

American Independent Cinema

Geoff King

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Introduction

How Independent?

From the lowest-budget, most formally audacious or politically radical to the quirky, the offbeat, the cultish and the more conventional, the independent sector has thrived in American cinema in the past two decades, producing a body of work that stands out from the dominant Hollywood mainstream and that includes many of the most distinctive films to have appeared in the USA in recent years. It represents a challenge to Hollywood, although also one that has been embraced by the commercial mainstream to a substantial extent. Major formerly independent distributors such as Miramax and New Line are attached to Hollywood studios (Disney and Time-Warner, respectively), while some prominent directors from the independent sector have been signed up for Hollywood duty. The ‘independence’ of American independent cinema, or exactly what kind of production qualifies for the term, is constantly under question, on a variety of grounds. At the same time, the independent sector continues to thrive and to maintain an identity that is distinctive, even if not entirely separable from Hollywood.

Exactly how ‘independence’ is defined can vary in both form and degree. This book is organized around three main points of

orientation: the position of individual films, or filmmakers, in terms of (1) their industrial location, (2) the kinds of formal/aesthetic strategies they adopt and (3) their relationship to the broader social, cultural, political or ideological landscape. Strategies vary, at each level. Some films customarily designated as 'independent' operate at a distance from the mainstream in all three respects: they are produced in an ultra-low-budget world a million miles from that of the Hollywood blockbuster; they adopt formal strategies that disrupt or abandon the smoothly flowing conventions associated with the mainstream Hollywood style; and they offer challenging perspectives on social issues, a rarity in Hollywood. Others exist in a closer, sometimes symbiotic relationship with the Hollywood behemoth, offering a distinctive touch within more conventional frameworks. In between are many shades of difference.

A degree of distance, industrially, from the Hollywood studio system often appears to be a necessary condition for substantial formal or socio-political departure from the dominant norms. Lower budgets and less marketing-driven filmmaking generally permit greater licence. But this can be relative. How, exactly, any individual title is marked as sufficiently different from the Hollywood mainstream to qualify as independent is subject to numerous variations explored in detail in this book. Some lean towards an 'artistic' form and content, merging at one end with works usually defined as 'experimental' or 'avant-garde'. Others are more avowedly 'political' or polemical in intent. The 'artistic' and the 'political' are far from separate categories, however. Formal experiment and departure from dominant conventions is, potentially, a major resource for the deconstruction of dominant ideologies. Other examples of American independent cinema are less lofty in their ambitions, taking up the inheritance of lower-budget 'exploitation' cinema, for example, or seeking to carve a niche through the creation of 'quality', stylish, cultish or offbeat films, the primary goal of which remains the provision of profit-generating entertainment.

One of the main aims of this book is to chart the contours of American independent cinema within these coordinates. Independent cinema exists in the overlapping territory between Hollywood and a number of alternatives: the experimental 'avant-garde', the more accessible 'art' or 'quality' cinema, the politically engaged, the low-



1. Not much doing really – but a milestone in the developing indie scene of the 1980s: *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984).

budget exploitation film and the more generally offbeat or eccentric. The principal focus of *American Independent Cinema* is on the particular versions of independent cinema that came to prominence from the mid 1980s with the appearance of milestone films such as *Stranger Than Paradise* (Jim Jarmusch, 1984), *sex, lies, and videotape* (Steven Soderbergh, 1989) and *Clerks* (Kevin Smith, 1994). The terms ‘independent’ or ‘indie’ – the latter often used to distinguish this particular version of independence – are used primarily in the sense in which they became established in the wider culture in this period, rather than according to a fixed or more literal definition. To understand the forces shaping this particular notion of independence, however, a number of different historical roots and predecessors have also to be considered.

Taken literally, the ‘independent’ sector has a much longer and broader history than that which forms the main subject of this book. At its earliest, the term was used to describe producers operating in the shadow of the three companies – Edison, Biograph and Vitagraph – that dominated the film business in the 1890s and 1900s. Early independents faced a constant threat of legal action, control

over the industry in this period being exerted partly through the ownership of patents that sought to restrict access to key aspects of film technology. From this early stage, the term 'independent' gained romantic connotation, signifying the brave efforts of rebels fighting against a powerful trust. Independent production in this era is often given the credit for a number of landmark developments, including the shift of the centre of gravity of the film business to California and the initiation of the star system, although both claims owe more to myth than reality.¹ The independents formed their own alliance in opposition to the patents company and, Janet Staiger suggests, used a number of similar strategies; the result was the division of the industry into two rival blocs.²

The patents company was declared to be an illegal restraint of trade and dissolved in 1915. It was soon replaced, however, by what was to become the Hollywood studio system, a vertically integrated operation in which the five major studios dominated the production, distribution and exhibition of features in the USA and much of the rest of the world. The studio system underwent substantial reorientation from the 1950s, in the face of further federal regulation and broader social change, but its dominance has remained largely in place. In the context of an industrial regime dominated by Hollywood, independent activity has tended to fall into one of two general categories: either inside or outside the orbit of the majors. Within the gravitational pull of the studios, independent production has been found at both the upper and lower ends of the business. Low-budget independent outfits such as Republic and Monogram, and many smaller entities, helped to serve the demand of the system for the production of 'B' movies, to fill the bottom half of double bills, during the 1930s.³ At the same time, independent producers such as David Selznick and Sam Goldwyn produced expensive 'A' features, borrowing stars and leasing studio space from the majors and supplying prestige films such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Rebecca* (1940) that profited the studios by playing in their important first-run theatres. The most high-profile A-list move into independence from the studios was launched earlier, in 1919, with the founding of United Artists, a distribution company created to handle the films of Mary Pickford, Charles Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks and D.W. Griffith.

The success of Selznick, in particular, as an independent producer working closely with the studios, pointed the way towards what was to be the future structure of Hollywood production, which became increasingly organized on a contracted-out basis from the 1950s onwards. The studio production-line system gave way to the package system, in which individual film projects were put together on a one-off basis. A great deal of Hollywood production today can be described as 'independent' in this sense, in that projects are often initiated and pursued by entities that exist formally beyond the bounds of the majors. These include production companies set up by producers, directors and stars, often working closely with one studio or another, and some larger independent companies. In most such cases the films that result belong solidly to the Hollywood mainstream. Hollywood remains the principal source of funding and distribution, even when only a relatively small proportion of production is conducted entirely in-house. Technically independent productions include Hollywood blockbusters such as *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) and *Basic Instinct* (1992), produced by the independent Carolco in an alliance with TriStar Pictures. As with the likes of Selznick, arrangements with independents such as Carolco, Castle Rock and Morgan's Creek in the 1990s gave the studios extra flexibility, to work in partnerships that reduced their risks, especially at the higher-budget end of the spectrum.⁴ It is clear that formal independence of this variety in the industrial domain is, in itself, no guarantee of independent qualities of other kinds.

If some forms of independent production have worked closely in unison with Hollywood, others have operated in areas in which Hollywood has chosen not to tread, sometimes teaching valuable lessons to the dominant institution. Necessity has often driven independent operators to be the pioneers of American cinema, exploring new avenues in their search for territories not already colonized by the major studios. The early independents took cinema to parts of rural America, including the gold camps of Alaska, that were not served by the big companies.⁵ Technological innovations have also come from independent sources in some cases: the development of widescreen processes and 3D in the 1950s, for example, originated outside the control of the studios. Both historically and today, independent

producers have often served specialized, niche audiences of one kind or another. A good example during the classical Hollywood studio era is low-budget independent black-oriented filmmaking, which, although often white owned and financed, catered specifically for black audiences from the silent era until the Second World War.

The most significant audience for which Hollywood failed to cater in the immediate post-war decades, and which created the basis for some of the most important strains of independent production, was the youth audience. Hollywood was very slow to respond to demographic and other social changes during the 1950s and 1960s that created a large audience receptive to material targeted at teenage viewers. Into the gap stepped a number of independent producers, the best known being American Independent Pictures (AIP), supplying the teen audience with a range of low-budget horror, hot-rod, biker and beach-blanket movies. Such films tended to be in 'disreputable' genres unfavoured by Hollywood. They were sold using 'exploitation' tactics, sensational titles and posters giving the impression of more lurid thrills than were usually delivered by the low-production-value material actually presented on-screen.

If this was a version of independence that was nakedly commercial in intent, the independent scene of the later 1950s and 1960s also saw a flowering of more 'artistic' and in some cases 'avant-garde' independent filmmaking. The birth of something akin to an 'American New Wave', to match those of contemporary European cinema, was announced in the early 1960s. The more narrative- and character-led manifestations of this development – films such as John Cassavetes' *Shadows* (1960) – can be seen as direct predecessors of the indie scene of the 1980s and 1990s. Examples from the avant-garde end of the spectrum, in some cases dating back to the 1940s, include formalist experimentation by filmmakers such as Maya Deren and Stan Brakhage and the 'underground' films of Andy Warhol. The avant-garde remained largely isolated, as in almost all cases a strictly non-commercial and rigorously independent undertaking. The strands of 'exploitation', 'art' and 'underground' cinema sometimes came closer together, however, jointly forming important sources for the Hollywood 'Renaissance' of the late 1960s to the mid to late 1970s, a period in which a financially struggling Hollywood finally

began to come to terms with its changed demographic and social context. The commercial success of independent youth-oriented pictures such as those of AIP was matched by that of some more edgy and disturbing independent productions in the same generic territory, especially horror. Films such as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) proved highly successful at the box office, pushing back the boundaries of conventional exploitation-horror material and combining this with a more negative portrait of American society that resonated with contemporary angst and unrest in the era of events such as racial uprising, the Vietnam war and Watergate.

The response of Hollywood was to embrace some of this material. A landmark move was the decision by Columbia to distribute *Easy Rider* (1969), a project originally destined to become another biker picture for AIP. The success of *Easy Rider* helped convince the studios to invest in a new generation of filmmakers seen to be more in touch with the youth audience affected by the 1960s counterculture. Hollywood learned other lessons from the independents in this period. Along with a number of foreign imports, independent features demonstrated the box-office appeal of more racy, controversial or 'adult' material, encouraging the adoption by Hollywood of the ratings system, which widened the bounds of what could be offered to audiences from 1968. Examples ranged from gory low-budget horror to the sexploitation films of Russ Meyer. Elements of independent 'exploitation' strategy were also embraced by Hollywood in its more mainstream, blockbuster productions, especially the strategy of combining wide opening release patterns with saturation advertising, in order to recoup costs quickly. A number of Hollywood's biggest-grossing films of the 1970s were, in part, bigger-budget and glossier versions of independent exploitation fare, especially *The Exorcist* (1973) and *Jaws* (1975).

Hollywood stole some of the ground of the independents during the 1970s, encouraging some independents into more extreme or 'outrageous' ground to maintain their marketable differences: the raw horror of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, the harder-core sexploitation of *Deep Throat* (1972), the cult 'bad taste' trash extremes of John Waters' *Pink Flamingos* (1973). Independent operation remained the main source of development in the slasher and splatter varieties of horror, but

this was another terrain onto which Hollywood was quick to move in the light of the box-office success of *Halloween* (1978) and *Friday the 13th* (1980). If the more commercial/exploitation end of independent cinema was to a large extent taken over by larger-budget Hollywood productions, the same was only partially and briefly true of the 'art' film component. The Hollywood Renaissance embraced aspects of 'art' cinema to some extent, but it proved short-lived, the product of a period of transition that soon passed in the later 1970s, with both the consolidation of a blockbuster-centred regime in Hollywood and a political turn to the right in American culture. Space for edgier, more questioning or 'difficult' filmmaking was generally reduced in Hollywood from the end of the decade. Some individuals associated with the Hollywood Renaissance continued to make less conventional films, sometimes for the studios, where past box-office achievements or status and reputation gave them sufficient clout (Martin Scorsese, for example), sometimes in the independent realm or with funding from television (as in the case of Robert Altman during the 1980s). Hollywood's loss, in terms of the general narrowing of the horizons of possibility at the heart of the studio-led machine, was to be the gain of a newly consolidating form of independent production and distribution that was beginning to take shape during the 1980s, and into which some of the inheritance of the Renaissance was carried.

The term 'independent' has had rather different connotations at different periods in the history of American cinema. In the 1930s, for example, it signified 'something less than trash'.⁶ In the late 1950s and early 1960s it might have suggested both the innovations of the 'American New Wave' and the low-budget exploitation science fiction and horror made by Roger Corman for AIP. The 'New Wave' proved fragmentary and short-lived, breaking down during the 1960s into its separate art/personal/expressive feature film and more underground/experimental short components. Accessible non-Hollywood features were still produced, but, as Geoff Andrew suggests, 'they were so infrequent, and usually achieved such a low audience profile, that there was little sense of continuity, let alone of any kind of "movement"'.⁷ From the mid 1980s, however, the more arty/quirky, sometimes politically inflected, brand of independent cinema began to gain a higher profile and a more sustained and institutionalized base in

the broadly off-Hollywood arena. Explanations for this development will be suggested in greater detail in Chapter 1, which focuses on the industrial dimension of recent and contemporary American independent cinema, but the generally inhospitable climate of the Hollywood mainstream during the 1980s and into the 1990s was certainly a factor.

The industrial realm is, clearly, an important part of any definition of independent cinema. In Greg Merritt's account, *Celluloid Mavericks: A History of American Independent Film*, it is the single, defining characteristic. An independent film, for Merritt, is 'any motion picture financed and produced completely autonomous of *all* studios, regardless of size'.⁸ Films made by smaller studios or given a guarantee of distribution by one of the majors before production are classified as 'semi-indie'. In neither case, in Merritt's account, is style or content a consideration. Any other basis of definition is 'too slippery', including 'the widely held belief that independence is determined not by financing but by "spirit", by professing an alternative vision'.⁹ My argument, however, is that independent cinema is not best defined in such narrow and literal terms. Industrial factors are important, but do not provide the only grounds for definition of the particular varieties of filmmaking to which the label independent has most prominently been attached in recent decades. Other definitions may be somewhat slippery, but the feature-length, narrative-based independent cinema examined in this book is not a single, unified entity. 'Independence' is a relative rather than an absolute quality and can be defined as such at the industrial and other levels. It is this dynamic quality, drawing on a range of traditions, that makes it such a rich, variable and fascinating part of the cinematic landscape.

American Independent Cinema starts with consideration of the industrial context because it is in this dimension that many of the conditions of existence of independent cinema are set. The gradual establishment of an industrial infrastructure, particularly in distribution, was a key factor in the emergence of the type of indie scene that came to fruition in the 1980s and 1990s. In general – but with some exceptions – the term 'independent' as used in this book requires an industrial location that is either clearly independent or somewhere in the grey area often known as 'Indiewood', which includes studio-

owned/affiliated 'specialist' or 'independent' labels. But it would be an impoverished definition of independent cinema that ignored the qualities of the films themselves. If indie films are often described by the use of somewhat vague terms such as 'quirky' and 'offbeat', one of the aims of this book is to examine some of the particular devices that create such qualities, to seek a grasp on the slippery notion of 'alternative vision' at the levels of both form (principally in Chapters 2 to 4) and content (principally in Chapter 5). Where departures from mainstream convention are found at the formal level, they tend to be in two main directions: either in making greater claims to verisimilitude/realism, or in the use of more complex, stylized, expressive, showy or self-conscious forms. In content, many independent films offer visions of society not usually found in the mainstream, although the bounds of difference are often limited. The characteristic location of that which is designated by the terms 'indie' or 'independent', in the dominant senses in which they are used here, is a space that exists between the more familiar-conventional mainstream and the more radical departures of the avant-garde or the underground.

Unlike many accounts of American independent cinema, this book does not take the individual filmmaker as a major point of organization (there are no chapters devoted specifically to figures such as Jim Jarmusch, John Sayles, Hal Hartley, Todd Haynes or Quentin Tarantino). The indie sector is, clearly, a place where more scope generally exists than in Hollywood for the pursuit of auteurist individual freedom of expression; for filmmakers to express their own particular visions of the world through choices of form and content.¹⁰ What this book seeks to identify, however, is the existence of a number of different (overlapping) modes of independent practice, institutionalized or partially institutionalized forms that include but also go beyond the particular concerns of the many individuals whose work has contributed to the vibrancy of independent alternatives to the Hollywood mainstream.

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