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Introduction

‘Who the Hell Is Howard Hawks?’

Ian Brookes

Hawks has always, perhaps purposely, been an undefined figure.

Peter Bogdanovich

In the 1950s, a young film fan called Eugene Archer was planning a book about six of the most important American film directors: John Ford, John Huston, Elia Kazan, George Stevens, William Wyler and Fred Zinnemann. On a Fulbright to Paris, Archer became an habitué of the Cinémathèque Française and an avid reader of Cahiers du cinéma, discovering there that French critics were unimpressed by the pantheon of directors in his proposed study and were instead championing Alfred Hitchcock and Howard Hawks. Hitchcock was well enough known, certainly, but Hawks hardly at all. Archer wrote to his friend, the New York film critic Andrew Sarris, asking: ‘Who the Hell Is Howard Hawks?’ ‘Archer and I thought we knew all about Hitchcock,’ Sarris later recalled. ‘But Hawks? Who was he? And why were the French taking him so seriously?’ Sarris recounted how François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard ‘were just crazy about Hawks. And especially at that time, Rio Bravo [1959] had just come out, and that was, to them, huge. And here, people just thought it was another western.’

Sarris’s anecdote serves to bring together some of the main issues and key players in the knotty problem of locating Howard Hawks. In 1950s’ Paris, Archer found himself in the thick of a cineaste culture that was forging a new agenda for film theory and criticism, and taking Hollywood seriously when American criticism, such as it then was, did not. Archer’s question continues to reverberate: it recurred as the title of a 1967 article by Robin Wood, and another in 2002 by Peter Wollen, each of whom would become influential figures in shaping Hawks’s reputation.

Although Hawks made some of Hollywood’s most critically acclaimed and enduringly popular films, he remains something of a marginalised figure. And although he is acknowledged in some quarters as an important auteur in American cinema, he hasn’t received the same kind of attention as others such as Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, Frank Capra, Cecil B. DeMille, George Cukor, Billy Wilder or Orson Welles. While all these figures have attracted a substantial number of critical and biographical studies, the first biography of Hawks, by Todd McCarthy, didn’t appear until 1997, some twenty years after Hawks’s death. Despite having his ‘name above the title’ for most of a career spanning half a century, he often goes unrecognised as the director of his own
films. As late as 1968, Andrew Sarris could describe Hawks as ‘the least known and least appreciated Hollywood director of any stature’. Today, several of his films are either unavailable or obtainable only as foreign imports. Tellingly – and unlike all those directors mentioned above – there has never been any collected edition of his work on video or DVD.

In the course of working on this book I’ve lost count of the times I’ve been asked who Hawks was and what he did. When I explained that he was an important American film-maker the enquirers were often none the wiser until I mentioned a film title or two, which more often than not they did recall and often admired. ‘Oh,’ they would typically say, ‘did he make that?’ (Occasionally, encouraged by a flicker of recognition when I mentioned his name, I found that the enquirer was thinking not of Howard Hawks but Howard Hughes.) My own experience echoes Robin Wood’s nearly fifty years ago when he reported ‘a commonly observed phenomenon that people who think they have never heard of Hawks retain vivid memories of films directed by him’.

One explanation for this is that Hawks’s films don’t seem to have a distinctive style and so could be deemed to lack the requisite directorial signature of the auteur. As Manny Farber, an astute early critic of Hawks put it, his films ‘are as different as they’re similar’. Some of Hawks’s contemporaries were more obviously recognisable through their identification with a particular genre: Ford with the Western, Hitchcock with the suspense thriller, DeMille with the historical epic and Cukor with the ‘woman’s film’. Hawks is characterised by the very opposite, what we might call generic promiscuity. No other film-maker worked across genres as he did, yet specific Hawks pictures have come to be seen as exemplary instances of their type: Scarface (1932) of the gangster film; The Big Sleep (1946) of film noir; Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (1953) of musical comedy; I Was a Male War Bride (1949) of romantic comedy; Twentieth Century (1934), Bringing Up Baby (1938) and His Girl Friday (1940) of screwball comedy; Red River (1948), The Big Sky (1952) and Rio Bravo of the Western; Ceiling Zero (1936) and Only Angels Have Wings (1939) of the aviation film; and Air Force (1943) of the combat film. Nor did Hawks have any longterm association with a particular studio, unlike, say, DeMille at Paramount, Vincente Minnelli at MGM or Michael Curtiz at Warner Bros. Indeed, Hawks worked for all of the major studios at one time or another, but only on shortterm contracts. From 1943, his films were made by a succession of his own production companies.

Another explanation for this under-recognition is that Hawks’s films don’t appear to present the same kind of narrative complexity as others do. He is often described as a ‘storyteller’ whose narratives have been viewed as straightforward and simply told stories. Hawks himself added to this impression in later interviews. ‘If I can make about five good scenes and not annoy the audience,’ he said, ‘it’s an awfully good picture.’ This seems like a disingenuously modest aspiration for a film-maker, although it does indicate the reliance on ‘scene-making’ in his work.
Although his films were commercially successful, Hawks himself was often overlooked by critics, at least until later in his career. He received little official acclaim from the industry during his lifetime and was nominated only once for an Academy Award, as Best Director for Sergeant York (1941), which he didn’t win (losing out to John Ford with How Green Was My Valley). He did receive an Honorary Academy Award in 1975, the kind of belated recognition for lifetime achievement which the Academy occasionally bestows on a recipient shortly before his death. Although he was among the best-connected figures in the industry – his personal telephone directory constituted a veritable Who’s Who of Hollywood from Jean Arthur to Darryl F. Zanuck – he was also a remote and enigmatic figure, nicely described by his script girl and ‘major-domo’ Meta Carpenter Wilde as a ‘moated’ man. This is also suggested by the photograph chosen for the cover of Gerald Mast’s study of Hawks which shows a scarcely discernible figure wreathed in cigarette smoke. He cared little about what posterity thought of him. His papers were carelessly kept and many accidentally destroyed. What remained he readily gave away. Even his name gets misspelled (as ‘Hawkes’).

Other anomalies have obscured Hawks’s reputation. He is often seen as an ‘action’ director and much of his work seems to corroborate that view. He is associated with genres with a masculine bias, like the Western; settings in the worlds of the gangster, the prison and the private eye; and ‘manly’ pursuits like boxing, motor racing, deep-sea fishing, logging and safari hunting. Hawks himself seemed to personify an outdoorsman ethic. Like his friend Ernest Hemingway, he liked hunting, shooting and fishing. Screenwriter Leigh Brackett confirmed this view in her account of working with Hawks: ‘He is an intensely masculine person, with an intensely masculine outlook on life,’ she said. ‘He has done most of the things he makes pictures about – driven racing cars, piloted planes, ridden motorcycles. … He values bravery, strength, expertise, loyalty, all the “masculine” virtues.’ And yet Hawks wasn’t quite the action director he seemed. The action sequences in his films were usually relegated to second-unit directors and they often look like the interpolated scenes they were, conspicuously mismatched within the ‘Hawksian’ narrative world. Hawks favoured interior spaces as his working habitat and, as his biographer Todd McCarthy has pointed out, ‘was most comfortable in a drawing room, an office, a home, or a hotel’.

It is also the case that critical perceptions of Hawks’s films often fall back on taken-for-granted notions such as the ‘Hawksian woman’ or the ‘Hawksian group’, categories that appear to be unproblematically settled under the rubric of ‘Hawksian’. Thus, even when he comes to critical attention, Hawks seems to be a known entity, causing few problems of interpretation. This view is further compounded by the apparent dearth of any obvious relationship between narrative theme and visual style, the kind of relationship more readily identifiable in the work of such directors as Hitchcock, Ford or Douglas Sirk. One of the main problems in identifying Hawks’s style is his use of a camera that seems scarcely discernible, making it look like no style at all. It’s a style often described in terms of what it isn’t: unobtrusive, inconspicuous, undemonstrative. This is not to suggest that Hawks lacked a discernible style, but rather it was one that derived from a working method rather than a visual or narrative conception, a process
which is, in itself, absent from the screen. The crucial elements which constitute Hawks's style are only partly to be found in the straightforward or functional shooting style he preferred. Rather, the process of collective improvisation, especially with a trusted cast and crew, and the development of ensemble performance are the hallmarks of a Hawks production. Any attempt to define 'Hawksian' would need to recognise the intrinsic importance of that collaborative, improvisational process. Indeed, Hawks's film-making technique is best understood as analogous to jazz improvisation, as we shall see.

Hawks on Hawks

Hawks's posthumous reputation owes much to the series of interviews he gave during the last decade of his life, especially before audiences of academics and film school acolytes. Although he habitually professed incomprehension at much of the critical interest in his work, he clearly took to the interview form in which he found it congenial to recount, or invent, stories of his Hollywood experiences. But although these stories provide fascinating insights into Hollywood film-making in the studio era, they often conceal as much as they disclose, largely through displays of self-aggrandisement and one-upmanship. We should also remember Alexandre Trauner's description of him as 'the world's biggest bluffer' and so we should take the stories he tells about himself with something more than a pinch of salt. Hawks certainly became adept at telling stories in which he was centre stage, dispensing advice to actors and crew or taking on studio bosses. In this practised anecdotal mode, Hawks would typically describe confrontational episodes with studio heads such as Sam Goldwyn, Louis B. Mayer and Jack Warner in which he himself would invariably emerge triumphant. However, according to his second wife, Slim Keith, Hawks was a kind of Walter Mitty fantasist and an unreliable witness to his own life story. 'Everything that he did had a storybook quality to it,' said Keith. 'Every story or experience he related had him as the central character, committing great feats of derring-do or acts of heroic bravery.'14 In a similar vein, Joseph McBride and Michael Wilmington described Hawks at the 1971 Chicago Film Festival

beguiling the audience with a flow of anecdotes. Some were familiar, but he embellished them with new twists and flourishes, just as his heroes repeat the same tasks in an endless but volatile routine until they achieve an almost effortless mastery.15

Hawks's modus operandi began to prove frustrating to interviewers, as Joseph McBride and Gerald Peary found in 1974. They described 'the way he somehow managed, despite our stated intentions, to slip in most of his favorite, and by now maddening, anecdotes'.16 In another interview the same year for the radical film journal Jump Cut, there was a more concerted effort by the leftist interviewers to hold Hawks to political account and to forestall the predictable anecdotal responses – 'to circumvent the usual What-Was-It-Like-To-Work-With-Humphrey Bogart approach' – as they described it. But even these hard-nosed inquisitors found themselves 'perversely
enchant... hanging batedly on every scabrous John Wayne anecdote'. Hawks could be amiably expansive when he felt like it, but he was invariably recalcitrant when asked about political subjects as, for example, in this terse response to Peter Bogdanovich:

BOGDANOVICH: It’s been said [by Robin Wood] that the picture [To Have and Have Not, 1944] is implicitly antifascist...
HAWKS: I don’t even know what ‘antifascist’ is, so I couldn’t tell you.18

But even when Hawks gave short shrift to a question, this in itself could be revealing, as in this exchange – a masterclass in acerbic concision – in an unpublished interview with Win Sharples:

SHARPLES: I loved Monkey Business [1952].
HAWKS: French do, I didn’t.19

Hawks affected a defensive strategy against ‘theory’, one resistant to academic probing, and to that end he liked to describe himself as just a storyteller. ‘All I’m doing is telling a story,’ he often said. ‘I don’t analyze or do a lot of thinking about it.’20 All the same, in the best of these interviews – notably two unpublished ones, by Kevin Brownlow and Win Sharples, together with those by Joseph McBride published as Hawks on Hawks – we can see a much more reflective and analytical Hawks, who comes across as an astute commentator on his own work as well as on the practice and – indeed – theory of film-making. There is a paradox at work here that François Truffaut shrewdly identified:

something I feel that’s very interesting with Hawks is that in all those interviews, he always criticizes, he raps the intellectuals, and in my opinion he is one of the most intellectual filmmakers in America. He often speaks in terms of film concepts. He has many general theories. He doesn’t belong to the school of instinctive filmmakers. He thinks of everything he does, everything is thought out. So somebody ought to tell him one day that despite himself, he is an intellectual and that he has to accept that!21

French Critics, American Artist

I remember [Hawks] always laughed when someone would send him a copy of Cahiers du Cinéma. ‘I just aim the camera at the actors,’ he liked to say, ‘and they make up all these things about me.’

George Kirgo22

French critics took an early interest in Hawks: a prescient French reviewer of A Girl in Every Port (1928) was already speaking of Hawks’s ‘simplifying style’.23 The French
have always taken cinema more seriously than the Americans and Auriol’s exuberant appreciation of *A Girl in Every Port* in *La Revue du cinéma* reflected the longstanding esteem which French critics had for American film-makers. In that same year, the *Revue* also included accounts of Charles Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Mack Sennett, Harry Langdon, Frank Borzage, King Vidor, Josef von Sternberg and Erich von Stroheim alongside others on European ‘art’ cinema and the avant-garde. The *Revue*, a precursor to *Cahiers du cinéma*, was already paving the way for the critical and theoretical framework of the *politique des auteurs* through which Hawks would find himself elevated to the upper echelons of a new French canon.

A cluster of laudatory articles on Hawks appeared in *Cahiers* during the 1950s inaugurated by Jacques Rivette’s ‘The Genius of Howard Hawks’ in 1953. ‘The evidence on the screen is proof of Hawks’s genius,’ Rivette proclaimed, ‘you only have to watch *Monkey Business* to know that it is a brilliant film’.24 Rivette’s essay was the first to apply an auteurist methodology to Hawks’s work. The *Cahiers* writers reconfigured Hawks as a major auteur and effectively triggered new auteurist appraisals of his work in Britain and America. Rivette’s essay was an important influence on Robin Wood’s groundbreaking study of Hawks and on Wood’s colleagues such as V. F. Perkins at *Movie*, which published a special Hawks issue in 1962. The French critical evaluation of Hawks also influenced Peter Wollen’s structuralist study of film, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, its chapter on auteur theory featuring a ‘test case’ devoted to the director.25 Wood’s and Wollen’s books were founding texts in the development of film studies in the 1960s and 1970s, granting Hawks a central position in the emergent academic discipline. Film scholars, at least, no longer had to ask ‘Who the hell is Howard Hawks?’

The idea of Hawks the auteur was launched by French criticism and it would be difficult to imagine his subsequent reputation without it. Rivette’s declaration of Hawks’s ‘genius’ was characteristic of the rhetorical flamboyance that accompanied the polemical writings of the *Cahiers* firebrands, as in Eric Rohmer’s review of *The Big Sky* the same year. ‘I think that one cannot truly love any film deeply,’ said Rohmer, ‘if one does not love deeply the films of Howard Hawks.’26 Another of the characteristically hyperbolic instances of *Cahiers* writing would acquire aphoristic force: Jean-Luc Godard’s claim that Hawks was nothing less than ‘the greatest American artist’.27 Godard’s juxtaposition of ‘artist’ and ‘American’ here worked as an expression of *Cahiers*’ politique manifesto, conferring on the Hollywood director the status of artist, but it also provided a useful epithet to recast the otherwise unclassifiable Hawks as ‘American Artist’.28 Hawks’s auteur status was boosted again when the *politique*, including its penchant for categories and rankings, was taken up by Sarris in his highly influential book *The American Cinema* which effectively imported the means of legitimating the study of Hollywood directors and placed Hawks in its highest category of ‘Pantheon’ directors. Like the *Cahiers* writers, Sarris admired Hawks’s styleless ‘American’ style as ‘good, clean, direct, functional cinema, perhaps the most distinctively American cinema of all’.29 Hawks was gaining recognition, although largely within the parameters of scholarly study.
Hawks, Modernity and Modernism

The modern man – that’s Hawks, completely.

Henri Langlois

Hawks appealed to French critics because he seemed to them both modern and modernist at a juncture which was witnessing major cultural shifts both in France and America. As Langlois wryly reminded his Cahiers readers at the time of the Hawks retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1962, New York was only belatedly catching up with Paris in its recognition of A Girl in Every Port, over thirty years after Auriol’s review in Revue du cinéma. The Paris of 1928 was ‘rejecting expressionism’, Langlois said. ‘It was the Paris of the Montparnassians and Picasso, of the surrealists and the Seventh Art, of Diaghilev, of the “Soirées de Paris”, of the “Six”, of Gertrude Stein, of Brancusi’s masterpieces.’ Paris had become the centre of European modernism, Langlois is saying, and Hawks can bear comparison with Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier, then at the vanguard of modernist architecture and design. Langlois cites the claim by the modernist writer Blaise Cendrars that A Girl in Every Port ‘definitely marked the first appearance of contemporary cinema’. Langlois considered Hawks’s cinema to be ‘ahead of its time’ and ‘even in the vanguard of artistic movements’.

There was no more important figure than Langlois in establishing a profile for Hawks, not only in print but also through regular screenings of his films. The Cinémathèque Française had been founded by Langlois in 1935 and run by him ever since, becoming by the 1950s, when Eugene Archer arrived in Paris, the very centre of French cineaste culture as both cinema and film archive. It was because of Langlois’ regard for Hawks that Paris had become ‘the only place’ where most of his films could be seen. It was also the place frequented by the Hawksian critics and film-makers associated with Cahiers – Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol, Rivette, Rohmer – who became collectively known as ‘les enfants de la Cinémathèque’. Langlois played an incalculable role on Hawks’s behalf in the foundation of an informal academy at the Cinémathèque in which the Cahiers critics were effectively schooled in Hawks studies as they were creating a new paradigm for the study of film.

‘The Hawksian Woman’

The idea of Hawksian modernity noted by Langlois can be linked to his narrative treatment of women and what some feminist critics of the 1970s identified as the ‘Hawksian woman’. Hawks’s formative studio experience coincided with the emergence of the ‘new woman’ of the 1920s when there was a significant increase in the number of women working outside the home, together with a conspicuous shift in social and sexual mores. This was evident in women’s appearance where the full frocks, tight corsets and elaborate hats of the Edwardian era, determinants of a sedate and decorous demeanour, were replaced by shorter dresses with a freer-flowing look, exemplified by the figure of the ‘flapper’. The typical upswept hairstyle of the ‘Gibson Girl’ gave way to the short ‘bob’ cut, exemplified by film stars Colleen Moore, Clara Bow and
Hawks with Henri Langlois, Director of the Cinémathèque Française and longstanding champion of Hawks’s work, Paris, 1967 (BFI)
Louise Brooks. These new fashions provided a more natural and streamlined look for women and were better suited to activity. The flapper became emblematic of new kinds of female expressiveness.

We can see in Louise Brooks in A Girl in Every Port a new kind of female characterisation taking shape, an incipient version of the Hawksian woman. Although hers was a relatively minor role, Brooks had a mesmerising effect on French critics. Langlois, for example, admired her as ‘the modern artist par excellence’.

Brooks’s Marie is a carnival performer, ‘Mam’selle Godiva’, with a high-diving act. Hawks’s tracking camera makes much of her climb up a vertiginously high ladder, her lithe physique emphasised in a tight-fitting swimsuit, followed by a spectacular dive into the little tank. But what is even more striking is the way she executes the task. She is exceptionally good at what she does, performing the daredevil feat with fearless expertise. If she looks modern, she also enacts a modern kind of femininity, and it was this quality which attracted Hawks. ‘Just think of how modern she looks,’ he told Kevin Brownlow. ‘Oh, God, she was a good looking girl.’ Hawks spoke admiringly about Brooks and his reflections provide real insight into his casting preferences:

I wanted a different type of girl. I didn’t want what they’d been playing. I wanted a new type. I hired Louise Brooks because, see, she’s the type of person – she’s very sure
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