



In Memory of Peter Wollen  
David A. Gerstner and Matthew Solomon

Peter Wollen and auteur theory are spoken in the same breath. But like the theory with which his name is indelibly stamped, his wide-ranging scholarly and creative practice make way for yet-unexplored intellectual experimentation. Peter was not ahead of the curve; he made the curve. On December 17, 2019, Peter passed away leaving a legacy of extraordinary writing (*écriture* in the broadest terms) for the students he mentored and those yet to come.

Born in 1938 in London, Peter came of age postwar in which his cinephilia merged with his political formations. Taken together, his career in writing and filmmaking ushered in a period of creativity in which the ideological complexities that marked the 1960s and 1970s found provocative contours in his work. He first turned to journalism writing for the *New Left Review*. Already delighting in a playful yet deeply committed voice to cinema, he wrote under the *nom de plume*, Lee Russell (we can hear Peter's lovely chuckle as we write these notes). His 1964 essay, "Howard Hawks," hints at his subtle and unique talent to grasp the paradoxical dimensions that gave rise to the pleasures of cinema in a despairing world. In this essay, the Hollywood director's longstanding theme in which "danger" and "fun" intertwine reveal what will prove to be Peter's subsequent concerns with the cinema: "Danger gives existence pungency," Russell/Wollen writes. Hawks's world is one of "nihilism" in which the moment action occurs, danger arises. "This nihilism," he continues, "in which 'living' means no more than being in danger of losing your life—a danger entered into gratuitously—is augmented by the Hawksian concept of having 'fun.' The word 'fun' crops up constantly in Hawks's interviews and scripts. It masks his despair." Writing against the backdrop of postwar London where the energies of a new creative



spirit were launching against the backdrop of a traumatized world, Peter introduced a way of seeing in which he easily choreographed Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, and Gene Kelly with Jean Renoir, Jean-Luc Godard, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Ken Russell.

Peter was never one to separate making films from researching and writing about films. He co-wrote the script for Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Passenger* (1975) with Mark Peploe, and adapted *Friendship's Death* (1987) from one of his short stories. He was partner to a number of critical and creative collaborations that combined theory and practice, which for him were always inevitably imbricated. Among the most notable were the six films he co-directed with Laura Mulvey between 1974 and 1982, which constitute perhaps his most significant and radical contributions to cinematic form and feminist filmmaking. In the wake of Mulvey's 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," they concentrated their cinematic efforts on exploring the language of cinema as it reinforced patriarchal ideology and masculinist pleasure, perhaps most notably in *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), which fused avant-garde art practice with feminist theory to develop a cinematic language that challenged and refused patriarchal film form.

One of Peter's major contributions to the study of cinema and/as art was careful attention to the creative milieus in which filmmakers and artists have worked, which allowed him to make unexpected connections while rendering historical contexts in palpable detail. Winner of the SCMS Career Achievement Award in 2006, Peter's students were endlessly dazzled by his wide-ranging research interests that orbited around "cinema and the other arts" (the title of a graduate seminar he offered regularly at UCLA). The topics he chose to investigate in his writing and teaching were unusually diverse, ranging from painting and photography to dance and fashion. Author of books, screenplays, reviews, and poems, the historical-critical-theoretical



essay was perhaps Peter's preferred form. His essays are generative and reward rereading. Whether reflecting on the children's books of author-animator-director Frank Tashlin, on the auteurist politics of Michael Curtiz, on Louise Brooks's distinctive hairstyle, on early hip-hop ("rapping takes disco leaps ahead," he noted in 1982), on the often-overlooked mechanics and chemistry of the film laboratory, on the panopticism Louis XIV enabled through dance, or on the unsettling postcolonial-modernity that riddles a cricket match, the attentive reader not only discovers astute observations about *how and why* we experience the world as we do; we encounter a tantalizing choreography of ideas and material practice in which "fun" and "despair" become startlingly clear. Although a number of his writings have not yet been collected or republished, many can be found in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (Verso, 1982); *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture* (Indiana University Press, 1993); *Paris/Hollywood: Writings on Film* (Verso, 2002); and *Paris/Manhattan: Writings on Art* (Verso, 2004). The titles of these last two collections point to Peter's prescient interest in "world cities" as nexuses for transnational cultural, political, social, and economic exchanges. Such exchanges defined both his intellectual and his personal biography.

Never himself pursuing a doctorate degree despite advising numerous Ph.D. students, Peter maintained a commitment to his and their writing. As with his own writing, he encouraged an accessible style to reach an intellectually curious readership. His contributions to *Sight & Sound* during the 1990s are fine examples which play with form and sparkle with acumen. He never forsook *criticism*, insisting that critical judgment and discernment was an important part of the critic's and, indeed, the artist's job. For him criticism and scholarship were inseparable, and must necessarily inform one another.



Those that knew Peter will recall his infectious laugh, his boundless curiosity, and the generosity of his staggering intellect. He challenged us. He supported our desires to learn and experience the world in unanticipated ways. In our sadness we feel nonetheless lucky since he leaves behind a body of work that has only just begun to be taken up with rigor and pleasure.