories engulf, bombard, and even devour her present condition. She is caught between the desire to remember her first love,
and the need to forget and erase the bitter memories associated with it.

_Hiroshima mon amour_ appears as a pseudo-documentary, which raises questions regarding the representation of reality and history, and the way images can be distorted by time, mythmaking, and memories. While initially foregrounding an historical reality and the issues of a constructed history, the reality of Hiroshima soon becomes lost. The film becomes caught in a web of subjective memories and arbitrary temporal connections which reduce Hiroshima and the war to the level of icon, symbol, and myth. Hiroshima and Nevers are further reduced to mere markers of time, words that serve to conjure memories, and pit remembering against forgetting. Reality is thereby constructed as a means to endure time.

The film persists in showing the loss of a one-to-one correspondence between image and reality. Memories are confused with history, and time loses all linear continuity. In typical modernist fashion (and with the help of Marguerite Duras' screenplay), Resnais evokes a stream of consciousness which calls into question the construction of reality as well as the constructors: "private" individuals, officials, and even filmmakers. He weaves the immediate romantic narrative of the present with memories of Nevers and Hiroshima during the war, so that subjectivity and objectivity become blurred. The dialogue and momentary flashbacks further serve to undermine temporality and demystify reality.

Modernist cinema as exhibited by Resnais (and many other directors identified as _auteurs_) strives to challenge the conventional ideology of the "real." The New Wave and art cinema directors grieve the loss of the real by acknowledging and exposing it. Their films often substitute a temporal and subjective vision for a history and reality that is no longer possible. _Fellini's Roma_ (1972) is a perfect example of a film/filmmaker explicitly rewriting history from a subjective viewpoint. In his depiction of Rome, Fellini un-trains and trains his audience in its perception of reality. In this film Fellini exposes the artifice of realism in an over-indulgent self-glorification. Through the narration, the self-proclaiming title, and the autobiographical content he foregrounds himself over time and history. He presents a story in which, as author, he has the power to construct, reconstruct, and deconstruct the historical, social, and political reality of the "Eternal City." Rome is depicted from its ancient glory up through modern times. The city's historical reality, however, remains in the hands of Fellini and his subjective perception. The film lacks any clear delineation of narrative or individualized characters besides Fellini himself. In the end, however, Fellini also unmasks a weakened author—one who cannot compete with the greater author—Rome—a city which marks itself as the center of history and the world. The last scene of motorcycles racing around the Colosseum in the middle of the night evokes the chaos which drowns the city and
The city as author: *Fellini Roma*

*Weekend* from most other modernist films is the extremism and anger with which he battles reality. The chaos, first exemplified in the (often-cited “non-bourgeois”) long tracking shot, is carried still further in the ruptured soundtrack and the seemingly easy transition from a real world to an imaginary one. The film, itself, comes under attack for its imaginary status. As Peter Wollen argues in his article on Godard and counter cinema, “Godard is obsessed with the problem of true speech, lying speech and theatrical speech.” In *Weekend* Godard explores this obsession by undermining the cinematic tendency to placate desire through hallucination and misrecognition. The characters blatantly address the fictive nature of film, and accuse the narrative of being inherently replete with lies, thereby announcing the “End of Cinema.”

Godard’s *Weekend* satirizes the existential quest. Although the two main characters are depicted as aimless nomads who have lost all sense of physical direction and time, they do not evoke the empathy of conventional existential heroes. In fact, Godard wants the spectator to despise these characters and their bourgeois/capitalist values. These characters attempt to contextualize and validate themselves through the film, and further to validate the filmmaking process (ironically, the original aim of the New Wave). During their encounter with the figure of Emily Brontë, they excuse her murder in the remark: “This isn’t a novel. It’s a film. A film is life.” In this comment, Godard shows his contempt for the classical narrative approach to cinema that privileges mimesis. He thereby undermines the imaginary world of stories upheld in conventional filmmaking, and further self-consciously criticizes and questions his own role as filmmaker and artificial constructor of dubious realities. In one ironic sweep, Western civilization and filmmaking are disclosed and attacked in *Weekend* as bourgeois, artificial constructs. As Wollen argues, Godard seeks to foreground an interwoven plurality of worlds that is not bound by traditional notions of spatial and temporal reality. In exploring the plurality and discursive potential in the world, Godard, like Fellini, confronts and creates yet another subjective “reality” that is meaningless to the core.

Directors such as Godard, Fellini and others of this post-New Wave period often...
drowned their films in anarchy, as a manifestation of loss. They viewed a lost reality, therefore, as more real than the hyper-real illusions of Realist theory. (The hyper-real merely caters to the spectator's desire and the theorist's nostalgia). The meaning was therefore uncovered in the loss, a negative furious unity of loss. Antonioni, Resnais, Fellini and Godard exhibit various modernist responses to a lost reality. However, while these directors defy illusions of reality propagated in classical narrative cinema, they still fixate on the loss of the real and, in their individual expressions, manifest a yearning that situates them within the modernist tradition.

Antonioni and Resnais convey a tragic lyricism. The sadness is reminiscent of Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* (*La règle du jeu*, 1939), and exemplifies the inevitable and impending death of a once believed primordial ontology. Fellini's and Godard's approaches are quite different. While also sorrowful over the loss of reality and meaning, they express fury and anger. These directors seem to revel in their ability to dictate reality, yet their films actually convey a cynical, satirical, and accusatory tone in their display of senselessness. The senselessness is not expressed through a feeling of futility as in the films of Antonioni and Resnais, but through anarchy.

As cinema became a self-conscious medium, it necessarily had to confront itself as such. This confrontation manifests an historical moment in cinematic history, and a phenomenal split in the reaction to as well as the appropriation and construction of "reality." The phenomenal split among *auteurs* / modernist directors derives from an inevitable evolution, and suggests a transition to postmodernism. The earlier films of Antonioni and Resnais are more conservative in their modernism. They are nostalgic to the core, and drift in abstract states of remembering and forgetting. However, in self-consciously foregrounding these themes, the filmmaker and spectator become victims of nostalgia themselves. As Baudry would argue, nostalgia and desire become intertwined and indistinguishable. Nostalgia thereby replaces the lost reality that we are nostalgic for—it provides a comfort zone that, in some sense, fulfills desire.

The other route taken by directors such as Fellini and Godard, roughly one decade later, consciously foregrounds the *auteur* as an artificial constructor. In this sense, their films attempt to deconstruct traditional narrative devices and conventional approaches towards reality, only to remystify and reaffirm the spectacle that is cinema. Fellini and Godard use their films in order to achieve a spectacularized self-critique. These films drown the narrative and the spectator in the spectacle. In the end, the *auteur*, too, is drowned, as the subjective voice is silenced by (an)other voice(s). While Fellini discloses the artificial construct of history and time, Godard goes further in proclaiming the death of reality as well as the death of cinema. It could be argued that in this renunciation of the real and in his own grief, Godard approaches a postmodern aesthetic.

*Auteur theory is often criticized as nostalgic, comparable to 19th-century Romanticism. The directors are accused of remystifying reality in their persistent focus on the "real," rather than truly challenging and demystifying Bazinian Realism. These accusations, however, overlook the contributions of these directors. The directors of art cinema and the New Wave challenged conventional perceptions of space and time and placed subjectivity into the foreground of critical film analysis. Peter Wollen, often cited as a structuralist *auteur* critic, outlined the power of these works when he wrote in 1972,*

*A powerful work...is one which challenges codes, overthrows established ways of reading or looking, not simply to establish new ones, but to compel an unending dialogue, not at random, but productively...*¹⁰

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From a post-structuralist standpoint, this dialogue opens up the reading of texts, and alters notions of reality. There is no longer one way of viewing a film (based on dominant ideology). The relativity of historical truth and the ephemerality of time deny a simple reading, a single perception. The emergence of the self-conscious modernist filmmaker and the use of the subjective voice were therefore important developments in cinema history. Though these developments may have followed on the coat tails of other art movements, they made their mark in a medium which usually glorifies its technical feats of illusionism.

Although auteur theory may be considered conservative in dwelling on the notion of a lost reality, that notion can perhaps be reframed and distinguished from those embraced by the more conservative Realist theory of Bazin and by Classical Hollywood cinema. Wollen undermined Bazin’s ontology of the real when he wrote (in relation to Godard and counter cinema),

> The cinema cannot show the truth, or reveal it, because the truth is not out there in the real world, waiting to be photographed. What the cinema can do is produce meanings, and meanings can only be plotted, not in relation to some abstract yardstick or criterion of truth, but in relation to other meanings.¹¹

This interrelationship implies a Foucaudian shifting of discourse, and thereby foregrounds the discursive potential of cinema. One could argue then, that the directors of art cinema and the New Wave were attempting to uncover a notion of truth, a “true” vision of reality which relied on multiple subjective visions. The subjective truth then stands in direct opposition to the objective myths of Realism as well as to itself. The truth is finally uncovered in the conflict and opposition of meaning, the challenge to perception. The auteurs, therefore, were not Romantics according to 19th-century codes and sensibilities. They were striving to redefine (perhaps deconstruct) conventional theoretical notions of reality in an attempt to uncover meaning.

Where, then, does this leave auteur theory? Like genre theory, the criticism of auteur theory does little to situate itself as a theory delineating a specific historical phenomenon/moment. If we analyze the films discussed in this paper using a post-structuralist model, and if we examine their rhetoric and evolution, it is difficult to limit auteur theory to a criticism of mere classification, explication and patterning, or as David Bordwell described it, “a cluster of assumptions and hypotheses that permit particular interpretations to come into being.”¹² A meta-critique of the auteurs and of auteur theory would necessarily disclose a more lucid analysis of modernism and auteurism, and their conflation or conjuncture with postmodernism.

Wollen approaches such a meta-critique when he discusses Godard’s Wind From the East (Le vent d’Est, 1969) as a “starting point for work on a revolutionary cinema,” claiming, however, “it is not that revolutionary cinema itself.”¹³ The question remains: can there ever be a revolutionary cinema? Can there be a postmodernist cinema? Or will cinema continually approach the abyss, but never jump? In essence, where can cinema take us if, as Wollen suggests, the limitations of cinema lie in its very existence—as it relates to itself, to its own ideology and structures of desire? The answer lies in an investigation of the moment when cinema confronts itself and its ideological status, i.e. an historical moment. Pam Cook points to the weaknesses of Wollen’s critical method in his failure to account for the influence of history on Godard’s films. She goes on to argue that Godard as well as other filmmakers are “caught up in history and changing conditions of production which can be seen to affect [his] work.”¹⁴ The incorporation of an historical framework would necessarily strengthen the
critical model of auteur theory.

Whereas other art and literary movements experienced modernism in the early part of the century, and only fairly recently experienced a postmodern/postmortem phenomenon, in cinema, the subjective voice was announced almost simultaneously with its own obituary. Thus, cinema becomes both self-conscious of its modernism, and signs its own death sentence within a brief historical moment (extending from the late-1950's to the early 1970's). Jean-François Lyotard has argued that the modern and the postmodern can co-exist within a generation, or even within a single work. He asks, "What, then, is the postmodern...it is undoubtedly a part of the modern. All that has been received, if only yesterday...must be suspected." The postmodern originates, then, from a critical stance towards the modern. This historical moment when the modern and the postmodern co-exist in cinema is also the heyday of the auteurs and of auteur theory. Auteur theory and modernist cinema capture such a critical moment because they recognize, as in Godard's case, (or at least suggest) the end of cinema, the end of pure desire and loss, and the end of an implicit ideological connection, which cinema has relied on, and has developed an historical position towards.

Interestingly, this era also marks the historical entry of television into consumer culture. Modernist cinema, therefore, occurred contemporaneously with the development of television. Television, like cinema, calls the real into question. However, television goes one step further in also confronting cinema's reality and the function of the cinematic apparatus. If the invention of cinema responded to a lost reality in guarding the ideology of the visible, then television responded similarly to a representational reality that cinema could no longer uphold. Television is therefore not the same apparatus of desire which Baudry discussed. It is a consumer apparatus that un-sutures all that cinema desperately tries to hold together. As Lyotard might say, television is an exemplary postmodern medium in its unique ability to "wage a war against totality."16

It can be argued that television overtakes cinema in the postmodern era. The "frenzy of the visible" becomes even more frenzied in television, so that the visible no longer resolves a crisis in representation, but rather marks a resignation to the crisis, a "de-criticalization" of the crisis, an acceptance of the loss. Discussing the postmodern era in terms of pastiche and schizophrenia, Frederic Jameson claims that, "in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum."17 According to Jameson's theory, cinema cannot create anything new, but must go back, reinvent itself along historical/classical lines, or at most self-consciously contemplates its own death in a Godard-like accusatory fashion. Styles are therefore resurrected and employed in order for cinema to maintain its elevated status and separation from the lowly commercial world of television. Television itself would be considered by Jameson a schizophrenic exercise—"an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence."18 Television bombards its spectator with fast-moving images. It incorporates both high and low discourses, renouncing all hierarchies and structures. Filmmakers are once again left to ponder the status of the "real," now, totally relinquished by contemporary consumer culture.

The unwillingness to relinquish the "real" is symptomatic of many contemporary directors who resurrect and imitate past/dead styles. The loss of the "real" therefore still plagues and consumes filmmakers, and in the case of Wim Wenders, forms the basis of his filmic career. In a 1988 interview Wenders lamented the infiltration of mass consumer culture and the resulting disappearance of the "real" through storytelling.19 His recent work,
notably *Wings of Desire (Der Himmel über Berlin, 1987)*, exemplifies the resurrection of modernist styles as a means (need) of preserving the idea of story. Throughout the film, nostalgia manifests itself in the form of desire—the desire for story, the desire for security, the desire for communication, and finally, the desire to of desire. In *Wings of Desire* Damiel has a desire “to conquer a history for (him)self.” As a wandering guardian angel, he has no story of his own. Rather, Damiel and Cassiel live vicariously through the stories of others/Others. Through these other stories, Wenders parades the images of a diverse and postmodern culture of different colors and languages, as well as displaying a multi-layered history that nostalgically stretches from the beginning of time to the middle of World War II. In the end, however, these images remain empty signposts as all meaning becomes subsumed in the self-indulgent romantic tale of Damiel and Marion. This tale epitomizes Wenders’ desire for story and his resurrection of the classical quest myth. Marion suggests this sentiment when she tells Damiel, “there’s no greater story than ours, that of man and woman.” Wenders, thus, weaves a story for a child-like audience needing reassurance. His desire of desire is pure nostalgia reminiscent of cinema’s period of high modernism. On another level, it would seem that Damiel’s descent from heaven to earth could be read as a move from high to low, from high modernism to postmodernism. However, the final images of the film are so steeped in romance and a hyperbolic display of union that it is compromising to attach Wenders’ intentions to postmodernism. He merely speaks through the mask of modernism, thereby resurrecting an imaginary realm of high culture.

Where, then, does this leave cinema? A meta-critique of *auteur* theory would find within it a structuralist/Barthesian announcement of the death of the author, and of cinema itself. This death sentence would then necessarily call into question and interrogate cinema’s primary function. This sign of pre-mortem anxiety perhaps suggests a transition into postmodernist thinking. While modernist cinema finally acknowledged the loss of reality, the self-conscious approach of its filmmakers annihilated any discrete function of the cinematic apparatus. Cinema as such is therefore dead. It cannot progress. It has reached an apex, a Joyceian epiphany, a Yeatsian Second Coming. *Auteur* theory can be perhaps reoriented historically to disclose this juncture—to show a certain moment in cinematic history when things fell apart, and the center could not hold, when *auteurs* like Fellini and Godard began to question the status of modernism, without completely relinquishing it.

In a postmodern transition, *auteurs* perhaps lose their privileged place because no one (except perhaps, the nostalgic *auteur* like Wim Wenders) cares about or expects a “Second Coming.” The project is aborted. There is nothing left to discuss. Loss is accepted and appropriated into daily life. Existentialism is passé, null and void. The split subject no longer evokes concern. The center is gone, the gods have fled, the Second Coming is never coming, and yet the pervasive loss goes unnoticed. The television watching-consumer-culture has digested and accepted the fact that there will be no savior—and no savoir. The *auteur*,
however, can still be acknowledged in relation to an historical text, as the one who aided the text in disclosing itself, the one who exposed modernism and a newer (more real) reality. In this model, the auteur is not so much a god-like figure, as one who reveals/discloses a discourse and a struggle in the making of meaning. This auteur thereby straddles modernism and postmodernism, and further defines a continuum.

What's next? Or, at least, what is left? Can cinema escape its conventional positioning and transcend the theories that would pattern it in this manner? Can this historical moment be a point of departure for modernist cinema and auteurism, or is cinema fated to its own historical placement vis à vis reality? The era of the auteurs and of modernist cinema reveals, and continues to reveal in the case of filmmakers like Wenders, that cinema can never be completely postmodern. It is perhaps in this historical moment of self-consciousness, that conscience does, in fact, make cowards of us all.

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10 Peter Wollen, Signs and Meaning in the Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972) 172.
11 Wollen, "Goddard and Counter Cinema" 509.
13 Wollen, "Goddard and Counter Cinema" 509.
16 Lyotard 596.
18 Jameson 119.
19 Ian Paneth, "Wim and His Wings," Film Quarterly Fall 1988: 6-7.