In an interview in the film magazine *Empire*, Ian Nathan asks if Michael Mann can be considered ‘a Hollywood auteur’ (2004: 85). Mann is a major Hollywood presence: writer, producer and director of a dozen films as well as producer of various television shows. Does his position in Hollywood make him an auteur, a term which suggests responsibility for the finished film? This book takes the position that Michael Mann can be regarded as an auteur, and this chapter justifies this assertion through discussion of auteur theory in relation to Mann’s career.

David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson define ‘auteur’ as ‘The presumed or actual author of a film, usually identified as the director’ (2004: 501). They state:

An auteur usually did not literally write scripts but managed nonetheless to stamp his or her personality on genre and studio products, transcending the constraints of Hollywood’s standardized system. (487, original emphasis)

This statement identifies the auteur as an individual who creates a body of cinematic work that is recognisably and distinctly theirs. Therefore, a theory of authorship identifies directors who create a body of work that is consistent, distinctive and even profound as auteurs. In this chapter, the criteria for assigning responsibility for films will be established and applied to Mann. These criteria are textual analysis, the production process, and the marketing and reception of films. By discussing Michael Mann’s work in these contexts, the chapter builds to an understanding of Mann’s authorship, a fundamental premise of this book.
Auteur theory was the ‘first self-conscious and fully articulated’ (Allen and Gomery, 1985: 71) theory in film studies, and remains ‘probably the most widely shared assumption in film studies today’ (Bordwell and Thompson, 2004: 38). Prompted by Alexandre Astruc’s 1948 article ‘The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Camera Stylo’ (1968 [translation]: 17–23), French critics and aspiring film-makers such as Francois Truffaut argued for ‘pure cinema’ (1976 [translation]: 232). Truffaut as well as Jean-Luc Godard described the director as central to the creation of film art: ‘the cinematic is expressed by the visual’ (Gerstner, 2003: 7). These critics praised Hollywood directors such as John Ford and Alfred Hitchcock, while in America, Andrew Sarris also championed the director as a creative force within the production system of Hollywood. Sarris developed a theory to determine the worth of a director. His criteria included ‘technical competence, presence of a distinct visual style, and the emergence of interior meaning’ (Gerstner, 2003: 8) and Sarris’ theory allows a body of films to be established ‘as an oeuvre, a repetition and enrichment of characteristic themes and stylistic choices’ (Staiger, 2003: 5). In the case of Mann, his oeuvre expresses the themes of existentialism, social engagement and the tension between them.

A problem with auteur theory is that it can romanticise the auteur to the status of transcendent artist, outside social and historical context. Ed Buscombe describes a more socially aware concept of the author, identifying intertextuality and the relations between cinema and society (1973: 84). For the purposes of this book, Mann need not be regarded as a transcendent artist, but as a director of a group of films which, under close analysis, are found to contain significant commonalities.

Another problem with auteur theory is that it can ignore the essentially collaborative character of film-making. Berys Gaut (1997) argues that single authorship models of understanding are inadequate due to the multiple contributors to any film. Gaut identifies the director as ‘someone who directs and supervises others’ (156), but other participants in the film will make their own contribution. Nonetheless, the various contributions made by actors, cinematographers and editors must be approved, and the task of approval falls to the director. As noted by V. F. Perkins:

[The director] is in control throughout the period in which virtually all significant relationships [within a film] are defined. He has possession of the means through which all other contributions acquire meaning within the film. (1972: 184)