



**CO-DEPENDENCE AND SYMBIOSIS  
OR WHAT LESSONS SHOULD ACADEMIC RESEARCHERS  
LEARN FROM THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENT  
CINEMA**

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*Institute for Economic Development Policy  
Discussion Paper Series*

**2008-05**

# **Co-dependence and Symbiosis**

## **Or What Lessons Should Academic Researchers Learn from the History of American Independent Cinema**

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July 2008

### **Introduction**

In recent years, the landscape of higher education in the UK has undergone a radical transformation. Arguably, the most visible effect of this transformation is the now clear perception by university employees as well as by people outside it that Higher Education Institutions are an integral part of national and global economic markets, and therefore subject to the vagaries of these market. While in the past the economics of universities and colleges were in the remit of management at the very top of the institutions' echelons, nowadays it has become part of the everyday reality for all staff, academic and support.

The area where this has been particularly noticeable for academic staff is research. With the proliferation of external funding bodies (and their increasingly large available funds) in the last decade and the growing integration between universities and industries in the design of research projects or through knowledge transfer schemes, it is clear that research income generation has become of primary significance – especially for old universities which have traditionally privileged research.

Under these circumstances, and not surprisingly, university-affiliated scholarly researchers have started rethinking their research projects and the nature of research itself. This is especially as successful research bids to external funding bodies have started carrying added value (they can be used as achievement indicators that count towards an academic's career progression) on top of their normal value as prestige elements for the

university. In this respect, research projects are seen to be increasingly shaped by the objectives and agenda of the numerous funding bodies that are in a position to finance them and not necessarily by individual scholar's interest in a discipline or a field of studies.

The implications of this development are obvious, especially in terms of the creation of "hot" topics and areas of research that have a better chance to obtain funding, to the detriment of other areas or topics that might be deemed less appealing and therefore have fewer chances to secure any funding. More importantly for the objectives of this essay, the concept of the academic freedom, which can be broadly defined as a scholar's right to research any topic he or she is interested for academic purposes irrespective of current trends and developments in one's field, is directly questioned. Can one still talk about academic freedom in an era of research bids (often involving teams with several members from countries around the world) to funding organisations, like the Seventh Research Framework Programme, which determine the parameters of the field within which research will take place? And what about the thousands of academics who do small scale research and work on largely individual projects? Can they exist in today's economic climate? Can they obtain funding from anywhere if their topic is not "hot"?

In order to discuss these questions, I shall draw a number of analogies with recent developments in the area of American independent cinema. As the low budget "indie" cinema of the past 25-30 years managed not only to co-exist with conglomerate Hollywood but to also find great commercial success by exploiting several of Hollywood's resources, perhaps it could teach academics a few lessons about how to exist in the increasingly commercialised world of Higher Education. In the same manner in which filmmakers like John Sayles, Spike Lee, Kevin Smith, etc. managed to co-exist with Hollywood without compromising the aesthetic integrity of their films or their sometimes radical political viewpoint, perhaps academic researchers might also be able to find a space for their "low-concept" projects and co-exist with Knowledge Transfer Partnerships, Research Networks and Workshops, Knowledge Catalyst Schemes, European Research Frameworks. In order to make this argument I shall start with an in-depth review of the American independent film sector.

## **American independent cinema: finding a voice and making itself heard**

In 1999, James Schamus, independent film writer and producer (with credits in films like *Brokeback Mountain* (2006) and *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (2000) and later co-president of Focus Features, an NBC/Universal subsidiary established to finance, produce and distribute low-budget films for the specialty/independent market, gave the opening speech at the Spirit Awards (the OSCAR equivalents for the independent sector). At that time Schamus was also chair of the Independent Feature Project West, the California-based branch of the Independent Feature Project, an organisation that was established in 1979, “on a belief that a truly vital American cinema must include the personal, idiosyncratic, and sometimes controversial voices of filmmakers working outside of the established studio system.”<sup>i</sup> That organisation grew exponentially in the 20 years since its inception and at the time of Schamus’s speech it had become a large national association that numbered thousands of members and had branches in several U.S. cities, including one in Los Angeles which was headed by Schamus.

In his speech Schamus stunned an audience of indie filmmakers, producers, financiers, agents, and other indie cinema aficionados by suggesting that the Independent Feature Project as an organisation and institution that had supported an immense number of filmmakers and projects over 20 years, should be immediately disbanded. His rationale was very simple: the IFP had already achieved its goals.<sup>ii</sup> The contemporary independent film movement in the USA that had started at the end of the 1970s/beginning of the early 1980s with a “trickle of poorly funded documentaries, supplemented by the occasional underfinanced grainy picture”,<sup>iii</sup> like John Sayles’s *Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1980) and Richard Pierce’s *Heartland* (1980) had come a long way by 1999, the year when the astounding commercial success of the completely independent *The Blair Witch Project* demonstrated once again that independent fare can be ridiculously low-budget, visually challenging and able to record \$142 million at the US box office. And if film executives, industry analysts and knowledgeable filmgoers were tempted to think that the incredible success of the BWP was an one off, a fluke, a surprise movie that comes out of nowhere at the right

time and its success is very rarely repeated, 2002 saw the even more incredible success of My Big Fat Greek Wedding, which recorded a gross of £242 million in the US box office and which until December 2007 was sitting at number 50 of the table of the all time blockbusters at the US box office, while Lost in Translation, Brokeback Mountain and Little Miss Sunshine surpassed the \$100 million mark in the next few years in terms of global box office takings.

At the same time the industrial landscape of the independent sector also looked very different compared to the early 1980s. While back in the early 1980s there was very little institutional support for independent filmmaking, by the end of the century the situation had all but reversed. For instance, around 1980 independent filmmaking could receive support from the following sources:

#### 1) Public Service Broadcasters (PBS)

According to the leading US public service broadcaster's charter, part of its programme had to be dedicated to subject matter that commercial television and (largely) film avoided. Such subject matter included: voicing alternative views; representing minorities; examining social problems; and uncovering "hidden histories" – all aspects of the first wave of the independent films of the 1980s. One could, in fact, argue that early American independent cinema owed its reputation as a vehicle for the articulation of alternative voices and political positions largely to its association with the objectives and ethos of PBS.

#### 2) The Federal US Government

This was primarily through the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, organisation that distributed grants to aspiring filmmakers through after a bidding process. Many key films of the early 1980s (like Heartland and Northern Lights (R.Nilsson, 1980) were partly financed by these funding bodies

#### 3) Local Governments

By the late 1970s most of the US States had established Municipal and State Film Bureaus in order to assist independent filmmakers who wanted to make films outside the California and New York-based film industry. Many US States hoped to attract productions by investing funds in independent films and received rewards in terms of job creation, prestige, publicity, tourism, etc. Partly due to the work of Victor Nunez, Florida became an early regional filmmaking hub, while in the 1990s Texas emerged as a leading independent cinema regional centre, mainly due to the success of the films of Richard Linklater.

4) Last, but most importantly, independent cinema received institutional support from Independent Distributors

A handful of thinly-capitalised distribution companies with an expertise in marketing non-US art house films started undertaking the distribution and commercial exploitation of low-budget American films financed and produced outside the corporate conglomerates that dominated mainstream Hollywood cinema. In 1981, when the first contemporary independent films made their appearance in the US screens, there were only seven established independent distribution companies willing to take a risk and fund the distribution of a minor film.

<b>Company</b>	<b>Life Span</b>	<b>Key Film</b>
First Run Features	1968-to date	<i>To Die For</i> (Van Sant, 1994)
Frameline	1973-to date	<i>Tongues Untied</i> (Riggs, 1990)
Atlantic Releasing Corporation	1976-1993	<i>Extremities</i> (Young, 1986)
The Samuel Goldwyn Company	1978-2001	<i>Wild at Heart</i> (Lynch, 1990)
Castle Hill Productions	1980 to date	<i>Someone to Love</i> (Jaglom, 1987)
Cinecom	1980-1990	<i>Matewan</i> (Sayles, 1987)
Horizon Films	1981-1988	<i>Variety</i> (Gordon, 1983)

However, the following two decades saw the development of an elaborate institutional apparatus in support of this type of cinema. Structural components of this apparatus included:

- 1) The Independent Feature Project (formerly known as the Independent Film Feature Project)

As mentioned earlier the IFFP and IFP were set up with the explicit intention of supporting US independent cinema. The organisation's IFP Market became a major showcase for filmmaker-members of the IFP where they could screen their work – complete or in progress – for distributors and/or investors. Furthermore, IFP became part of an international network of organisations that fostered the development of national cinemas (along with the British Film Council; the Cannes Film Festival, the Berlin International Film Festival, etc.) pitching US independent cinema therefore as “American cinema” (as opposed to the more international mainstream Hollywood cinema). IFP's membership of this network allowed the organisation to channel its members' films to international markets.

## 2) The Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers (AIVF)

This was another membership-based organisation (5,000 members by 2005) that since 1973 has striven to support independent film as well as video-making. Until recently, AIVF administered various small grants (between \$3,000 and \$5,000) provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.

## 3) The Sundance Film Institute

This was established in 1981 by Robert Redford as a summer camp for a small number of new filmmakers in the mountains of Utah where industry professionals would teach them “how to develop their [the filmmakers'] uneven screenplays into solid, workable properties.”<sup>iv</sup> The Institute quickly became an important training ground for young filmmakers, especially ones coming from an ethnic or any other minority background. In 1985, the Sundance Film Institute took over the rights of the U.S Film Festival, a very minor showcase for films that were made completely outside the American film industry, which had been experiencing severe financial difficulties. In 1990 – and after the spectacular success of the 1989 winner of the festival, *Sex Lies and Videotape* – the name of the festival changed from US Film Festival to the Sundance Film Festival. Since then the Festival has become the most significant showcase/market for independent films with the number of film submissions to the festival increasing from 60 films in 1987 to over 3,600 films in 2003.<sup>v</sup>

#### 4) Mainstream Hollywood

At the same time with all these organisations, institutional support arrived also from the sector against which independent filmmakers had been defining themselves: mainstream Hollywood and the major diversified entertainment conglomerates that had been controlling the American film industry since the late 1960s. There was also substantial institutional support from hybrid-companies that seemed to belong neither to the mainstream nor to the independent sector or, to put it differently, to have one foot in the mainstream and the other in the independent circles. Such companies included:

Mini-majors: adequately capitalised independent production and distribution companies that “operate[d] – or tried to operate – outside the orbit of the majors,” but which set themselves up as a smaller version of the majors.<sup>vi</sup> The most important such hybrid company was Orion Pictures responsible for such important pictures such as *Platoon* (1986) *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Although most critics place Orion on the same rank with the majors I have argued elsewhere that despite the fact that the company used several business practices associated with the conglomerates and financed and distributed expensive films that could easily be films from Warner or Paramount, it nevertheless remained independent throughout its history and repeatedly fend off attempts for corporate takeovers by companies such as Viacom (eventually owner of Paramount Pictures).<sup>vii</sup>

Major independents: hybrid production and distribution companies that were allowed a large degree of creative autonomy after they were taken over by a conglomerate parent. Miramax and New Line Cinema are the most important companies in these area. Miramax, in particular, is the company most heavily associated with independent films in the minds of cinema-goers while key independent filmmakers like Kevin Smith have been quoted saying: I wanted to be an independent filmmaker. I wanted to work at Miramax. In those days it was still ‘We are independent film.’<sup>viii</sup> Both companies were independent until 1993-4 when both were taken over by Disney and Turner Broadcasting System for \$60 and \$600 million respectively, before New Line found itself as



part of the Time Warner conglomerate when they merged with TBS. The companies that emerged after the takeovers of 1993 were called major independents.<sup>ix</sup>

Classics Divisions: subsidiaries of the major conglomerates which were originally established to distribute non-American art-house films in the United States but which gradually shifted their interest from acquisitions of non-U.S. films to distribution of independently produced and financed American films when American independent cinema started showing clear signs of financial success.

Examples of classics divisions would include:

<b>Classics Division</b>	<b>Lifespan</b>	<b>Key American Films</b>
United Artists Classics	1980-1984	<i>Lianna</i> (Sayles, 1983)
20 <sup>th</sup> Century-Fox International Classics	1982-1983	<i>Eating Raoul</i> (Bartel, 1982) co-distributed with Quartet
Universal Classics	1982-1983	No American. film distributed
Orion Classics <sup>x</sup>	1983-1997	<i>Slacker</i> (Linklater, 1991)
<b>New Classics Divisions</b>	<b>Lifespan</b>	<b>Key American Films</b>
Fine Line Features	1992-2005	<i>Short Cuts</i> (Altman, 1993)
Sony Pictures Classics	1992-to date	<i>Safe</i> (Haynes, 1995)
Fox Searchlight	1994-to date	<i>Boys Don't Cry</i> (Peirce, 1999)
Paramount Classics	1998-to date	<i>You Can Count on Me</i> (Lonergan, 2000)
Screen Gems	1999- to date	<i>Adaptation</i> (Jonze, 2002)
United Artists Films	1999-to date	<i>Coffee and Cigarettes</i> (Jarmusch, 2004)
Focus Features	2002- to date	<i>Lost in Translation</i> (S. Coppola, 2003)
Warner Independent Pictures	2003- to date	<i>Good Night, and Good Luck</i> (Clooney, 2005)
Picturehouse	2005-to date	<i>Factotum</i> (Hamer, 2005)

With all this institutional support coming from all sides of the industry, including the major conglomerates, it is not surprising that the number of truly independent film companies (defined here as production and distribution entities without corporate ties to the major conglomerates) has declined dramatically in recent years. One of these companies, Lions Gate Films (which hit a gold mine with the release of a cycle of low budget but extremely

commercially successful torture porn films like *Saw* and *Hostel*) has solidified its position in the market and for the last few years it has even competed with some of the majors – in that respect it can be seen as a new mini-major. The rest would include:

- Newmarket Films (responsible for such critically and/or commercially successful independent films like *Memento* (2000), *Donnie Darko* (2001) and *Monster* (2003), while in 2004 it benefited from distributing the remarkably successful Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. As a matter of fact Newmarket proudly parades its independent credential as their website underscores the fact that "in a time when almost every independent is being gobbled up by a major corporation, Newmarket continues to maintain its independence."<sup>xi</sup>
- Alliance Atlantis, a Canadian company which started distributing films in the US after the success of Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*
- A small number of much-less capitalised independent companies which release a handful of films per year
- a large number of more narrow specialised companies that distribute fare for much more specific markets (religious, gay and lesbian, ethnic markets, etc.)

Not surprisingly, all this institutional support signalled the institutionalisation of American independent cinema and its eventual transformation from a largely individual enterprise to an industrial category. Rather than stand as a political statement and practice (with the term political stretched here to its boundaries to include class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, race, etc.) independent cinema has become now an industrial category (in the same way that genre, stardom and authorship have functioned historically as such categories) which allows the conglomerated film industry to market successfully relatively low budget films that are significantly different from the extremely expensive action/adventure/fantasy blockbusters and star vehicles which are normally associated with mainstream cinema.<sup>xii</sup>

This development has made trade analysts and film historians alike to question the usefulness of the term independent and to coin new terms such as Indiewood which allows all of the above practitioners of what has been once known as independent cinema fall under the same umbrella, irrespective of whether the budgets of their films have been provided by a mini major (like for instance in the case of *Crash* [Haggis, 2005 which was distributed by Lions Gate Films]; by a major independent (like in the case of *Pulp Fiction* [Tarantino, 1994, which was financed and distributed by Miramax, by then a subsidiary of Disney]; classics division (like in the case of *Lost in Translation* [S. Coppola, 2003 which was financed and distributed by Focus Features, the specialty label of NBC/Universal]; or an independent company (as is the case of *Memento* [Nolan, 2000, which was distributed by Newmarket Films]. For the cinema going public these are all “indie” films, short for independent but also an umbrella label that suggests a mood or style of filmmaking and not necessarily a mode of filmmaking practiced away from the influence of the major conglomerates.

I have dedicated a few pages in mapping the institutional terrain of contemporary independent cinema because, as I will argue, the similarities and analogies it presents with the institutional landscape that surrounds contemporary academics and their relationship to the huge organisations they are affiliated with, the universities, are remarkable. And if independent or “indie” cinema has, according to James Schamus, eventually emerged successful despite the corporate pressures of the conglomerates and the seismic changes in the global entertainment market then, perhaps, academics can learn some valuable lessons and even discover ways to defend themselves from the pressures they have been experiencing in recent years, especially in response to the dramatic shifts in the area of research funding. The following sections will present these similarities and analogies.

### **The “Indie” Academic Model**

Although strictly speaking independent filmmaking can find a direct analogy to independent scholarship (an independent scholar defined as one not affiliated with a recognised academic institution in an employer-employee relationship),

the “indie” cinema model nevertheless (as I just mentioned “a mood or style of filmmaking and not necessarily a mode of filmmaking practiced away from the influence of the major conglomerates”) is flexible enough to find analogies with the experience of thousands of academics/researchers who are affiliated with a university and who work on relatively small individual projects that represent their own specific research interests and which do not require substantial investment in terms of funding and/or resource (as is particularly the case for most academics in the Arts and Humanities area). In this respect, one could talk about “indie” scholars working at universities and “indie” research practiced within university structures in the same way that *Lost in Translation* and *Do the Right Thing* are considered “indie” films.

To take myself as an example, although I am certainly not an independent scholar in the strict sense of the term I could class myself as an “indie” scholar (for the time being at least). I have an institutional affiliation with (that is I am employed by) the School of Politics and Communications at the University of Liverpool. I have certain teaching duties and administrative duties. When it comes to research, however, I have no pressures to fit in to the set “research clusters” in my school which are: *European Regional Politics and Security; International Security and Communication; UK Politics and Governance; and Public Communication and Media Institutions;* (even though broadly my research does fit in the last cluster). That might have been ideal for the School, the Faculty and the University but it is not a prerequisite. My institution knew about my research interests when they interviewed me for my current post. I work in the area of film studies, especially on American cinema, and with a strong emphasis on the independent sector, while other colleagues research in various other areas within the broad field of communication studies (language, broadcasting, communications policy, communication and gender, etc). I do have the freedom to continue researching in that area, to attract research students who want to do MPhils and PhDs in the area of my expertise and to bid for funding for projects that are within the parameters of my chosen field. So, arguably, I have an “indie” status which allows me considerable freedom in the same way that Spike Lee had freedom to do his most acclaimed film, *Do the Right Thing* (1989) with money provided by

Universal Pictures (then a subsidiary of Japanese electronics giant, Matsushita).

Second, if one accepts the proposition that the “indie” academic status does not mean strictly no affiliations with a university but the possibility of having the freedom to determine at least the subject of one’s own research and of requiring relatively limited funds to conduct your research, then the similarities with the contemporary American independent cinema model are even more striking. If “independent filmmakers” received support from Public Service Broadcasters (interested in minorities, representations, and hidden histories), the Government (federal and local through grants and investments) and independent distributors, “indie academics” could receive institutional support from corresponding institutions, including:

- Public Service organisations (charities and other NGOs support research and projects, especially under the Knowledge Transfer Partnership model; non profit organisations like the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Industries funds projects relating to the uncovering hidden histories in American cinema, which is ideal for a researcher in my field, etc.)
- The government through its funding bodies like the AHRC in the area of film studies (which roughly corresponds to the NEH and NEA) which is one of the most significant research funding bodies in the field of Humanities in the UK.
- Academic publishers, which, despite market pressures to produce income generating text books and introductions to be used in courses, they take often gambles with original, high quality work. Good examples here are Peter Lang, a small-sized publisher which specialises in European Cinema and especially McFarlane, a US publisher, which for many years has continued commissioning monographs with little commercial interest such as Lydia Papadimitriou (2006) *The Greek Film Musical*.

Furthermore, and following various developments in avenues of support towards academic research, an “indie” scholar can receive support from organisations, societies, associations and caucuses grouped around a particular research interest, ranging from the extremely broad (The Society for Cinema and Media Studies [SCMS]; The Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association [MECCSA]) to more narrow (The David Mamet Society; The Harold Pinter Society). Such institutions are the rough equivalent of the Independent Feature Project and of The Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers as they:

- function as showcases for academic work (complete or in progress) opening up opportunities for further development. Annual conferences of such bodies such as the SCMS or MECCSA tend to attract huge numbers of researchers and act as networks that bring together academics who work on similar fields. They also tend to have regional branches (exactly like the Independent Feature Project) which organise smaller scale showcases/conferences.
- are part of an international network of organisations that foster the development of a particular discipline, (SCMS, Screen Conference, NECS, etc. in the field of film studies).
- in the same way that the IFP channels its members’ films to international markets, members of such organisation see their work promoted in particular academic environments and institutions (for instance my work on independent filmmaker David Mamet has been promoted through the David Mamet Society and its in house publication/newsletter, *The David Mamet Review*).

Although there is no direct equivalent of the Sundance Film Institute and Festival in the academia, opportunities for academic research training outside the ones offered by the universities themselves certainly exist. For instance, one could actually argue that HERO (Higher Education & Research Opportunities) which acts as “a gateway to the UK's research system and relevant organisations within the sector”<sup>xiii</sup> is somewhat similar to The

Sundance Institute (especially in terms of the way the Institute evolved from a summer camp in Utah into a diversified entertainment enterprise providing further institutional support through the Sundance Channel, a commercial cable broadcaster that aspired to connect “viewers with filmmakers, the creative process, and the world of independent film” as well as through education-orientated programmes such as the Screenplay Reading Series in Los Angeles and New York and the Documentary Film Programme.<sup>xiv</sup> Although HERO has been set up by major institutional players such as HEFCE, UCAS, Universities UK, etc. and therefore cannot claim the same status as an organisation like Sundance, it nonetheless allows for similar type of support.

Finally, there is support from the academic “mainstream,” which in this case one means the universities themselves. Unlike in the film industry where the structure of oligopoly allows a small number of conglomerates to dominate the entertainment market, the higher education market in the UK is large enough to sustain 127 officially recognised universities and a very large number of colleges where research is also often practiced. Of course there are great differences in terms of the levels of intensity or quality of research among the universities, but each such institution has a number of mechanisms in place in order to support researchers. For instance, a University like Liverpool:

- enables and rewards excellence in research and translation into practice.
- provides core facilities and infrastructure, and a research support budget for each department.
- provides expert administrative support which helps to identify opportunities, understand potential markets, develop beneficial relationships, develop, cost, price and negotiate projects, support project operation and identify and transfer intellectual property.<sup>xv</sup>

With such a strong institutional support, any scholar - irrespective of the discipline within which they might be working - seems to be strongly invited to participate in research by formulating research interests and then seeking to

materialise them in the form of research projects, which could be supported and funded, partially or wholly, by one or more of the above funding bodies.

However, although this model (which largely corresponds to the “indie” scholarship model) has been practiced in the majority of British universities, especially in terms of introducing new academics to research, and sounds very appealing as it provides researchers with a strong institutional apparatus within which they could conduct any kind of research they desire, recent developments have questioned the model’s applicability. Such developments include:

- shifts in the culture of research funding (especially, the increasing emphasis on large grants)
- further amplification in terms of emphasis placed on research between old and new universities
- increase of available research funds outside the academia (for instance the Seventh Research Framework Programme administers a vast amount of money while the Science and Research Commissioner Janez Potocnik has strongly highlighted the importance of the relationship between academia and the private sector for the creation and application of new knowledge).<sup>xvi</sup>
- and last but certainly not least the emphasis universities as employers have placed on research income generation as a requirement for career progression to the higher echelons of academia

All these have created great pressures for the “indie” scholar/researcher, who has started looking increasingly towards what we might call in the language of cinema, the production of “blockbuster research,” that is, the production of research projects and outputs designed to generate large amounts of income for the institutions that support them. These pressures materialise in the forms of encouragement towards:

- collaborations (collaborative bids across department, schools, faculties, and universities);



- bids for specific projects that department, school, faculty leaders consider them to be good or beneficial
- emphasis on the more lucrative projects (targeting the pots with the most money)
- availability of university research and development funds for projects that will lead to bids for external funding

Perhaps two contrasting examples and some figures can make the point here.

Under the *Capacities* work programme the Seventh Research Framework Programme has made a call for bids on Oct 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007 for a collaborative project of 5 researchers from 5 different member states of the European Union which would research and make proposals to modernise the management system of research institutions and universities (Identifier: FP7-COH-2007-2.2-OMC-NET). With the budget for this project set to 4.5 million euros which could increase to 7.5 million (approx £5 million) over a period of 3 years, each individual would be contributing to their institution the equivalent of **300,000 euros** per year going up to **500,000 Euros** (£350,000) per year.<sup>xvii</sup>

Compare these funds with standalone research grants from the ESRC (£15,000 to £1.5 million) or the AHRC (£20,000 to £1,000,000) and it seems that “indie” researchers do indeed have a chance in pursuing their individual interest. As a matter of fact AHRC also has a Speculative Research Grant which seems to be driven by research for the sake of research and “where the concepts may be speculative or the outcomes uncertain, but as a project it has the potential to be of especial value to the research community”).<sup>xviii</sup>

However, this picture does not tell the whole truth. First, the Speculative Research Grants are so few (only 4 were awarded in the most recent round in December 2007 making for a total of 14 grants in the year) that do not represent a realistic avenue for the potentially large number of researchers who would like to obtain funding in order to do research for the sake of research.<sup>xix</sup> Second, although both AHRC and ESRC offer a substantial number of such grants only a quarter of the applicants receive such funding. According to AHRC, in the most recent round of Standalone research grants, the result of which were announced in December 2007, “out of more than two hundred and fifty academics in the fields of arts and humanities who applied

for research funding as part of the scheme, 43 researchers were awarded £14 million.<sup>xx</sup> This is the equivalent of 17% of all applicants, a very low figure compared to the number of official submission and especially the potential number of submissions that did not make the final stage, failing the various institutional scrutiny/peer/research committees that have to sign off the submission of such projects. On the other hand, though, this is considerably better than the 122 features screened in 2008 Sundance Film Festival which represent just 3.36% of the 3,624 features that were submitted to the Festival..<sup>xxi</sup>

Furthermore, even though each successful AHRC research was awarded on average £325,581 for a 3 year period, many of these projects are actually set up with the main researcher being the project leader and with postgraduate/postdoctoral researchers conducting the actual field work. The role of the principal researcher/investigator whose name appears on the project then is in this case reminiscent of the role of the “executive producer” in film who lends their name to a project mainly because they arranged the financing of the project and ensured its smooth delivery from pre-production to release. This role, however, can hardly be associated with the “indie” researcher model which normally involves the individual researcher conducting the research and producing the output themselves in the same way in which a filmmaker is involved with the production of their film on a daily basis and often write, produce, direct, star and edit their own films.

Finally the £325,581 on average corresponds to a little over than £100,000 per year in terms of research income generation for the institution which is still a considerably lower amount of income compared to the **\$300,000 euros** (approximately £200,000) that a relatively small project from the Seventh Research Framework Programme generates.

Not surprisingly, then, the “indie” researcher model seems to get under substantial pressure as institutional support seems to be geared increasingly – in arts and humanities at least – towards a small number of significantly-sized projects, which of course enhances the competition for the awards, and which forces university leaders to encourage collaborations, interdisciplinarity and so on, in order to create the larger research teams that could realistically target the large income generating awards.

An interesting variable here is the old/new university dichotomy as the afore-mentioned pressures to “indie” researchers take very different forms. Although new universities value research as much as old universities, the burden of administration and teaching makes research incredibly difficult in a post-1992 university. And yet, for the research active academics, new universities have the potential to offer a thriving environment for “indie” researchers, especially because such institutions do not depend on (and therefore do not actively seek) research income. This has been especially the case with universities which had UoAs that received in 2003 HEFCE Capability Funding.

Capability Funding was an initiative created for UoAs that received 3a and 3b in the 2001 RAE. In order to stimulate research, HEFCE allowed all those UoAs to bid for a specific amount (depending on the number of research active staff in each UoA) and, if successful, to award them research funds for a 3 year period (clearly targeting the 2008 RAE). The interesting facts about Capability Fund was that the Fund was administered by the UoAs themselves and that it was accountable to HEFCE, which means that it could not have been used for other purposes. In this respect, Capability Fund could be used for speculative research, small projects, conference attendance, conference organisation, research assistance, research leave, archive visits, purchase of research materials, etc. This means that an “indie” researcher had an excellent potential to see one or more research projects from beginning to end.

Old universities, on the other hand, do not have the luxury to subsidise this type of activity as they depend on research income generation. For instance, a university like Liverpool pools over £100 million a year in research income (including external projects and core research funding),<sup>xxii</sup> which is the equivalent of approximately 33,000 undergraduate students paying £3000 a year. In this respect, research income generation has to be at the core of the university’s finance plan and research policy and strategy should be at the top of its agenda.

This is exactly where the pressure on academics might start manifesting itself as in order for an old university to allow academics specific institutional “perks” (less teaching and administration compared to new universities), it

would encourage academics to produce blockbuster research, research that would generate the kind of income that could make a significant contribution to the University's research income generation target. And as collaborative, cross-school, cross-faculty and other joint projects attract the large grants and funds, the encouragement to create such collaborations becomes evident.

This encouragement has taken an interesting twist in recent years, in the ways that Universities have now made research income generation a prerequisite for career progression to the higher echelons of academia. The introduction of Professional/Personal Development Reviews in recent years has allowed the advance mapping out of a researcher's outputs and activities, often in accordance with strategic planning as this has been determined by the university's management. Not surprisingly, research income generation features both in the strategic planning of the university and in the activities a researcher is expected to carry out during the academic year.

All these pressures suggest that academic freedom is at stake in the current climate. And the "indie" researcher model, as defined earlier, which has been a "healthy" reality for large numbers of scholars over the years, has increasingly become problematic as more and more researchers are encouraged to think of larger projects and new schemes. One could actually argue that the "indie" researcher model seems to be more nowadays more applicable for scholars new to research rather than established academics.

But is this the end of academic choice and freedom when it comes to research? Are the research interests of established academics doomed to be determined by the confluence of funding schemes, opportunities for collaborative projects, university research policy and strategic planning? Or is there a way for academics to resist such tendencies and respond positively to the pressures of producing blockbuster research?

Once again the example of American independent cinema and see if there are with its great successes in recent years can provide us with some answers.

American independent cinema managed to succeed and make its mark on a global scale mainly because the independent movement of the 1980s and early 1990s managed to integrate successfully into the structures of global media and finance.<sup>xxiii</sup> Even though, strictly speaking, it stopped being

independent industrially, its stylistic, thematic, aesthetic and formal concerns continued to challenge dominant views and regimes in the same way the industrially independent films of the 1980s had done. What's more, unlike the industrially independent films of the 1980s, the integrated indie films of recent years achieved global distribution and exhibition which means that idiosyncratic and demanding films like *Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (financed and distributed by Disney) got known to people across the globe enabling filmmakers like Wes Anderson to continue making highly personal films like last year's *The Darjeeling Limited*.

In a similar manner, perhaps, "indie" researchers need not necessarily compromise their research interests and academic freedom, but they do need to be more readily prepared (and perhaps equipped) to recognise the commercial potential of their research projects whether this involves attracting external funding, recruiting a research student, creating publicity for their department/school/faculty/university, etc. I am not implying here that research interests and projects should be determined by their commercial imperatives but that even the smallest project might have the potential for some income generation in which case the researcher should be able to recognise this and explore it. Even in arts and humanities where a vast amount of research is carried out in terms of analysing texts and therefore with seemingly little commercial potential, one should be able to recognise alternative ways to place personal research within a culture of commerce. Public dissemination (public lectures) and other opportunities to publicize one's work is one way that springs immediately to mind. Other forms of commercialisation are more specific to the discipline/subject but the truth is that, historically, academics have not been very interested in the commercial potential of their research (with the exception perhaps of the annual royalty statement for those who have published books).

A researcher's ability to recognise and exploit the commercial potential of a project not only for themselves but, significantly, for the institution that pays their salary could alleviate worries in the management's mind that academics do not understand the current higher educational climate while, on the other hand, could create an environment where small, individual research projects can survive and which could perhaps lead to larger projects and income

generation. This time however, those projects would grow as part of an organic, sound process and not as part of a pressure to shift research focus in order to target a particular pot of money. In the way “indie” cinema has managed to integrate itself to the structures of global finance and distribution, “indie” scholars need to be willing to embrace opportunities for commercial exploitation of their research. In today’s economic climate, this is their only serious chance to have their cake and eat it too, that is, to maintain their academic freedom and to deflect potential institutional pressures.

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## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Prof Roger Sugden for originally suggesting the link between American Independent Cinema and academic and for encouraging me to explore it in this essay.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.ifp.org/nav/about.php>

<sup>ii</sup> Schamus, 2002, p 253

<sup>iii</sup> Biskind, 2005, p 17

<sup>iv</sup> Peary, 1981, p 47.

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.sundance.org/festival/insider/2008-01-21-FOF-selection.asp>

<sup>vi</sup> Hillier, 1994, p 21.

<sup>vii</sup> Tzioumakis, 2004, pp 87-135.

<sup>viii</sup> Biskind, 2005, p 164

<sup>ix</sup> Wyatt, 1998, 78-90.

<sup>x</sup> Although Orion went bankrupt in 1992, its Classics division under a different management released a few more films in the next five years (including *Trees Lounge* (Buscemi, 1996) until the company was sold to MGM

<sup>xi</sup> <http://www.newmarketfilms.com/about.cfm>

<sup>xii</sup> Tzioumakis, 2006, p 247.

<sup>xiii</sup> [http://www.hero.ac.uk/uk/research/hero\\_\\_\\_for\\_researchers.cfm](http://www.hero.ac.uk/uk/research/hero___for_researchers.cfm)

<sup>xiv</sup> Tzioumakis, 2006, pp 254-5

<sup>xv</sup> [http://www.liv.ac.uk/research/environment/research\\_support.htm](http://www.liv.ac.uk/research/environment/research_support.htm)

<sup>xvi</sup> [http://cordis.europa.eu/fetch?CALLER=FP7\\_NEWS&ACTION=D&RCN=28984](http://cordis.europa.eu/fetch?CALLER=FP7_NEWS&ACTION=D&RCN=28984)

<sup>xvii</sup> [http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/dc/index.cfm?fuseaction=UserSite.CapacitiesDetailsCallPage&call\\_id=76#prereg](http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/dc/index.cfm?fuseaction=UserSite.CapacitiesDetailsCallPage&call_id=76#prereg)

<sup>xviii</sup> [http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/apply/research/research\\_grants/the\\_route\\_for\\_speculative\\_research.asp](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/apply/research/research_grants/the_route_for_speculative_research.asp)

<sup>xix</sup> [http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/awards/search\\_results.asp?grant=RGSP&year=2007](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/awards/search_results.asp?grant=RGSP&year=2007)

<sup>xx</sup> [http://www.ahrb.ac.uk/news/news\\_pr/2008/research\\_grant\\_awards.asp](http://www.ahrb.ac.uk/news/news_pr/2008/research_grant_awards.asp)

<sup>xxi</sup> <http://www.sundance.org/festival/insider/2008-01-21-FOF-selection.asp>

<sup>xxii</sup> <http://www.liv.ac.uk/research/>

<sup>xxiii</sup> Schamus, 2002, p 259



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