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INDEPENDENT FILM IN THE UNITED STATES,  
1980-1999

E. Deidre Pribram

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of  
Sheffield Hallam University  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## INDEPENDENT FILM IN THE UNITED STATES, 1980-1999

This dissertation pursues a study of independent film, from 1980 to 1999, as an emergent system of representation. Independent American and non-American films distributed in the United States have evolved into a distinct cultural site, formulated as points of intersection between principles of mainstream popular film and the traditions of the avant-garde.

Contemporary independent film's identity as a commodity stresses its differences from Hollywood's output; the independent industry is not ruled by the same economic, political, aesthetic and historical imperatives as Hollywood cinema. Arguably, this creates an autonomous filmic enterprise able to represent alternative political views and aesthetic perspectives. But simultaneously, the independent industry is driven by familiar marketplace demands and competition for consumers. My study focuses on films released theatrically in the U.S. by non-studio distributors, such as Miramax, Fine Line, Goldwyn, October, and so on. The films considered will have received some measure of widespread play, permitting an analysis of how these specific texts, their distribution, and their reception conform to and diverge from the institutional and discursive practices of a dominant Hollywood industry.

The dissertation analyses both the material, concrete aspects and the discursive dimensions of independent film. For instance, under the purview of the independent industry a division exists between 'art films' and 'political films'. A frequent attribute of work in the art category is formal experimentation. Political films tend to be those made by representatives of subcultural groups and marketed as such to their 'specialised audiences'. They may or may not exhibit formal experimentation. On the one hand, in a kind of tyranny of the formal, art films continue to be defined by their aesthetic variations without a corollary questioning of whether they are indeed 'alternative' at the level of narrative signification. On the other hand, political films are promoted as an acknowledgment to underrepresented communities -- what the industry *should* be providing -- and as a marketing strategy for product-starved audiences to whom these films often sell well. In other words, political films may be chosen for their subject matter or for the audiences they specifically address, but they remain specialised, without the 'universal' appeal of films accorded the label of art. This investigation traces the extent to which and how independent films represent the stories, perspectives, and experiences of a pluralistic, multicultural society.

This research project develops a discursively-based methodology in which films are analysed as the functions of multiple, simultaneous, layered, and interacting discourses: representational, institutional, interpretive, and cultural/historical. The study offers a contribution to the field in its exploration of contemporary independent film as a distinct cultural formation, in its expansion of theoretical work on narrativity and the representation of subcultural groups, in its development of discursive analytical procedures, and in its integrated approach towards cultural theory, cultural politics, and cultural production.

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to examine contemporary independent film as a distinct system of cinematic representation, although a complex and heterogeneous one. Independent American and non-American films distributed in the United States from 1980 to the present have evolved into a discrete cultural site formulated in the interactions between principles of mainstream popular film and legacies of the avant-garde. Bearing traits characteristic of both Hollywood and alternative cinema, independent film, as it has manifested in the 1980s and 1990s, is a shifting, malleable discursive field positioned somewhere between dominant and avant-garde practices.

Social recognition of independent film as an operative category is both familiar and widespread. The success since 1980 of such films as *Blood Simple* (Coen Brothers, 1983), *Stranger Than Paradise* (Jim Jarmusch, 1985), *She's Gotta Have It* (Spike Lee, 1986), *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1986), *The Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris, 1988), *Drugstore Cowboy* (Gus Van Sant, 1989), *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (Matty Rich, 1991), *Paris Is Burning* (Jennie Livingstone, 1991), *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992), *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1992), *Like Water For Chocolate* (Alfonso Arau, 1993), *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993), *Orlando* (Sally Potter, 1993), *Clerks* (Kevin Smith, 1994), *Hoop Dreams* (Steve James, 1994), *Il Postino* (Michael Radford, 1995), *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996), *Secrets & Lies* (Mike Leigh, 1996), *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997) and *Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998), has made independent film an often cited (in reviews), easily recognised (on the part of audiences), and heavily marketed (by the industry) classification of film. But as Christine Gledhill says of

genre studies, 'While the existence of genres is in some ways a self-evident fact, the business of definition and demarcation is less clear-cut.'<sup>1</sup>

This is not to link independent film to a genre but rather to say something about the business of definition and demarcation. Indeed, independent film, like its cinematic counterparts commonly identified as Hollywood and the avant-garde, encompass multiple genres. Once one establishes that the object of study -- in this case, independent film -- exists as a cultural site, the more significant task is to determine what it is and what are its cultural implications. However, the difficulty of classifications such as 'Hollywood', 'avant-garde' or 'independent' cinemas is that what they point to is as vast, diversified, and contingent as it is 'self-evident'. The theoretical framework utilised in this study in order to disentangle some of the social structures and cultural functions of independent film is discourse analysis. That is to say, independent film is treated here as a discursive formation.

A discursive formation is a set of cultural practices and institutions that cohere into an identifiable body or domain of knowledge, which has been historically constituted within specific discursive and power relations. Undertaking cultural criticism based on discourse analysis in the Foucaultian sense necessitates a consideration of both textual aspects and, equally, contextual conditions. This, in turn, involves two phases. In the first instance, an analysis of how texts and contexts (including 'content' issues, particular historical and geographical moment of a text's appearance, and so on) operate as separate arenas or functions in the processes of cultural production and cultural meaning construction. And in the second instance, an exploration of the complex, multiple ways texts and contexts interact. This is to follow a cultural product, a text, from the social world within which it originates through to the social world(s) to which it ultimately returns, while examining how all these discursive layers, textual and social, affect the accompanying production of meanings.

Discourses operative in a discursive formation such as independent film include the following:

i. Representational discourses, involving both the formal and narrative languages enacted; the historical aesthetic traditions within which cultural producers work; the role of cultural producers as artists or authors; and the actual production of an artefact or text.

ii. The material and institutional discourses, including economic, involved in the production and dissemination of cultural artefacts.

iii. Interpretive, audience or reception discourses, that is, how specific social beings, identities, and communities forge meanings and utilise texts.

iv. Historical and cultural discourses, including ideological and political claims.

This refers to the cultural context in which a text is embedded and the historical moment at which readings occur. Involved here are categories of identity such as gender, race, and so on, and the complex ideological frameworks which surround and create them, as well as normative cultural constructs such as concepts of justice and jurisprudence, or discourses of heterosexual romance.

In any discursive formation, sites of meaning production are multiple, complex, and *interactional*. All of the above are sites or systems of meaning production which interact together as a larger system of meaning construction, in this instance, the discursive formation of independent film. The specific meanings constructed at any site or at any moment are sometimes complementary to each other, sometimes conflicting, but ultimately coherent because they are held together by the discursive rules and behaviours which, in turn, create the discursive object, independent film.

Each system -- representational, institutional, interpretive, and cultural/historical -- embodies multiple layers of signification occurring at multiple sites. The aim here is to disentangle some of these, to trace their trajectories and impacts. And equally, the goal is to identify points of intersection between these

various systems and analyse the signifiatory effects of their interaction. It is necessary to pursue both courses because within each discursive frame or system some meanings are produced or operate separately, while other meanings are tied together and gain coherency only in the movement between differing processes of signification -- representational and cultural; institutional and interpretive; institutional, representational, cultural; and so on.

In describing a body of work as 'independent', the subtextual assumption is that it is independent *of* something other than itself. The implicit referent in this case is the ubiquitous presence of the Hollywood industry. At any given historical moment, independent film shapes itself in relation to contemporary attributes of mainstream production, staying at least one step in contradistinction to dominant cinematic practices. Such differentiation can take one, or a combination, of forms: narrative formation -- the kinds of stories told and the ways they are recounted; formal and structural characteristics -- the aesthetic means used to relate stories; and cultural referents -- which individuals and groups are represented and how their social and political lives are depicted.

There are no fixed criteria for what constitutes an independent film, its outlines shifting as dominant standards evolve, as long as it remains in some accountable (usually marketable) measure alternative to Hollywood practice. Once a specific innovation has been absorbed by mainstream film, independent practice responds by reinventing itself otherwise.

However, *the ways* in which independent film differentiates itself in order to stake out its distinctive cinematic domain is significant. Contemporary independent film of the last two decades has repeatedly formulated itself as the heir to avant-garde traditions and experimental practices. 'New', 'cutting-edge', 'radical', and 'alternative' are all self-styled properties of independent cinema. Claiming its position at the perimeter rather than the centre of cultural production, independent films are exhibited largely through arthouse theatres in urban settings

instead of via the studio-dominated cineplexes dotting the overall demographic landscape. In general, the independent industry aims for reasonably-sized, specifically targeted audiences rather than the mass appeal mandated by Hollywood's blockbuster budgets. Independent film's identity as a commodity stresses its differences from Hollywood's output; the independent industry is not supposed to be ruled by the same economic, political, aesthetic, and historical imperatives as Hollywood cinema. This creates an arguably autonomous filmic enterprise able to represent alternative political views and aesthetic perspectives.

Still, the independent industry remains driven by marketplace demands and competition for consumers similar to Hollywood's, particularly as it grows in popularity, profile, and market share. While often encompassing elements of an alternative cinematic language, independent cinema must also concern itself with a greater degree of narrative and formal accessibility than much experimental work, in order to achieve a sufficiently wide viewership, and therefore, economic viability.

Independent film's avant-garde heritage is evident in the two overarching realms the contemporary movement has carved out for itself: the aesthetic and the political. If a film is aesthetically original, if it can be deemed 'cutting-edge', or if formally it is sufficiently distinctive, it falls within the purview of independent practice. Also within the parameters of its aesthetic mandate is the tradition of the 'art' film. While no longer necessarily an experimental departure in either form or content, such films are usually identified by the greater intellectual demand they make of viewers or by their dramatic seriousness. The legacy of the art film, traditionally dominated by European filmmakers such as Ingmar Bergman, Francois Truffaut and Bernardo Bertolucci, continues in such current examples as *Babette's Feast* (Gabriel Axel, 1987), *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1988), *Cinema Paradiso* (Guiseppe Tornatore,



1990), *Howard's End* (James Ivory, 1992), *Shine* (Scott Hicks, 1996), and *Life Is Beautiful* (Roberto Benigni, 1998).

Formed in the wake of the activism of the 1960s and 1970s, independent film's political mandate is largely liberal to left wing. One of the industry's focuses has been identity politics, for instance in films such as *Desert Hearts* (Donna Deitch, 1986), *Working Girls* (Lizzie Borden, 1987), *Poison* (Todd Haynes, 1991), *Daughters of the Dust* (Julie Dash, 1992), *The Living End* (Gregg Araki, 1992), *Mi Vida Loca* (Allison Anders, 1994), and *Eat Drink Man Woman* (Ang Lee, 1994). Traditionally under-represented groups are frequently both the subject matter and target audiences of independent film.

An individual work may conform to either the aesthetic or political purview, or to both simultaneously. A film such as *Slacker* (Richard Linklater, 1991), for instance, can be viewed as structurally innovative in its method of following a single character for a period of time and then, with seeming narrative arbitrariness, switching to another. Simultaneously, the film was viewed as having a cultural impact because it helped define a generation, or from an industry perspective a demographic group, now named after the film.

While a film's popularity, and therefore its profitability, are overriding considerations, an independent film cannot be sold solely on the basis that it will be exciting, funny or action-packed. An individual work must fall within the aesthetic or political mandate, at least to the extent that it can be promoted that way, regardless of whether there is general agreement or not on its 'fit' within those parameters. Films perceived as purely entertainment are left to Hollywood's purview.<sup>2</sup> An alternative form of pleasure, whether formal, demographic or in terms of subject matter (such as breaking sex and violence taboos) must be established, or at least argued, for an independent entry.

In addition, all genres are not equally represented in independent practice. Melodrama and romantic comedy, to name two, are infrequent unless also utilised

in the depiction of a subcultural group, as in the cases of *The Wedding Banquet* (Ang Lee, 1993) and *Go Fish* (Rose Troche, 1994). On the other hand, certain genres such as the gangster film, especially with American-made movies, are over-represented, for instance with *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (John McNaughton, 1990), *Reservoir Dogs*, *Bad Lieutenant* (Abel Ferrara, 1992), *One False Move* (Carl Franklin, 1992), *Killing Zoe* (Roger Avary, 1994), and *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994).

The term 'independent' has been used throughout movie history in varying ways. United Artists when it was founded in 1919 was considered independent, set apart from the dominant studios by providing 'a mechanism for the distribution and release of independently-produced features' made by its founders -- Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, D.W. Griffith -- and others, who sought more control over their own films and profits.<sup>3</sup> In the aftermath of the 1948 consent decrees, when exhibition divestiture was mandated, the studios, no longer enjoying the income from their theatres nor having automatically guaranteed exhibition outlets for their films, moved towards what was recognised as independent production. 'The studios gradually fired their contract personnel and phased out active production, and began leasing their facilities for independent projects, generally providing co-financing and distribution as well.'<sup>4</sup> A contemporary company like Castle Rock, for instance (until its 1993 buyout by Turner, then Time Warner), is an independent producer under this definition, with such films as *When Harry Met Sally* (Rob Reiner, 1989), *City Slickers* (Ron Underwood, 1991), *A Few Good Men* (Rob Reiner, 1992), and *In The Line Of Fire* (Wolfgang Peterson, 1993). Following the demise of the B studios in the late 1940s and 1950s, 'independent' also came to signify low-budget genre or exploitation pictures. Previously, the production of low-budget genre pictures had been relegated to the B studios. But as actor Tom Hanks notes, at the time he began in the business the concept of 'independent' was synonymous with

exploitation fare, such as slasher movies.<sup>5</sup> It is with the 1980s and 1990s that independent film has taken on its current sense of respected specialty fare, often self or privately financed and released by a handful of specialty distributors.

Given the many, changing meanings of the term 'independent', it is quite likely that an alternate designation would have helped identify the attributes of the 1980s and 1990s movement in distinction from other senses of the term. Instead, upon occasion, the use of 'independent film' tends to blur its differences from precursor movements. Indeed, efforts have been made to name the contemporary movement in other ways as evident, for instance, in the 1987 study commissioned by The Sundance Institute and The Independent Feature Project, *Off-Hollywood: The Making and Marketing of American Specialty Films*, or in the title of Richard Ferncase's 1996 book, *Outsider Features: American Independent Films of the 1980s*.<sup>6</sup> Despite such efforts, the appellation *independent film* appears to have stuck in popular, professional, and critical usage.

Generally, a film released in the United States is considered independent if it has received no studio financing, is distributed by a non-major, and has no prominent stars. How then does one classify a film such as Robert Altman's *The Player* (1992), a satire of the movie industry? It was distributed by independent Fine Line Features, yet had well-known actors in fictional roles (Tim Robbins, Whoopi Goldberg) as well as stars making cameo appearances (Bruce Willis, Julia Roberts, Cher). In addition, Altman is a director with a track record -- although he had been out of the Hollywood loop for the previous decade; indeed, *The Player* was perceived as his 'comeback' film.

Or to take the case of *Il Postino* which was financed in Europe, produced in Italy, then distributed in the U.S. by Miramax Films. As a foreign film, distributed by a non-major, its independent standing is clear. But does the fact that Miramax spent \$7 million in promotional and print costs in the months preceding the Academy Awards, on a film with an original budget of \$4 million, in order to garner

its 5 Academy Award nominations, including Hollywood's prestigious Best Picture, call into question its independent status?<sup>7</sup>

Even more ambiguous is a low-budget documentary such as *Roger & Me* (Michael Moore, 1989), a specific indictment of General Motors and a general indictment of corporate capitalism's treatment of workers. Made by a former journalist who struggled to accumulate the production costs (including, according to the promotional materials, mortgaging his own home) by the time the completed film played the festival circuit it had created such a 'buzz' that it was sold to and distributed by a major, Warner Brothers.<sup>8</sup>

Measured in terms of institutional criteria, one of the ways independent film can be defined is by an existing mechanism of distribution -- the kinds of films picked up by independent or specialty distributors determines an independent typology. However, this still begs many questions. Which films are independent distributors picking up and on the basis of what selection criteria? Who are their audiences? that is, who are they selling their products to, and how does that impact, in turn, upon their selection patterns? How are they selling or promoting these films?

Further, while the constitutive elements of a project's financing and distribution are an attempt to identify independent film by material and institutional criteria, this omits considerations of narrative formulation, processes of signification, and so on. This study examines independent film in both its material and discursive dimensions, as an industry *and* as a cultural site of meaning production.

In order to do so, and because the object under investigation -- independent film as a system of representation -- is large and complex, this study will focus on the *consumption* side of independent cinema, that is, on its distribution and reception. First, material and institutional dimensions will be accessed via an analysis of the corporate structures, operating mechanisms and

current status of independent distribution. Unfortunately, choosing such an approach necessitates the slighting of other significant industry infrastructures that contribute to the production and dissemination of independent cinema. Included in these infrastructures are financing entities, an array of producers and producing mechanisms, production personnel (directors, actors, crew), exhibitors, festivals, and so on.<sup>9</sup> Because the focus of this study is on consumption, each film in the following chapters is cited by title, director, year, and distributor.

Second, the discursive dimensions of independent film can be approached through considerations of the reception aspects of filmic consumption. Which films receive viewership (distribution, positive or negative audience response), and why? What are the specificities of textual forms available to independent film within its current accepted parameters? What are the various interpretations given such films by cultural commentators, for instance, movie reviewers and, where data exists, audience members? Discursive dimensions of independent film, via its consumption/reception, will be undertaken through close textual analysis of a number of specific films coupled with careful analysis of the multiple readings such films have prompted.

Although the largest independent distributors may also produce some of their films, standard industry practice is to select and purchase the material they distribute, their 'product', from a constantly renewed, existing field of already-made films. In this sense, mechanisms of distribution/exhibition form a first tier of consumption for independent films. In this study, independent distribution is analysed as a mode of consumption, as well as a part of the dissemination process for independent production. Movie reviewers and other cultural commentators whose influence, as will be seen, can be fairly considerable, are analysed as composing a second tier in the processes of consumption. Audience members, viewers who transmit their interpretations via word-of-mouth, formulate the third, and most traditional tier of consumption. One of the principal concerns

pursued in this study are the ways that, in the process of consumption, each of these layers also construct the object they consume.

In order to more clearly analyse the impact of consumption/reception, this investigation will limit itself to feature-length films which have received some measure of general play through theatrical release and which continue to have a videocassette shelf life. Further, although non-fiction films such as *The Thin Blue Line*, *Roger & Me*, *Paris Is Burning*, *American Dream* (Barbara Kopple, 1992), *Brother's Keeper* (Joe Berlinger, 1992), *The War Room* (Chris Hegedus and D.A. Pennebaker, 1993), *Hoop Dreams*, and *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* (Errol Morris, 1997), form a significant part of independent cinema's profile, the films analysed here will be limited to fiction which, despite a number of documentary successes, continues to dominate the independent spectrum.

It should also be noted that although this study examines a national market -- the United States -- independent film is not a national cinema. It incorporates both indigenous and foreign work within its domain. In the United States, for example, international cinema is a strong element in the constitution of independent fare. Although not a national cinema, the nature and specifics of the practice will vary within different national contexts, for instance, because structures of distribution vary from country to country, and because independent film is defined relationally against a particular market's dominant cinema(s). The attempt to chart contemporary independent film in varying national contexts would be, in itself, a complex project.

Chapter One, 'Co-Dependence: The Independent Industry', concentrates on material and institutional aspects of independent practice. The characteristics which act towards defining a work as independent are itemised and described. Factors contributing to the rise of contemporary independent film are explored, including Hollywood and cult film precursors. The chapter also provides a profile

of independent distributors, their history, and current economic and cultural parameters.

Chapter Two, 'Film As Artefact: The Alternative Influences Of Independent Cinema', offers an overview of the theoretical reasoning or aesthetic justification behind a number of experimental filmic practices. Six categories of alternative artistic practice are outlined, with the respective terrain and concerns of each delineated. The six are: the aesthetic avant-garde; the political avant-garde; art cinema; personal cinema; identity cinema; and postmodernism. Numerous examples of contemporary independent films are cited in each of the six categories, indicating each film's most significant alternative influence.

Chapter Three, "'Fixing" Difference: Identity Politics and Independent Distribution', provides an analysis of identity politics, one of the foundations upon which independent film as a discursive field is based. More specifically, the chapter explores how the attributes and limitations of independent distribution interact with the discourses of identity politics. The chapter examines the distribution history of three films: *To Sleep With Anger* (Charles Burnett, 1990), whose distributor, The Samuel Goldwyn Company, received much criticism for its handling of the film; *Daughters of the Dust*, a film of alternative aesthetic, political and narrative sensibility that nearly failed to receive theatrical distribution; and *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* (Leslie Harris, 1993) which was championed by the independent industry in *Daughters of the Dust's* stead.

Chapter Four, 'Telling Tales: Narrativity and Independent Film', takes on the complex subject of narrative theory. While independent film has claimed certain aesthetic approaches and subject matter (cultural referents) to be within its purview, it has been markedly less clear on its relationship to issues and aspects of narrativity. This is due in part to the current state of film narratology which is much more willing to grapple with narrativity as a formal and structural system than it is equipped to take on the challenge of the ideological aspects of narrative

as representation. Chapter Four examines Mike Leigh's *Naked* (1993) as an independent film influenced by the political avant-garde in its aesthetic presentation and subject matter, but limited in the extent to which it departs from traditional models in its process of narrative signification around heterosexual relationships and the male as redemptive hero. To highlight this resemblance, *Naked* is compared to Hollywood's *Shoot the Moon* (Alan Parker, 1982) as well as to *Trainspotting*.

Chapter Five, 'Psychic Cleavage: Reading The Art Versus The Politics In Independent Film', evaluates hermeneutics as a political imperative. The chapter takes three films connected by gendered political issues -- spousal abuse, rape, and/or social and legal sexual discrimination -- but differentiated in the aesthetic and narrative approaches brought to bear on their respective subject matter. *The Piano* bridges mainstream attributes with feminist avant-garde practices; *Orlando* is more 'purely' avant-garde; and *The Accused* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1988) is a product of Hollywood (normative realist) narrative. Issues addressed include: what effects do these varying modes of representation have on meaning production? what are the implications of multiple, often conflicting, available readings within a single text? how does a fragmented, multicultural society begin to negotiate fragmented, multiply-inflected story interpretations?

Chapter Six, 'Independent Auteurism: From Modern Existentialism To Postmodernism As Nostalgia', assesses whether the much-discussed films of Quentin Tarantino represent a stylistically revamped version of modernist auteurism or, rather, a shift to a postmodern practice. The assessment is conducted through an exploration of the reception of the films *Pulp Fiction*, *Reservoir Dogs*, and *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994) in two national contexts, the U.S. and Great Britain. The analysis considers responses to the films' depictions of violence and morality (or lack of) in comparison to the work of modernist auteurs, exemplified by Martin Scorsese and Paul Schrader. The



conclusion is that Tarantino's directorial efforts are postmodern but within a distressingly limited conceptual framework of what postmodernism could be, indeed, based largely on nostalgia for modernist cinematic masters.

This study is not intended to be an exhaustive account, but rather, an attempt to begin to think about the qualities and cultural impact of that multi-faceted, increasingly conspicuous practice identified as independent film. Similarly, the discursive and institutional elements which together construct a system of cinematic representation are manifold; the subjects discussed here -- mechanisms of distribution, artistic practices, identity politics, narrativity, hermeneutics, postmodernism -- are representative but certainly not exhaustive. They present, however, some of the more significant components that work to construct this particular discursive field.

Each of the following chapters analyses aspects of one or more of the principal discursive systems -- representational, institutional, interpretive, and cultural/historical -- which together, in varying ways and to varying degrees, formulate the larger discursive formation of independent film. The look at specific texts, in Chapters Three through Six, is an attempt to examine each of these discourses in operation, as well as an effort to locate and explain how two or more of these discourses might interact together, whether in complementary or conflicting ways, in the process of textual signification.

The reasons I have chosen to undertake this inquiry into independent film are varied. First, when I think of the films of recent years available in a popular format, in a cinema or at the video store, and which have grabbed my attention, I rarely recall Hollywood-originated work. Consistently, it has been independent film that has intrigued me, and pointed the way to imagining new possibilities in the processes of aesthetic and narrative signification. Second, independent film seems a potential way out of the deadlock associated with the political avant-garde which, although dedicated to activism and change, has not found a way to

appeal to larger audiences. This is connected to a refusal to believe, as did the feminist avant-garde of the 1970s and 1980s that 'popular' of necessity equals 'oppressive'. Third, interest in identity politics, and especially the representation of women, urges investigation of an institutional practice which has claimed that politics as its own, while only inadequately representing it. One of the most pressing issues facing our multicultural, postmodern world is to theorise and put into practice means by which multiple, complex identities, all with distinct voices, experiences, and interests, might come to co-exist across the spectrum of an entire social formation and at the many points of intersection within its domain. The importance of independent cinema lies in the fact that it is a cultural site in which some competing voices, issues, and identities are being played out. Although often unsuccessful in achievement(s), independent film does operate as an arena, discursive and institutional, wherein various conditions and identities of multiculturalism are tested and contested. As a consequence, this study devotes considerable attention to the identity politics aspects of independent film.

Fourth, I am motivated by an awareness that independent film is a category of cinematic practice already 'out there', a discursive formation frequently experienced by film viewers and filmmakers but not, to date, sufficiently theorised. I spent much of the 1990s identifying myself as an independent filmmaker and encountering people in every facet of the filmmaking enterprise, from financing to production through exhibition and distribution, who also identified themselves as working within the independent industry or within an independent paradigm, who recognised numerous others doing so as well, and who believed they made/sold products which were independent in quality. Over the same time period, I taught film students in a university setting, a significant number of whom wanted to be independent filmmakers. When they described their ambitions as such, their conception of independent seemed to refer to a mode of filmmaking, as well as to a certain lifestyle. On the one hand, it signified not wanting to be simply a hired

director, director of photography, gaffer, and so on, on a Hollywood project controlled by numerous other, more influential functionaries. But neither did they want to exist from grant to grant, scraping money together for the next project to be shown in highly specialised, low-audience-turnout venues, for the sake of the purity of their work, as was so often the case with the avant-garde. They seemed quite willing to sacrifice some of that purity, if they retained a measure of control or a degree of personal stamp upon their product, as long as the exchange also included a dimension of commercial success and public identity, that is, calculable audience response. In other words, they were willing to trade off the extreme benefits of both ways of working -- purity, absolute control versus potentially extraordinary fortune and celebrity -- in order to have *some* of both worlds.

My overarching concerns in analysing independent cinema are, therefore, twofold, pertaining to both practice and theory but engaged in an effort to link them. On the one hand, the goal for filmmakers is to take what has been formulated in theoretical spaces and come to some understanding of how those structures of representation are operationalised. The achievement for filmmakers who contest dominant practices (whether radically or marginally) is to imagine or produce *otherwise*. This analysis focusses on how alternative independent discursive possibilities might be operationalised textually while paying attention to institutional, industrial, and other discursive factors which mitigate in favor of or against their enactment. At the same time, one of the purposes of theory is to analyse the configuration(s) of cultural practices in terms of the parts they play in a larger arena of cultural politics. The larger arena in the instance of this study is a rapidly intensifying, multiply-identified society. Independent film as an enterprise that attempts to be representative of certain of these social changes urges an exploration of the ways and the degree to which various identities are tested and contested within this particular cultural practice. And further, it raises issues of how this practice's examples, beneficial or detrimental, might be applied to more

general concerns of identity politics. Within these dual terms of practice and politics, then, the following work is an attempt to conceptualise some of the parameters, limitations, and possibilities of that discursive entity, independent film.

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<sup>1</sup> Christine Gledhill, 'Genre', in *The Cinema Book*, Pam Cook (ed.), London: BFI, 1987, p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> This is not to suggest that much Hollywood originated fare is 'pure entertainment'. Quite the contrary, 'entertainment' is constructed by the same social, political, and ideological considerations and constraints as any other cultural text. It is only to point out that many Hollywood films are presented or marketed as entertainment in contrast to the intentional, self-conscious pursuit of 'art' or 'political content' on the part of many independent producers and consumers.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986, pp. 173-174.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Schatz, 'The New Hollywood', in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, Jim Collins, Hillary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (eds), New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> 'The Two Hollywoods', *New York Times Magazine*, 16 November 1997, Section 6, p. 124.

<sup>6</sup> David Rosen with Peter Hamilton, *Off-Hollywood: The Making and Marketing of American Specialty Films*, A Study of American Independent Feature Films Commissioned by The Sundance Institute and The Independent Feature Project, 1987. Richard Ferncase, *Outsider Features: American Independent Film of the 1980s*, Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> 'To boost *The Postman's* Oscar prospects and broaden its audience, Miramax says, it has spent \$2.5 million since January. In fact, *Newsweek* has learned, Miramax spent \$6 million -- and an additional \$1 million targeting Academy voters, buying more ads in *Variety* than any other studio,' *Newsweek*, 25 March 1996, p. 72. In addition to Best Picture, *Il Postino* was nominated for Best Director, Best Actor (Massimo Troisi), Screenplay and Original Dramatic Score. It won for Original Dramatic Score.

<sup>8</sup> Although attempting to be as inclusive as possible in the definition of independent film, any Hollywood financed or distributed film has been excluded from this study, with the exceptions of striking instances such as *Roger & Me*, *El Mariachi* (Robert Rodriguez, 1993, Columbia), and *Boyz N the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991, Columbia). Studio interest in such films reflects Hollywood's desire to capitalise on the independent successes of recent years.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, a notable example of a significant independent producer is Christine Vachon who has served as producer or executive producer for such films as *Poison* (Todd Haynes, 1991), *Swoon* (Tom Kalin, 1992), *Go Fish* (Rose Troche, 1994), *Safe* (Todd Haynes, 1995), *Kids* (Larry Clark, 1995), *Stonewall* (Nigel Finch, 1996), *I Shot Andy Warhol* (Mary Harron, 1996), *Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998), and *Velvet Goldmine* (Todd Haynes, 1998).

## CHAPTER ONE

### CO-DEPENDENCE: THE INDEPENDENT INDUSTRY

Following the 1997 Academy Awards in which the only studio film nominated for Best Picture was *Jerry Maguire* (Cameron Crowe, Columbia TriStar), the balance consisting of *The English Patient* (Anthony Minghella, Miramax), *Shine* (Scott Hicks, Fine Line), *Secrets & Lies* (Mike Leigh, October), and *Fargo* (Coen Brothers, Gramercy), *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* devoted an entire issue to 'The Two Hollywoods': studio and independent. 'One is a global blockbuster business, the other a scrappy independent cinema.'<sup>1</sup> In calling the special issue 'The Two Hollywoods' the *New York Times* signals mainstream recognition of independent film as a consequential commodity, industry, and body of signifying practices.

No longer located in the peripheral cultural space of 'alternative', independent film is identified as moving solidly towards the centre -- indeed, how much more central could it get than in being designated a 'Hollywood'? Yet while the edges of its work might increasingly be blurring with studio product, independent cinema's cultural currency is based on its ability to remain recognisably or arguably distinct: 'Audiences now choose among the products of two entirely distinct movie businesses, each with its own sensibility, economic model, cast of characters and lifestyle.'<sup>2</sup> While studio Hollywood might suddenly be competing with independent film (as the *New York Times Magazine* would have it with its cover photo of actors Tom Hanks and Ben Affleck, standing head to head, growling at each other), or at least beginning to take notice of this 'other'

industry, the issue's coverage makes clear that the independent arena, as a discursive field, must maintain some degree of difference from Hollywood in order to avoid being encompassed, and so dissolved, by the more dominant industry. As it gains cultural prominence and success, independent cinema can continue to exist only as long as it sustains its distinction as the second, the other of, Hollywood.

Further, the *New York Times* issue confirms 'independent film' as a significant and already-existing cultural formation. That is, the term is commonly used to identify and categorise certain films. Existing conceptualisations of what exactly is meant by independent film might be vague but people apparently recognise them when they see them. Indeed 1996, culminating in the 1997 Academy Awards with its 20 nominations for Miramax, more than any studio (including 12 for *The English Patient* and 2 for *Sling Blade*, Billy Bob Thornton), 7 for Fine Line (*Shine*) and 6 for October (*Secrets & Lies* and *Breaking the Waves*, Lars von Trier), was widely touted as the year of the independents.<sup>3</sup> But the emergence of a competing industry (however economically non-threatening) is evident over the course of a number of Oscar seasons in the 1990s.

In 1993 *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, Miramax) was nominated alongside *Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood, Warner Brothers). In 1994 *The Piano* (Jane Campion, Miramax) competed against *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, Universal). Although a *Schindler's List* sweep, *The Piano* won for original screenplay, lead and supporting actresses. 1995 saw what Tom Hanks refers to as 'the *Pulp Fiction-Forrest Gump* superbowl of 1995.' He goes on to add, 'Which we won by the way!'<sup>4</sup> *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, Miramax) received only the award for original screenplay, as did *The Piano* and *The Crying Game* in their years, making it something of a 'consolation prize'. 1996 had *Il Postino* (Michael Radner, Miramax) up against *Braveheart* (Mel Gibson, Paramount) and *Babe* (Chris Noonan, Universal), and 1997 marked the independent sweep led by *The*

*English Patient*. In 1998 Hollywood seemed to recover with its own sweep led by *Titanic* (James Cameron, Paramount). And 1999 saw *Shakespeare In Love* (John Madden, Miramax) and *Life Is Beautiful* (Roberto Benigni, Miramax) up against *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, Dreamworks). Although *Saving Private Ryan* won 5 awards, including best director, *Life Is Beautiful* won 3 and *Shakespeare In Love* won 7, including best screenplay and the prestigious best picture award.

At the same time there has been considerable debate over whether some of the independent films that have made it to the Academy Awards could even be considered 'independent'. Cited in the journal *Filmmaker*, San Francisco filmmaker Jay Rosenblatt finds it 'ludicrous' that a film like *The English Patient* could be labelled independent given its multi-million dollar budget (which ensures, amongst other things, prominent actors) and its Hollywood-like storytelling mode, both narratively and aesthetically.<sup>5</sup> Janet Maslin goes further, calling the 1997 Academy Awards 'Parallel Universe Night' given that 'in their gravity, scale and unlikely beauty' *The English Patient* and *Schindler's List* have much in common and that neither *Shine* nor *Sling Blade* are more avant-garde than *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, Paramount).<sup>6</sup> And prominent independent producer's representative John Pierson argues that 'you have to bend over backward and jump through hoops to define *Pulp Fiction* as independent' because of its stars, its \$8 million dollar budget, and its 1200 print release by Miramax. He asks, 'if *Pulp [Fiction]* is independent, why isn't a Miramax Woody Allen release or a New Line Jim Carrey romp?'<sup>7</sup>

I would suggest that the difference rests with the fundamental necessity outlined above: independent cinema's cultural existence is based on its ability to remain recognisably or arguably distinct from Hollywood product. *Pulp Fiction* has an arguably distinctive or original storytelling structure and style, while Woody



Allen and Jim Carrey have made effectively identical films, on every count, within Hollywood parameters.

The case for *The English Patient's* status as independent is a more difficult one to make. In addition to its budget, stars, experienced director, wide release and promotional strategy, all comparable to *Pulp Fiction*, it has a familiar, even formulaic, narrative and aesthetic approach. However, the argument for *The English Patient's* independent standing was made -- certainly by the film's promoters -- on the basis of its distributor, Miramax, and because it falls within the parameters of a certain conception of 'art film': both as a foreign film (to U.S. audiences) and as an historical epic.<sup>8</sup> So while the film's qualifications as independent were not immediately recognisable, and doubtful at best, they were perceived, in some quarters, as arguable.

The most commonly used criteria for determining what is or is not an independent film includes the following factors.

### Budget Size

Independent films are generally considered to have low or 'no' budgets. While the ceiling amount continually changes, due to the usually rising costs of making a film as well as to fluctuating expectations of what constitutes 'low', a film of \$1 million or under would qualify as low-budget while a film made for \$100,000 or less would be a no-budget. Independent films generally have budgets of under \$5 million although mini-majors such as Miramax are pushing that ceiling up to \$10 million.

### Source of Funding

Traditionally, in order to be considered independent a film must have non-studio financing. This is, however, an increasingly murky criterion to apply because there are so many *independent production companies* who produce films

that would not, by any other criteria, be considered independent (Castle Rock, for instance). Further, the major independent distributors are now owned by studios, therefore any films they produce or otherwise help finance have, de facto, studio financing although they might well be considered independent based on a number of other criteria. This criterion applies easily, however, when a film is financed by non-industry sources, such as grants, personal resources, private investors, although this almost invariably goes hand-in-hand with a low or no budget, as outlined above, making the funding sources themselves something of a moot point (*Clerks*, Kevin Smith, 1994, Miramax; *She's Gotta Have It*, Spike Lee, 1986, Island).

#### Distributor

A non-studio or independent distributor, more often based in New York rather than Los Angeles, is a widely used means of classifying a film as independent. Throughout the 1980s and into the mid-1990s there were four large independent distributors who, because of their size and industry dominance, were also referred to as the 'mini-majors': Miramax Films, Fine Line Features, Sony Pictures Classics (formerly Orion Classics) and the Samuel Goldwyn Company. In 1995 Goldwyn was put up for sale due to financial difficulties and in 1997 it went out of business. Around the same time, the industry presence of October Films was on the rise and it has come to supplant Goldwyn as the fourth large independent distributor. In addition, there are numerous smaller independent distributors, some currently in operation: First Run Features, Roxie Releasing, First Look Pictures, Strand Releasing, New Yorker Films, Northern Arts Entertainment, Arrow Entertainment, CFP/Lions Gate Releasing, and Zeitgeist; others that have appeared and failed over the last two decades: Cinecom, Island/Alive, Aries, Avenue Pictures, Circle Releasing, IRS Releasing, Spectrafilm, and Savoy Pictures.

The appellation mini-major for the four dominant distributors has become increasingly fitting. Independent film's rise to cultural prominence in the 1990s has prompted studio involvement. The four industry leaders are now, indeed, mini-majors, entirely or partially studio owned: Miramax by the Walt Disney Company; Fine Line Features, a division of New Line Cinema, was bought by Turner Broadcasting and then became part of Time Warner, owner of Warner Brothers Studios, in the subsequent Turner/Time Warner merger; Sony Pictures Classics, formerly Orion Classics, has always been studio affiliated and is currently owned by Sony (TriStar and Columbia); and in 1997, October completed a deal with Universal Pictures which gives the studio 51% ownership over the independent company. While all the mini-majors have some arrangement with the studios ensuring that the specialty companies remain 'independent', that is, they retain (varying degrees of) separate control over their operations and output, each has gained the advantage of access to significant studio resources, especially increased capitalisation. These and other issues related to distribution are examined in further detail later in this chapter.

### Actors

For the purposes of this discussion, actors can be classified into three rough categories: stars (Bruce Willis, Harvey Keitel), known (Steve Buscemi, Lili Taylor) and unknown. 'Known' actors include those who usually or often perform in independent films, such as Buscemi and Taylor, as well as non-A list actors who make the occasional foray into independent film in an attempt to rekindle their careers or to set it off in other directions (TV actors trying to move into film, for instance). Normally, the definition of independent film relies on having a cast of unknown or known actors, but not stars. However, this too is blurring. As independent films have become more prominent -- and fashionable -- more A-list actors are willing to undertake independent roles as a career enhancing step.

### Director's Experience

The 'typical' independent director falls into one of two categories: someone who is directing their first or second feature as their reputation-building training ground prior to moving to Hollywood (Spike Lee); or certain directors who have made career-long commitments to working independently (John Sayles, Jim Jarmusch).

### Specialised Audiences

Rather than mass market appeal, independent film is considered to address a spectrum of specialised audiences, hence the reason they are also referred to as specialty films. This varying understanding of audience results in 'niche marketing' or aiming a film at a specific demographic(s), much like television increasingly has done with the advent of cable but in contrast to Hollywood's blockbuster strategy of reaching the widest possible viewership. The specialised audience for independent film might overlap with a political identity (see the category Subject Matter, below) as in the case of gay and lesbian cinema, or it might address a more traditionally statistical demographic, for instance, older or urban viewers.

### Release Pattern

Different conceptualisations of audience translate into dramatically different release and advertising strategies (and budgets). The Hollywood film, aimed at a mass audience, usually follows a wide pattern of release: thousands of prints opening simultaneously across the nation, buttressed by saturation newspaper and television advertising. A specialty film, in contrast, aims to locate and build its audience more slowly by releasing far fewer prints (from a mere handful to the low hundreds, and so, far less costly), based on staggered openings which move from

city to city, and rely on the inexpensive but effective advertising of good reviews and positive word-of-mouth.<sup>9</sup>

### International Cinema

In the United States the vast majority of international films, and certainly foreign language films, are distributed by the independents. As such, international films are almost invariably inscribed as independent or 'art' films (and this, in turn, affects the kind of foreign films selected for release). Further, no other nation has a film industry as comparably monolithic as Hollywood's. That is, all national cinemas, like independent film in the U.S., also must compete with Hollywood, making them more closely affiliated, in this sense, to independent rather than studio sensibility.

### Subject Matter

Certain subjects are considered the dominant (or de facto) prerogative of independent film, principally those that take up an overtly or oppositional political stance. A tremendously important strain of independent film throughout the 1980s and 1990s are those associated with identity politics: gay and lesbian cinema, African-American cinema, Asian and Asian-American cinema, Latino/Latina cinema, women's cinema, and so on. This critical aspect of independent film is discussed in greater detail in Chapters Two and Three.

### Aesthetics

Whether reflected in structure, style and/or formal attributes, aesthetic experimentation is considered the province and one of the hallmarks of independent film. Avant-garde and alternative practices provide one of the most recurring, and fundamental, bases for independent cinema. Various alternative filmic legacies which have influenced independent film are detailed in Chapter

Two. Chapter Five includes an exploration of some of the issues that arise when independent film asserts itself as a cultural hybrid between avant-garde practices and Hollywood realist cinema.

### Narrative

While complexly interwoven with aesthetic considerations, and as such difficult to separate from the previous category, a consideration of narrativity focuses on a film's modes or means of storytelling, its narrative processes of signification, and its relationship to or reflections of/upon ideology. Every film has a process of signification, the system by which it accumulates and conveys its meanings which, in turn, add up to its 'story'. Aspects of narrative and independent film are examined in Chapter Four, and again, in Chapter Six. Further, while aesthetic variation is the more dominant means of classifying a film as independent, and while many independent films are both aesthetically and narratively experimental, there are some films encompassed within the framework of independent cinema that take an arguably alternative narrative approach but not an alternative aesthetic one. This is touched on in Chapter Two.

An independent film consists of some combination, even if a minimal number, of the attributes outlined above. It should also be noted that these are diverse attributes, sometimes overlapping (a low budget generally ensures no 'name' actors), sometimes competing (a foreign film could well have a Hollywood-size budget or aesthetic approach). Further, these are not equally weighted criteria; some count more or less, in varying configurations, depending upon the case and context in any given filmic instance (*Pulp Fiction's* aesthetic impact arguably outweighs its budget and stars).

The independent films which reach mainstream venues such as the Academy Awards (or the front page of the entertainment section of the *New York*

*Times* or *USA Today*) exist at the most prominent, visible and financially successful edge of independent film -- they are the most 'centred'. In storytelling modes they are often the most similar to Hollywood's products and are almost always released by one of the mini-majors, the handful of dominant independent distributors. Obviously, though, there is much independent work beyond these culturally profiled notables. In place of so much effort exerted in attempting to identify the exceedingly blurred border or line of demarcation that separates 'independent' from 'Hollywood', and which seems to preoccupy so much of the discussion -- is it or is it not an independent film? -- it is more productive to concentrate on exploring some of the major concerns and concepts encompassed by independent film. These, in turn, will work to situate independent film's (constantly shifting) discursive parameters.

The characteristics of independent film outlined above fall into two broad groupings: the 'means of production and "the vision thing"' as Manohla Dargis notes,<sup>10</sup> the institutional and material factors versus textual and discursive attributes. That is, filmic production as both commodity as well as a cultural artefact, in the sense of a means of human expression. Institutional and material factors often are considered the easier determinants to rely upon for purposes of definition precisely because they are more tangible. One can argue whether a film is or is not independent based on its budget (does \$8 million 'count?'), but at least one can determine what that budget is. Discursive factors are far more elusive to quantification.

James Schamus, professor at Columbia University and co-president of Good Machine, producer of such films as *Poison* (Todd Haynes, 1991, Zeitgeist), *The Wedding Banquet* (Ang Lee, 1993, Goldwyn), *The Brothers McMullen* (Edward Burns, 1995, Fox Searchlight), *Walking and Talking* (Nicole Holofcener, 1996, Miramax), and *Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998, Good Machine), suggests that American independent filmmakers define themselves in terms of a common

enemy, Hollywood, and that this is 'a peculiarly romantic (and free-market capitalist) notion of artistic identity, one that posits the heroic individual artist fighting for his [sic] vision.'<sup>11</sup> At the same time, however, American independent film does not eschew Hollywood but rather engages 'the dominant film industry in surprising ways, parodying Hollywood's representational and narrative strategies while at the same time paying homage to the ethics of the avant-garde past.'<sup>12</sup> A major indicator of engagement with the dominant industry is independent film's reliance upon plot-based, relatively linear narrative, like Hollywood, but in contrast to much of the avant-garde.

As a result, Schamus defines independent film as a 'blending of American and European sensibilities', without taking the form of a singular school or style, and while maintaining an *ambiguous stance* to both.<sup>13</sup> That is, independent film draws on both popular, mainstream culture and avant-garde culture without upholding one over the other in its entirety or in a simplistic manner. For instance, '[u]nlike earlier avant-garde strategies, it doesn't ask its audience to take a totally (and illusory) oppositional stance to mass culture, but neither does it buy into that stance uncritically.'<sup>14</sup>

So while Schamus describes Hollywood as the projected common enemy for independents, he does so in the sense that it is the ubiquitous presence *against* which independent film constantly strives to define itself. He does not suggest by this, however, that independent film's textual strategies are simply oppositional to Hollywood practices, as was at times the case for avant-garde movements. Quite the contrary, independent film in taking an 'ambiguous stance' towards Hollywood, borrows heavily from, pays homage to, plays to, and plays on the discourses of the dominant, mass culture industry, just as it does with avant-garde and art film traditions.

Dawn Hudson, Executive Director of the Independent Feature Project/West, follows Schamus' point about independent film being defined,



simultaneously, in opposition to and in relation to Hollywood by describing it as 'filmmaking that challenges the prevailing aesthetic, political and narrative conventions of American cinema,'<sup>15</sup> which suggests that independent film is a pliable entity that shapes itself in keeping with evolutions in dominant conventions.<sup>16</sup> Or, in the less positive spin of Steven Bickel, then head of international sales at Goldwyn, 'There's no such thing as independent films. They're really co-dependent films.'<sup>17</sup> Co-dependent, rather than wholly independent, in the sense of always requiring, by definition, the dominant industry to define itself against. And as the following chapter argues, independent film's discursive existence is also co-dependent upon the language and strategies of the avant-garde, although not as in the instance of Hollywood as a formation largely to be defined in opposition to, but rather as a respected tradition to be honoured as one borrows from and cites it.

Jim Stark, producer of a number of independent films including Jim Jarmusch's *Down By Law* (1986, Island), *Mystery Train* (1989, Orion Classics) and *Night On Earth* (1991, Fine Line), attempts to link the two broad groupings of material versus discursive factors by focusing on independent film as an economy of means that results in aesthetic invention: 'in general these filmmakers looked not to star actors, crowd scenes, fancy optical effects or plot twists, but to character pieces where the story was told visually, often with striking and inexpensive devices such as unrealistic or "moody" lighting, long takes or jump cuts.'<sup>18</sup> Scott Macauley, editor of *Filmmaker*, takes up a similar stance when he describes films such as *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1992, Miramax), *Clerks*, and *What Happened Was...* (Tom Noonan, 1994, Goldwyn) as a 'new generation of talkies'. These are films 'in which witty conversation and few locations provide a model of indie-film economy.'<sup>19</sup> Although Stark stresses visual techniques and Macauley the centrality of dialogue, both link economy of means to a creatively inventive aesthetics of necessity.

Ted Hope, producer of Hal Hartley's films *Simple Men* (1992, Fine Line), *Amateur* (1994, Sony Classics), and *Flirt* (1995, CFP), and James Schamus' partner in the production company Good Machine, takes a less uplifting, more cynical view, arguing that independent film has become 'a marketing concept only'.

Acquisitions are driven by marketability, and marketability alone. Art has no value. Sure a film has to be 'good' to be picked up, but what does a distributor truly look for when it acquires a film? Uniqueness of vision? Independent spirit? Discipline? A controlled or unique aesthetic? Try again. Like their Hollywood counterparts, the first item on their menu is a marketable concept, one they already know how to package.<sup>20</sup>

By a marketable concept independent distributors 'already know how to package', Hope means that the new acquisition must fit the model of a film that has successfully preceded it financially, for instance, because of specific subject matter, narrative style, known specialised audience it appeals to, or some other 'hook'.

James Schamus, Hope's producing partner, responds by acknowledging that acquisitions are driven almost solely by marketability but counters that this is precisely the function of current manifestations of independent film: to identify and define such markets.

[M]any people who used to be shut out of the public sphere -- women, gays and lesbians, African-Americans -- have found a place in our problematic cultural landscape precisely through the process of getting organized as a 'market'....[A] market *can* be a kind of community and the consumption of cultural commodities *can* help people form and articulate identities and solidarities of real importance.... [E]ven simply being able to share some kind of expression that's *meaningful* is already an act that promises some hope of community.

And today that process of sharing, for better or worse, often takes place in a market context.<sup>21</sup>

Schamus' point here is a critical argument that has been put forth by others.<sup>22</sup> In this view, the current function of independent film is to help define multiple and alternative markets or 'identities'. This important aspect of independent film is explored in greater depth in Chapter Three.

Taking a contrary view to most independents' recognition of the distinctions between Hollywood and independent fare, Sundance Festival founder Robert Redford has described his goal as wanting to *break down* the distinction between independent and studio films, so that 'there won't be a distinction between types of movies, just a broader menu. I think the reason independent film got categorized in the first place was because by and large, it wasn't very good.'<sup>23</sup> This is both a questionable analysis of the history of independent film ('it wasn't very good') and a questionable goal given that independent film's currency is based on its distinction from studio product and its ability to do things otherwise limited by Hollywood's vast and particular infrastructures.

As with a definition, there is no clear consensus on a 'moment of emergence' for the contemporary wave of cinema known as independent film. However, often cited seminal films include *The Return of the Secaucus Seven* (John Sayles, 1980, Libra), *Chan Is Missing* (Wayne Wang, 1982, New Yorker), *Smithereens* (Susan Seidelman, 1982, New Line), *Stranger Than Paradise* (Jim Jarmusch, 1984, Goldwyn) and *She's Gotta Have It* (Spike Lee, 1984, Island).

A number of infrastructural and/or technological conditions enabled the emergence and development, in the early to mid 1980s of independent film in its current configurations. (Chapter Two takes up some of the aesthetic conditions that enabled the rise of independent film; Chapter Three focusses on attendant necessary social and political conditions, in particular identity politics). The most frequently cited factor is the rapid growth of the home video market in the mid-80s,

the result of home video cassette players becoming available in the late 1970s. 'For a brief period from 1984 to 1987 (when the home video business was new), independent video companies sprang up, seemingly overnight, each one hungry for product.'<sup>24</sup> 'Overnight' video production and distribution companies such as Vestron, Cannon and Lorimar spurred the development of the independent industry with an influx of money for low-budget movies (\$1 to \$3 million) which they could sell to the burgeoning home-use market. Although short-lived, this boom in financing triggered a lot of independent production, helped develop institutional infrastructures, and succeeded in drawing a number of people into the orbit of independent production and distribution. The money dried up rather rapidly, however, as video distributors found themselves going out of business despite overstocked shelves and catalogues. The rule of thumb that successful video releases needed theatrical showcasing or some other kind of marketing hook became entrenched. From then on, the home video market looked increasingly to 'name actors, experienced directors and...conventional scripts.'<sup>25</sup>

A second factor which contributed to the rise of independent cinema in the 1980s and 1990s were the concurrent events taking place in Hollywood. Beginning with *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, Universal) in 1975 and *Star Wars* (George Lucas, Twentieth Century Fox) in 1977, Hollywood saw the rise of the 'blockbuster', large-scale action and special-effects driven films aimed at the widest possible audience but appealing especially to young men, the largest and most committed movie-going demographic group.<sup>26</sup> As Thomas Schatz argues, 'the composition and industry conceptualization of the youth market...was shifting from the politically hip, cineliterate viewers of a few years earlier to even younger viewers with more conservative tastes and sensibilities.'<sup>27</sup> The era of the blockbuster (in the strictest sense, films that earn \$100 million or more in domestic theatrical box-office) is often referred to as 'the new Hollywood' in order to distinguish it from 'classic' Hollywood. In addition to the blockbuster text of action

and effects, new Hollywood practices include high-cost films, large promotional budgets, the generation of media hype, tie-in and spin-off merchandising around films poised as 'events', and a film's simultaneous opening in thousands of theatres.<sup>28</sup> Schatz suggests that for the most part 'the New Hollywood's calculated blockbusters are themselves massive advertisements for their product lines' of books, CDs, television programming, video games, videocassettes, comic books, theme park rides, and assorted merchandise.

In 1996, the year that 'belonged' to independent film at the Academy Awards, the highest grossing Hollywood successes were among the most expensive to make: *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, Twentieth Century Fox), *Twister* (Jan De Bont, Warner Brothers) and *Mission: Impossible* (Brian DePalma, Paramount). The average cost to produce and market a film in 1996 was between \$57 and \$61 million.<sup>29</sup> In 1997, the year of *Titanic* and *Men In Black* (Barry Sonnenfeld, Columbia), Jack Valenti, President of the Motion Picture Association of America, cites the average cost to produce and market a film as \$75.6 million.<sup>30</sup>

Simultaneously, over the same two decades, Hollywood's box-office intake has come increasingly from foreign markets, which can now yield as much as 50% of a film's grosses. And blockbuster action and genre films, in particular, fare well with international audiences.<sup>31</sup> In Hollywood's current estimation, pursuing the blockbuster is a better financial strategy, and less risky, than medium or low-budget (by Hollywood standards) productions. 'Though the size of a picture's budget obviously doesn't guarantee a large audience, virtually every film that has had a megagross has also had a megabudget.'<sup>32</sup> Domestic audiences 'like big-budget extravaganzas, such as *Independence Day*, more than character dramas like *Fargo*.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, *Independence Day*' earned more at the domestic box office than Miramax's entire 1996 slate',<sup>34</sup> although that was the year of the independents. Or as Ron Weiskind puts it in the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*,

*The Postman [Il Postino]*, which ranks as the highest-grossing foreign-language film released in the United States, has racked up \$22 million in this country after more than a year in release. In contrast, *Star Trek: First Contact* reported a \$30 million box-office take on its first weekend alone.<sup>35</sup>

As for the international market, 'Foreign audiences don't want small, sensitive, serious pictures from America. They can get those from their own national film industries.'<sup>36</sup> This is a view seconded by Isisara Bey, an African-American studio executive who writes of his experiences at the 1993 Pan African Film and Television Festival in Burkina Faso, 'Make no mistake about it, Africans go to see African films -- in droves. Folks get all dressed up and stand in long lines, especially when it's a film by one of their favourites.' But, he explains, the African films at the festival dealt with 'issues of political and social significance. There were films of substance holding an unflinching mirror to the contradictions of African life.' What Africans look for from the American film industry are the bigger budget, high-gloss productions of action adventure, romantic comedy and other genre pictures. This desire is welcomed by a Hollywood which continues to consider Africa as 'the repository for the latest shoot 'em-up, cut 'em-up, action and karate flicks.'<sup>37</sup>

Hollywood's pursuit of the blockbuster strategy which relies increasingly on action, effects, genre films, and stars with domestic or international appeal -- what Peter Bart, editor-in-chief of *Variety* describes as 'marketing plans pretending to be movies'<sup>38</sup> -- has left an opening in the marketplace precisely for those 'small, serious' pictures that incorporate greater cultural specificity. A successful independent film grosses between \$1 and \$3 million: *Clerks*, \$3 million; *Reservoir Dogs*, \$2.8 million; *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (Matty Rich, 1991, Goldwyn), \$2.7 million; *Go Fish* (Rose Troche, 1994, Goldwyn), 2.4 million; *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (Maria Maggenti, 1995, Fine Line), \$1.97 million; *I Shot Andy Warhol* (Mary Harron, 1996, Goldwyn), \$1.8 million; *Daughters of the*

*Dust* (Julie Dash, 1992, Kino), \$1.7 million; *To Sleep With Anger* (Charles Burnett, 1990, Goldwyn), \$1.16 million; *Living In Oblivion* (Tom DiCillo, 1995, Sony Classics), \$1.08 million; *Slacker* (Richard Linklater, 1991, Orion Classics), \$1 million; *Box Of Moonlight* (Tom DiCillo, Trimark, 1997), \$782,000; *Safe* (Todd Haynes, Sony Classics, 1995), \$460,000; *Swoon* (Tom Kalin, Fine Line, 1992), \$340,000.<sup>39</sup> *She's Gotta Have It* at \$7.1 million is a stand-out. As the *Wall Street Journal* notes, for 'independent motion pictures that attract an "art-house" crowd and are popular with critics....a box-office gross of \$10 million is a home-run and [distribution] costs must be tightly scrutinized.'<sup>40</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum are the rare 'breakthroughs', the exceptions such as *The Crying Game* (\$65 million), *The English Patient* (\$78.7 million) and *Pulp Fiction* (\$100 million).<sup>41</sup> It should be noted that these, along with *Il Postino*, are all Miramax releases, explaining that company's industry dominance, often credited to their outstanding marketing savvy. It should also be noted that only about 10% of independent films made manage to recoup their costs and only about 1% achieve some measure of profitability or financial success.<sup>42</sup>

Other factors which have contributed to the establishment of independent film include: the rise of film schools which provide a training ground and a source for collaborators; the accessibility (both financial and portable), beginning in the 1940s and 1950s, of 16mm and other low-budget technologies; a growing tendency to consider specific demographic groups or target markets when looking at the consumer population;<sup>43</sup> and the existence of a repertory theatre tradition in the 1960s and 1970s which established an audience base of certain viewers (for instance, college, urban) who were later to become the foundation for specialised audiences. The expertise of repertory theatres rested in screening classics, foreign art films and cult films. The home video market of the 1980s effectively ended repertory exhibition given that such films could now be seen at home on a

VCR. However, the repertory tradition, in its viewer base and viewing practices, helped pave the way for 'the modern era of first-run, off-Hollywood features',<sup>44</sup> that is, theatrical premieres of original 'smaller' films rather than rescreenings of classics.

Repertory exhibition as one of the precursors of contemporary independent film is evident in the influence works of the repertory era have had on current independent cinema. In 1996, the independent film journal *Filmmaker* asked forty seven 'critics, curators, distributors, and producers' from the independent community to pick what they considered 'the most important American independent films of all time.' Because the selection criterion was *most important*, respondents chose films, in addition to considerations of quality, 'that were pioneering in some historical, cultural or business context.'<sup>45</sup> It should be noted that because discussion was limited to American films only, the incalculable influence of foreign, especially European, cinema is not factored in.

Many films of the recent wave of independent film were cited, for instance, *Stranger Than Paradise* (#2 on the list, Jim Jarmusch, 1984), *She's Gotta Have It* (#3, Spike Lee, 1986), *Return of the Secaucus Seven* (#5, John Sayles, 1980), *Blood Simple* (#9, Coen Brothers, 1984), *Reservoir Dogs* (#13, Quentin Tarantino, 1992), *Daughters of the Dust* (#14, Julie Dash, 1992), *Chan Is Missing* (#37, Wayne Wang, 1982), *Trust* (#45, Hal Hartley, 1990), and *The Living End* (#48, Gregg Araki, 1992).

Along with the many notable examples from contemporary independent film, the list also included a significant number of earlier works that would fall into the classic, avant-garde or cult film categories.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the #1 film is John Cassavetes' classic, *A Woman Under The Influence* (1974). Cassavetes is described as 'the quintessential American indie', his films receiving more votes than any other director, and his methods of private financing and self- distribution



much admired.<sup>47</sup> Also on the list, at #32, is Sam Fuller's *The Naked Kiss* (1965), a 'B film' classic.

Experimental or avant-garde influences selected include *Scorpio Rising* (at #8, Kenneth Anger, 1964), *A Movie* (#12, Bruce Conner, 1958), *Meshes of the Afternoon* (#20, Maya Deren, 1943), *Eraserhead* (#21, David Lynch, 1977), and *Film About A Woman Who...*(#29, Yvonne Rainer, 1974). Films which fall within the avant-garde or art paradigms are discussed in the next chapter.

Cult or exploitation films which made the list include: #15, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), George Romero's low-budget horror film; #26, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (Melvin Van Peebles, 1971), an inspiration for blaxploitation films and the concept of target or niche markets; #27, *Easy Rider*, (Dennis Hopper, 1969), the counter-culture road movie; #35, *Pink Flamingos* (1972), John Waters' camp outing; Russ Meyer's *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (#46, 1966), an action and sexploitation picture; and #50, the very financially successful, hardcore *Deep Throat* (Gerard Damiano, 1972). Exploitation films are low-budget genre pictures aimed at target markets of the genre's specific fans. Labelled as such because they "'exploit" sensational material',<sup>48</sup> they are often categorised together with cult films. Indeed, *Night of the Living Dead*; *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*; and *Deep Throat* are all exploitation films that developed cult followings. On the other hand, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* is less blaxploitation and more a political film (as is, arguably, *Easy Rider*, although based on low-budget generic 'biker flicks'), while *Pink Flamingos* can be seen as having art film intentions.<sup>49</sup>

Exploitation and cult films have their roots in the B movies of classical Hollywood. From the mid 1930s through the 1940s it was standard practice to present the movie-going public with a programme consisting of two features (plus newsreel, cartoons and previews of coming attractions).<sup>50</sup> Hollywood studios provided the A picture or top of the bill and collected the majority of the box-office

take in a percentage split with (then studio-owned) theatres. There was not, however, sufficient financial incentive for the studios to produce the B or second half of the double bill. Rather than programme two A features together, it was more profitable to hold the second A picture for a subsequent week and present it to a newly-paying audience.

The B half of the programme was paid a fixed rental fee for exhibition rights instead of a percentage of box-office take, so while there were not the opportunities for runaway hits, and large amounts of money, the prospect of regular, reasonable profits existed for those who could make 60 to 75 minute features *cheaply* and *rapidly*. Further, the risks were low as the films were guaranteed exhibition by being block-booked with the major studios' product. The result was the rise of substudios or B studios, like Republic and Monogram, that made westerns, gangster films and other genre pictures, often at the pace of one a week.<sup>51</sup> In time, the term 'B films' came to stand apart from their B studio origins. That is, they came to stand for a style of film -- low-budget, gritty, based on generic formulas -- whether produced by B studios or the majors.

The demise of the B studio system began in the late 1940s. First, in 1948, came the ruling in the antitrust case of *United States v. Paramount Pictures* which determined that the studio's control of production, distribution and exhibition constituted a monopoly and ordered studios to sell off their theatre chains. Over the next few years, as the Paramount consent decrees forced studios to divest themselves of their exhibition outlets, the practice of block booking B or second features disappeared.<sup>52</sup> Second, the rise of television in the 1950s and the accompanying drop in movie attendance caused the B studios to decline.<sup>53</sup> By the 1950s only a few survived and those that did so existed in transformed configurations, evolving into the production of 'exploitation' movies.

Prominent among these was American-International Pictures (AIP) which was one of the first companies to identify and capitalise on the burgeoning youth

market of the mid to late 1950s and 1960s.<sup>54</sup> And prominent at AIP during this era was Roger Corman who worked with a number of genre formulas -- sci-fi, horror, sexploitation, action -- and who helped pioneer contemporary low-budget filmmaking techniques at AIP and subsequently at his own production company, New World Pictures, founded in 1970.<sup>55</sup>

The development of the exploitation film and the opening up of exhibition practices led to the repertory tradition, well-established by the 1970s, and to the rise of the cult film. Cult fare included B film revivals such as *Freaks* (Tod Browning, 1932, re-released 1972) and *Reefer Madness* (Louis Gasnier, 1940, re-released 1972), as well as more recent exploitation ventures such as *Night of the Living Dead*, camp art films like *Pink Flamingos* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975), and more politicised filmmaking such as *The Harder They Come* (Perry Henzell, 1972) and *Girlfriends* (Claudia Weill, 1978).

Cult films are dependent on repeat viewers, often at late-night showings, for their success. In *Midnight Movies*, J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum argue that 'films tend to inspire a cult only after they have become devalued or otherwise estranged from mainstream acceptance.'<sup>56</sup> They attribute the success of a film like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* to the fact that it 'translated many intellectual and avant-garde ideas about sexuality and culture into terms that teen-agers could relate to.'<sup>57</sup>

As the spread of videocassette use in the 1980s undermined much of the reason for repertory cinemas, all of these antecedents -- B movies and low-budget features, exploitation, avant-garde and cult films -- contributed to the make-up of theatrically released, first-run independent film in the 1980s and 1990s.

A number of independent distributors also grew out of the repertory tradition. New Line Cinema, founded by Robert Shaye, began with cult and art films aimed at the college-aged audience. Initially, they distributed *Sympathy For the Devil* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1970), *Reefer Madness* and *Pink Flamingos*, and

continued with such films as *Smithereens* (Susan Seidelman) in 1982. Simultaneously throughout the 1980s, New Line was branching out into specialised genre pictures like the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series.<sup>58</sup> Successes like these and *The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* series<sup>59</sup> allowed New Line to finance and release higher-budget, glossier commercial productions, such as *The Mask* (Charles Russell, 1994), *Se7en* (David Fincher, 1995), *Last Man Standing* (Walter Hill, 1996) and *Wag The Dog* (Barry Levinson, 1997), and so to function as a virtual studio. In 1990, however, New Line established Fine Line Features, its specialty film division which subsequently oversaw the release of its smaller, independent films.<sup>60</sup> Headed by Ira Deutchman, Fine Line's early films included *Trust* (Hal Hartley, 1991), *My Own Private Idaho* (Gus Van Sant, 1991), *Night On Earth* (Jim Jarmusch, 1991), *The Player* (Robert Altman, 1992) and *Swoon* (Tom Kalin, 1992). Within the definitions established by this study, almost all films from New Line are excluded, while films distributed by Fine Line are included.

Other 'virtual studios' exist, for instance, British-based Polygram Filmed Entertainment and its U.S. distribution company Gramercy Pictures, co-founded with Universal Studios. Polygram Filmed Entertainment is a division of the international music and entertainment group, Polygram.<sup>61</sup> Established as a 50-50 joint venture between Polygram and MCA/Universal, Gramercy's function 'is to distribute and market films from both MCA and Polygram that are judged to be commercially viable but not "blockbuster" material.'<sup>62</sup> Polygram/Gramercy films have included *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Richard Curtis, 1994), *Dead Man Walking* (Tim Robbins, 1995), *Shallow Grave* (Danny Boyle, 1995), *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995), *Fargo* (Coen Brothers, 1996), *The Big Lebowski* (Coen Brothers, 1998), *Your Friends and Neighbors* (Neil LaBute, 1998) and *Elizabeth* (Shekhar Kapur, 1998). Although something like *Shallow Grave* could certainly be considered independent in many respects and *The Usual Suspects*

has been influential for independent film, Gramercy releases largely have been excluded from this study (for instance, Gramercy also distributed *Barb Wire*, David Hogan, 1996, with Pamela Anderson Lee).

The concept of a classics or specialty division, as in the case of New Line/Fine Line, originated with United Artists Classics, a division of United Artists which existed from 1980 to 1983, releasing such films as *The Last Metro* (Francois Truffaut, 1980), *Diva* (Jean-Jacques Beineix, 1981) and *Entre Nous* (Diane Kurys, 1983).<sup>63</sup> Ira Deutchman (of Fine Line), Tom Bernard and Michael Barker all established themselves at UA Classics, which Bernard and Barker's promotional material describes as 'the first modern-day specialized distribution company'. In 1983, Tom Bernard and Michael Barker, along with Donna Gigliotti, formed Orion Classics under Orion's auspices,<sup>64</sup> releasing such films as *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1986), *Babette's Feast* (Gabriel Axel, 1987), *Wings of Desire* (Wim Wenders, 1988), *Women On The Verge Of A Nervous Breakdown* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1988), *Mystery Train* (Jim Jarmusch, 1989), and *Europa, Europa* (Agnieszka Holland, 1991). In 1992, when Orion was facing Chapter 11 bankruptcy (subsequently to be resuscitated), Bernard and Barker, along with Marcie Bloom, who had replaced Gigliotti in 1990, established Sony Pictures Classics under the ownership of the Sony Corporation which also controlled the Columbia and TriStar studios. Sony Pictures Classics began in business with *Howard's End* (James Ivory, 1992) and continued with such films as *Orlando* (Sally Potter, 1993), *Mi Vida Loca* (Allison Anders, 1994), *Safe* (Todd Haynes, 1995), *Living In Oblivion* (Tom DiCillo, 1995), *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (Todd Solondz, 1996), *Lone Star* (John Sayles, 1996), *The Governess* (Sandra Goldbacher, 1998), and *Central Station* (Walter Salles, 1998).

Prominent independent producer's representative John Pierson describes Orion Classics as having had 'a consistent game plan throughout the eighties and into the nineties based on intelligent conservatism and savvy taste in world

cinema'.<sup>65</sup> conservative in their spending for a film's rights and its promotional budget, and relying, more than other American independent distributors, on foreign films, particularly European auteurs, for their product. James Schamus concurs, 'Orion Classics continues to work a market approach developed in the heyday of the art cinema market of the sixties'. He stresses that they specialise largely in 'art cinema as opposed to avant-garde or even quirky independent.'<sup>66</sup> Pierson believes that Sony Pictures Classics continues to be run in the same manner, as if by 'old dogs who don't believe in any of the new tricks': keeping promotional budgets low and relying on word of mouth; keeping print numbers down and opting for a slow release. And further, run by people who 'bash Miramax's profligacy at every opportunity'<sup>67</sup> for the latter's high expenditures in purchasing distribution rights and for exorbitant promotional costs.

Miramax, founded and run by brothers Harvey and Bob Weinstein (and named after their parents Miriam and Max), also began as an art/cult film distributor. One of their initial efforts was *Erendira* (Ruy Guerra, 1981, with a script by Gabriel Garcia Marquez).<sup>68</sup> Their turning point came in 1989, the year in which Miramax released *sex, lies & videotape* (Steven Soderbergh) and *My Left Foot* (Jim Sheridan). *Sex, lies & videotape*, in particular, altered Miramax's direction. Grossing \$24.7 million in theatrical domestic box-office,<sup>69</sup> it also altered expectations about independent film. From there, Miramax climbed steadily in box-office intake with *The Crying Game* in 1992 at \$65 million, *The Piano* (Jane Campion) in 1993 at \$40 million, crossing the \$100 million studio blockbuster 'magic number' with *Pulp Fiction* in 1994, grossing \$78 million domestically with *The English Patient* in 1996, \$53 million with *Life Is Beautiful* in 1998, and \$93 million for *Shakespeare In Love* in the same year.<sup>70</sup>

Miramax's successes and industry dominance are usually attributed to two factors. First, astute marketing skills and assertive business practices. *Forbes* describes Miramax as bringing 'a brand of street-smart marketing that the art-

world had rarely seen before.<sup>71</sup> The second factor, from 1993 on, is the Walt Disney Company's ownership of Miramax. Ironically, in an early interview, Bob Weinstein, describing studios as standing armies and themselves as 'guerrillas', says, 'We don't want to grow up to be another Walt Disney.'<sup>72</sup>

The Disney buy-out provided substantial financial resources to the smaller company, allowing Miramax to change, or at least broaden, its marketing strategy, often promoting and releasing a film widely, in a manner based more on a studio model than an independent one. 'Miramax spends so much marketing a film that, even though a film may gross a nice amount, the exorbitant price that Miramax spends in P&A (prints and advertising) for its releases eats up all the profits.'<sup>73</sup> The argument here is that Disney can afford to subsidise Miramax, whether it makes a profit or not; 'stand-alone' independent distributors cannot afford to do so, having to rely on profits in order to survive.

While Miramax's industry dominance is unquestionable, its business practices sometimes provoke 'anger and vitriol'<sup>74</sup> from competitors. It has been accused, for instance, of using its Disney backing to buy up films for fees other independents cannot afford. Speaking of the 1998 Sundance Film Festival in which Miramax bought 3 films -- *Next Step*, *Wonderland* (Brad Anderson), Australian film *The Castle* (Rob Sitch), and *Jerry and Tom* (Saul Rubinek) -- for a total of \$14.75 million,<sup>75</sup> Bingham Ray of October Films states, 'It was a headline-buying move: We're the players, nobody else. That's what those buys signal to me.'<sup>76</sup> Miramax has also been accused of buying up more films than it is able to release and subsequently shelving them, while managing to keep them out of competitors' hands.<sup>77</sup>

Charges against Miramax also include inflating box-office figures, for instance, boosting the opening weekend take for *Pulp Fiction* by \$400,000.<sup>78</sup> The reason for the figure inflation, according to CNN, was to ensure that the film made number one at the box-office. In a practice followed by studios, the *New York*

*Times* reports, initial box-office earnings are inflated because of studio belief that audiences measure the appeal of a movie based on its opening, that is, public perception of a film will be more favourable if it opens at number one.<sup>79</sup>

Of the mini-majors, the Samuel Goldwyn Company is the only one which has gone out of business. The Chair and CEO was Samuel Goldwyn, Jr., son of the legendary Hollywood figure, and the company owned a number of concerns, including an exhibition chain of 50 'mostly art-house theaters' and a film library of 850 Hollywood classics.<sup>80</sup>

The independent distribution division was headed by, most notably, Jeff Lipsky from 1983 to 1986 and by Tom Rothman until the summer of 1994. Debt-ridden and up for sale in 1996, the Goldwyn Company was bought by Metromedia International Group and then, in turn, sold to MGM.<sup>81</sup> Goldwyn ceased doing business in 1997. But over the years it had released an impressive array of independent films, including: *Stranger Than Paradise* (Jim Jarmusch, 1984), *Sid and Nancy* (Alex Cox, 1986), *Desert Hearts* (Donna Deitch, 1986), *Prick Up Your Ears* (Stephen Frears, 1987), *To Sleep With Anger* (Charles Burnett, 1990), *Straight Out Of Brooklyn* (Matty Rich, 1991), *Mississippi Masala* (Mira Nair, 1992), *Much Ado About Nothing* (Kenneth Branagh, 1993), *(32 Short Films About Glenn Gould)* (François Girard, 1993), *Ladybird, Ladybird* (Ken Loach, 1994), *To Live* (Zhang Yimou, 1994), *Go Fish* (Rose Troche, 1994) and *I Shot Andy Warhol* (Mary Harron, 1996).

October Films was founded in 1991 by Bingham Ray and Jeff Lipsky, who began with Mike Leigh's film of the same year, *Life Is Sweet*. Lipsky left in 1995 and was replaced by Amir Malin and John Schmidt. October's releases include: *Tout Les Matins Du Monde* (Alain Corneau, 1992), *The Living End* (Gregg Araki, 1992), *Un Coeur En Hiver* (Claude Sautet, 1993), *Ruby In Paradise* (Victor Nunez, 1993), *The War Room* (D.A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus, 1993), *The Last Seduction* (John Dahl, 1994), *Breaking The Waves* (Lars von Trier, 1996), *Secrets*



*And Lies* (Mike Leigh, 1996), *Girls Town* (Jim McKay, 1996), *A Soldier's Daughter Never Cries* (James Ivory, 1998), *High Art* (Lisa Cholodenko, 1998), and *Cookie's Fortune* (Robert Altman, 1999).

October's catalogue also has offered a number of 'independent classics' originally released by Cinecom, out of business since the early 1990's, such as *El Norte* (Gregory Nava, 1983), *The Times of Harvey Milk* (Robert Epstein, 1984), *The Brother From Another Planet* (John Sayles, 1984), *A Room With A View* (James Ivory, 1986), *Sammy & Rosie Get Laid* (Stephen Frears, 1987) and *Salaam Bombay!* (Mira Nair, 1988), (although the last three films have since gone to Polygram).

The most recent entry of a mini-major into the field of independent distribution has been Fox Searchlight Pictures, owned and underwritten by Twentieth Century Fox. Tom Rothman, previously of Goldwyn, was president of Fox Searchlight until he moved to become president of production at Twentieth Century Fox. He was replaced in late 1995 by Lindsay Law, long time head of the PBS-affiliated American Playhouse. Two Fox Searchlight ventures, *The Brothers McMullen* (Edward Burns, 1995) and *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997) have been notable successes, domestically grossing, respectively, \$10.2 million and \$45.9 million.<sup>82</sup> Both, however, have had the financial and institutional backing to pursue a more studio-like promotional and release operation. Fox Searchlight continues its efforts with such films as *Slums of Beverly Hills* (Tamara Jenkins, 1998) and *Waking Ned Devine* (Kirk Jones, 1998). Most recently, in 1998, Paramount formed Paramount Classics, headed by Ruth Vitale, formerly of Fine Line, with the intention of beginning to release films in 1999.<sup>83</sup>

Smaller distributors have done their best to keep up with the mini-majors, but have difficulty competing with the financial resources of the latter. In place of paying millions to buy up a film's distribution rights, a small company may pay a

maximum of \$100,000 or, in some cases, as little as nothing, guaranteeing only that they will spend a certain amount on prints and advertising to promote the film.

First Run Features, a long-time survivor in existence since 1979, has released such films as *Born In Flames* (Lizzie Borden, 1983), *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (Mirra Bank and Ellen Hovde, 1985), *Sherman's March* (Roll McElwee, 1986), *Sleepwalk* (Sara Driver, 1987), *The Big Dis* (Gordon Erikson, 1990) and *Strangers In Good Company* (Cynthia Scott, 1992). Seymour Wishman and Marc Mauceri, who run the company, complain they 'find little they like that competitors with deeper pockets don't beat them to.'<sup>84</sup>

Steve Fagan, sales manager for Arrow whose releases include *Toto le Heros* (Jaco Van Dormael, 1992), *Combination Platter* (Tony Chan, 1993), and *My Life's In Turnaround* (Don Ward and Eric Schaeffer, 1994), speaking of the high prices being paid for purchasing a film's rights at Sundance, comments, 'We can't compete against that. We don't have Walt Disney's money.'<sup>85</sup> And Jonathon Dana, the president of Triton, which went out of business in 1994 after releasing such films as *Hearts of Darkness* (Fax Bahr and George Hickenlooper, 1991), *Mindwalk* (Bernt Capra, 1991), *In The Soup* (Alexandre Rockwell, 1992) and *A Brief History of Time* (Errol Morris, 1992), argues that the 'whole system's being co-opted by the studios,' likening that to 'General Foods doing gourmet coffees.'<sup>86</sup> The reason for the undermining of smaller companies, he explains, is that independent distribution requires 'more intense capitalization than ever', referring to the money involved to purchase and successfully promote independent films, the necessary steps before they can earn a profit at the box-office.

A recent example is *Pi* (1998), written and directed by Darren Aronsky. The film was purchased at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival by Amir Malin for his new company Artisan Entertainment, at a price of \$500,000 according to Malin.<sup>87</sup> 'With minimal marketing costs, the black-and-white movie about a psychotic mathematician needs to generate some \$2 million in receipts to be on pace to

break even.<sup>88</sup> Malin, formerly of October and Cinecom, acknowledges that 'everyone told me we'd be lucky to do \$300,000 [at the domestic box-office]' and that they thought his purchase price of \$500,000 was excessive.<sup>89</sup> But contrary to expectations, by the summer of 1998 *Pi*, with successful marketing, had taken in \$1.8 million at the box-office.<sup>90</sup> Artisan, a new company built upon a library of 6,000 video titles from former companies Live and Carolco, which bring in a sizeable and steady income, is also the distributor of *Permanent Vacation* (David Veloz, 1998); *The 24 Hour Woman* (Nancy Savoca, 1999); *My Name Is Joe* (Ken Loach, 1999); and very financially successful, *The Blair Witch Project* (Eduardo Sanchez and Daniel Myrick, 1999). Another significant, emerging distributor is Lions Gate Releasing (*Gods and Monsters*, Bill Condon, 1998; *Buffalo 66*, Vincent Gallo, 1998), formerly CFP (*Heavy*, James Mangold, 1996).

That the specific distributor and the company's distribution strategy, in turn, are pivotal to a film's ultimate success or failure can be seen in the response of filmmakers to the exhibition histories of their films. Writing in *Box of Moonlight & Notes From Overboard*, Tom DiCillo describes his experience with his crowd-pleasing film, *Living In Oblivion* (1995). He has concerns about the length of time the film was in release at all, and notes that as it makes certain of the 'Year's Ten Best' lists in December 1995 (for instance, Janet Maslin's in the *New York Times*), it is not possible for new viewers to go see the film because it is no longer playing anywhere. DiCillo reports that he queries the distributor -- the not specifically named Sony Pictures Classics -- on their plans for garnering Academy Award nominations. 'He said he was living up to his commitment to seek a nomination for Best Original Screenplay by sending video cassettes to members of the Academy. I asked if he was taking out ads in the trade papers, offering the film for the Academy's consideration. He said they planned to do that sometime in January, not wanting to "overdo it" right away because the Academy members were too smart for that stuff and it tended to backfire.'<sup>91</sup>

Later the same day of that conversation, DiCillo picks up an issue of *Variety* and finds 'a full-color advertisement for *The Brothers McMullen*, offering the film "for your consideration" as Best Picture, Best Screenplay, Best Director, Best Actor and Best Actress.'

My distributor took *Living in Oblivion*, admittedly a small film and made it smaller....The distributor of *The Brothers McMullen*, took a very small film, and made it enormous. The amount they spent is irrelevant. No matter what it cost it worked. People saw the film. People are still seeing the film.<sup>92</sup>

The countervailing argument, of course, is that the amount spent *is* relevant. On DiCillo's next film, *Box of Moonlight* (1997), Trimark Pictures, dominantly a generic film distributor (*Warlock*, Steve Miner, and *Leprechaun*, Rodman Flender, both 1991) which gives the company the resources to afford higher prices for a film's rights, paid \$3 million for it. *Box of Moonlight* went on to earn only \$782,000 in domestic box-office despite John Turturro's presence in the cast and positive reviews.<sup>93</sup>

DiCillo expresses disappointment over *Living in Oblivion's* exhibition history although the distributor is a mini-major, Sony Pictures Classics, albeit a fiscally conservative one when it comes to promotional expenses.<sup>94</sup> But he is not speaking of or dealing with one of the smaller distributors who lack even Sony Classics' resources. In contrast, distributor of *The Brothers McMullen*, Fox Searchlight, is mandated to seek prestige and notice, bankrolled by \$150 million in capitalisation from Twentieth Century Fox.<sup>95</sup>

Another instance of a disgruntled filmmaker, this one dealing with one of the smaller, micro distributors, is the case of long-time independent Jan Jost and his film, *All The Vermeers In New York* (1992). In the Summer 1993 issue of *Filmmaker*, Marcus Hu, one of the founders and co-partners of Strand Releasing (*Claire of the Moon*, Nicole Conn, 1992; *Crush*, Alison Maclean, 1993; *Totally Fu\*\*ed Up*, Gregg Araki, 1994; *Clean, Shaven*, Lodge Kerrigan, 1995; *Love Is The*

*Devil*, John Maybury, 1998; as well as *All The Vermeers In New York*), a distributor '[k]nown as much for their taking chances on material that scared off their competitors as for their marketing acumen,<sup>96</sup> writes an article titled 'Guerrilla Releasing: A Guide To No-Budget Film Distribution'. In it, Hu contends

An independent filmmaker with rejection letters from Miramax, Goldwyn and Fine Line needn't begin sharpening a straight-edged razor. Despite the dominance of the larger specialty distributors, many of the new, smaller 'cottage industry' distributors are achieving success by carefully placing and niche-marketing their films....Such recent films as *All The Vermeers in New York*, *Henry [Portrait of a Serial Killer]*, *Vincent*, *Man Bites Dog*, *The Vanishing*, *Together Alone*, and *Mala Noche* are prime examples of independent films which might never have had a theatrical life if it weren't for the newer micro distributors.<sup>97</sup>

Although Strand is the distributor for *All The Vermeers In New York*, filmmaker Jost does not share Hu's optimism. In a detailed and angry letter in the Spring 1992 issue of *Off Hollywood Report*, Jost outlines his efforts and frustrations in seeking a distributor for *All The Vermeers In New York*. 'Finally, throwing in the towel on securing any of the legit so-called art film distributors in the States, we signed up with tiny Strand Releasing out of Venice, California.'<sup>98</sup> The 'legit' art film distributors Jost specifically itemises as either ignoring the film or turning him down are Orion Classics, Goldwyn, Fine Line, Island, Avenue and Aries. The outcome of having no option but to go with Strand is, in Jost's words, that the film opened 'in barebones fashion', at specific theatres in select cities, only. Hu cites the expenses spent for prints and advertising on *All The Vermeers In New York* as totalling only \$23,350 and the film's national theatrical gross as \$157,046.<sup>99</sup>

There is little question that for a film to earn \$10 million, like *The Brothers McMullen*, or even \$1 million, it requires detailed attention devoted to marketing,

often in the form of costly advertising, or in some other, time-demanding, hands-on approach. And as Jost attempts to point out, which films win such money, time, and attention, and for what reasons, is a serious issue in what constitutes contemporary independent film. Further, while smaller companies cannot afford to stake the same amount in prints and advertising commitments as the mini-majors do, neither can they hold out hope for a breakout success grossing \$45.9 million, like *The Full Monty*, or \$65 million, as did *The Crying Game*, without such expenditures.

A fundamental truism about independent film distribution is that companies are continually going out of business, appearing and disappearing overnight.<sup>100</sup> In a 1996 interview, John Sayles comments, 'We've made ten movies, and I'd say seven of the companies that distributed our movies are no longer in business.'<sup>101</sup> Sayles' guess is close -- the number of his films with original distributors now out of business numbers six.<sup>102</sup>

While it is accurate that independent distribution is a risky business and companies have gone out of business with startling regularity, this truism masks an equally significant factor: the individuals who form and run these companies resurface time and again. There may be rapid turnover in the corporate make-up of independent distribution, but the individual players have remained strikingly consistent.

One of the implications of an industry with high corporate turnover is that it provokes a constant flow of 'new blood' and fresh ideas (or at least power bases) into the institutional arena. In fact, while companies have formed, folded and formed anew, the founders, owners, presidents, and partners have moved from one corporate entity to the next, encountering and re-encountering each other en route. John Pierson refers to this handful of people (himself included) as independent film's 'permanent government'.<sup>103</sup>

As was pointed out earlier, Tom Bernard and Michael Barker began their distribution careers at United Artists Classics, moved jointly to form Orion Classics and, subsequently, established Sony Pictures Classics which they still run. Tom Rothman, originally an entertainment attorney, was longtime head of distribution and production at Goldwyn before leaving to become the first president of Fox Searchlight and, following that, moving to Twentieth Century Fox proper.

Amir Malin was a co-founder (in 1982) and CEO of Cinecom which released such films as *Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (Robert Altman, 1982), *Eating Raoul* (Paul Bartel, 1982), *El Norte* (Gregory Nava, 1983), *A Room With a View* (James Ivory, 1986), *Matewan* (John Sayles, 1987) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (Volker Schlöndorff, 1990), before going out of business in the early 1990s. Subsequently, Malin became one of the partners in October Films before, most recently, forming a new company, Artisan Entertainment (*Pi, Permanent Vacation, The Blair Witch Project*).

Ira Deutchman was head of marketing at United Artists Classics in the early 1980s till he left to oversee distribution at Amir Malin's newly formed Cinecom. After Cinecom's demise, Deutchman served as producer's representative for *Metropolitan* (Whit Stillman, 1990) which was sold to and released by New Line. In the wake of that deal, Deutchman became head of Fine Line Features, New Line's newly-established arthouse division.

Another notable figure is Ben Barenholtz who owned the Elgin Theater in New York and originated the concept of the midnight movie there in 1970 with *El Topo* (Alexandro Jodorowsky), following that up with *Pink Flamingos* (John Waters) in 1973. When the theatre went out of business in 1978, Barenholtz, moving from exhibition to distribution, founded Libra Films which released *Eraserhead* (David Lynch) in 1977 and *The Return of the Secaucus Seven* in 1980. In 1985, a new company Barenholtz was partnered in, Circle Releasing, distributed *Blood Simple* (Coen Brothers) and went on to produce several later

Coen Brothers films, including *Raising Arizona* (1987), *Miller's Crossing* (1990) and *Barton Fink* (1991).

Jeff Lipsky began working in distribution in 1974 as a sales rep for John Cassavetes' self-distributed *A Woman Under the Influence* (he describes Cassavetes as having 'invented the wheel' of independent distribution<sup>104</sup>). Later in the 1970s he served as head of distribution at New Yorker Films, and then as head of distribution at Goldwyn from 1983 to 1986, years which saw the release of films such as *Stranger Than Paradise* and *Desert Hearts*. From there he went to Skouras Pictures (*Belizaire the Cajun*, Glenn Pitre, 1986; *Waiting For the Moon*, Jill Godmilow, 1987; *Living On Tokyo Time*, Steven Okazaki, 1987; *The Wizard of Loneliness*, Jenny Bowen, 1988; *Apartment Zero*, Martin Donovan, 1989), and subsequently, in 1991, co-founded and ran October Films with Bingham Ray, before leaving in 1995. Most recently, Lipsky has resurfaced as Head of Distribution and Marketing at Samuel Goldwyn Films, a newly formed entity established by Samuel Goldwyn, Jr. in the wake of the Samuel Goldwyn Company's demise and sale. To date, Samuel Goldwyn Films has released *Lolita* (Adrian Lyne, 1998) and *Desert Blue* (Morgan J. Freeman, 1999).

Bingham Ray first managed the Carnegie Hall and Bleeker Street cinemas, then worked at New Yorker Films at the same time as Lipsky. Ray moved to Goldwyn during Lipsky's era as head of distribution (1983-1986), and took over Lipsky's position when the latter left in 1986. He did subsequent stints at Alive Pictures (*The Moderns*, Alan Rudolph) in 1988 and Avenue Pictures (*Drugstore Cowboy*, Gus Van Sant) in 1989 before co-founding October Films in 1991, which he continues to run.

While not an exhaustive list, the above examples provide some indication of how independent film's intimate 'permanent government' has recurrently resurfaced. These individuals comprise a consistency, indeed an institutional dominance, in what is otherwise perceived as an industry of flux and upheaval.



Their prevalence may well prevent the flow of new ideas and alternate strategies; insider experiences and viewpoints do not change dramatically, although the corporate entities within which they function do. This creates a certain sedimentation embedded within the appearance of upheaval and change, an industry mythology that is either false or much more limited than the persona suggests.

Another of the most significant aspects of the current composition of independent distribution is ownership of the mini-majors by Hollywood studios. Sony Pictures Classics (with its precursors Orion Classics and United Artists Classics) is the only long-standing mini-major to be studio owned and financed from its inception. In the spring of 1993 Walt Disney company bought Miramax; in the summer of 1993 the Turner Broadcasting System bought New Line Cinema, parent company of Fine Line Features. In 1995, New Line/Fine Line became part of the Time Warner complex, which includes Warner Brothers Studios, in a merger acquisition of the Turner Broadcasting System. In 1994, Twentieth Century Fox formed Fox Searchlight as its specialty or arthouse film division. And in 1997, 51% of October Films was sold to Universal Pictures.

The primary reason independent distributors agree to studio buyouts is to increase their capitalisation. In the current marketplace, purchasing, marketing and sometimes producing films requires tremendous financial resources.<sup>105</sup> For instance, through the deal with Universal, October 'gets a huge injection of cash to bid more aggressively on films, and to start producing them as well.'<sup>106</sup> Sufficient capitalisation has always been an issue in the film industry. One of the reasons for the disappearance of the B studios in the 1950s, for instance, was thin capitalisation: 'their physical assets, cash on hand, and borrowing power were never very great,<sup>107</sup> leaving them no financial cushion to fall back on during stretches of poor business.

From a studio perspective, the incentive in owning a specialty film division is dominantly prestige.

Disney executives sat helplessly as rival Sony Corp., with its Columbia and TriStar studios, bought ads in the trade newspapers trumpeting its '30 Academy Award nominations.' More than a third of these came from art-house pictures such as *Howard's End* and *Indochine*, that were released by its tiny 'Sony Classics' unit....Disney seeks this prestige.<sup>108</sup>

But while award-winning stature may be a greater motivater than commerce in studio acquisition of independent companies (or more accurately, the motive of prestige as it effects commerce), Hollywood began to take notice of independent film only after several striking box-office successes. The moment of change is widely regarded as the 1989 release of *sex, lies & videotape* which earned \$24.7 million at the box-office, grabbed Hollywood's attention and brought studio representatives in large numbers to subsequent years of the Sundance Film Festival, where the film had premiered, in search of other independent 'discoveries'. And Disney's purchase of Miramax occurred in the wake of 1992's successes *The Crying Game* (\$65 million, Miramax) and *Howard's End* (\$25 million, James Ivory, Sony Classics).

Harvey Weinstein insists Disney's only influence on Miramax is financial, 'Disney is our big daddy or rich uncle. You can say Disney or you can say Chase Manhattan.'<sup>109</sup> Disney publicly concurs. CEO Michael Eisner states, 'They're completely autonomous. And they should be. They keep their costs down and their ideas up.'<sup>110</sup> And Joe Roth, studio chair after Jeffrey Katzenberg's 1994 departure, seconds the sentiment calling it, "'euphemistic and silly" to say the Weinsteins report to him.'<sup>111</sup> But early predictions of tension between 'strong-willed Disney executives and the Weinstein brothers, who have a reputation as sometimes abrasive entrepreneurs'<sup>112</sup> seem to be borne out.

Disney-imposed restrictions at the time of the buy-out stipulated that Miramax stay within its budget guidelines and not release films rated NC-17.<sup>113</sup> In the past Miramax had distributed such X-rated films (since replaced by the NC-17 rating) as *Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down* (Pedro Almodovar, 1990) and *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (Peter Greenaway, 1990). Miramax released them into theatres without their ratings, as they were permitted to do, after using the ratings controversy surrounding the films to generate publicity. However Disney, as a member of the Motion Picture Association of American (MPAA) which oversees the ratings process, is not permitted to distribute unrated films. Further, Disney, as a 'family-oriented' company maintains a corporate policy against NC-17 films. Such films also make marketing harder as many newspapers will not run NC-17 ads, a number of theatres do not show them, and certain video stores (for example, Blockbuster) will not carry them.

To date, Miramax and Disney have fought over the release of such NC-17 films as *You So Crazy* with Martin Lawrence (Thomas Schlamme, 1994) which was sold by Miramax, at Disney's insistence, to Goldwyn; *Priest* (Antonia Bird, 1995) a story woven around the character of a homosexual priest; *Kids* (Larry Clark, 1995) for which Disney demanded the repayment of its \$3.5 million purchasing price, and which was subsequently distributed by Shining Excalibur, a subsidiary established by Miramax to distribute the film in disassociation from Disney; and *Dogma* (Kevin Smith, 1999) which Miramax has also offered to 'buy back' from Disney.

Nor is Miramax the only independent to be similarly affected. The distribution of Fine Line's *Crash* (David Cronenberg, 1997) was delayed for six months by Ted Turner who considered the film 'really weird'.<sup>114</sup> Steven Schiff, screenwriter of *Lolita* (Adrian Lyne, 1998), states that studio ownership kept independents like Miramax and October from distributing *Lolita* which, as a result,

premiered in the U.S. not theatrically but on the cable movie channel, Showtime, in August 1998.<sup>115</sup>

But perhaps the most highly publicised case to date is that of Todd Solondz' *Happiness*, a black comedy/drama with a subplot concerning pedophilia. Having financed the film and set to release it, October was forced to back out of the deal by its parent company, Universal. Opposition to *Happiness* is reported to have reached the highest echelons of Universal<sup>116</sup> and perhaps even its parent company, Seagram. Except for October's initial announcement on July 1, 1998 that it was backing out of releasing the film because *Happiness* did not 'fit Seagram/Universal's image',<sup>117</sup> October and Universal officials have refused to comment on the circumstances. It is worth noting, however, that the film was not renounced as 'unfit' for October. On the contrary, the controversy-generating, Cannes Critics' Prize-winning *Happiness* is precisely the kind of film October would desire for its slate. The hope of October executives that retention of 49% financial ownership in the company would ensure October its desired autonomy apparently has not materialised. *Happiness* has been distributed, instead, by its producers, Good Machine.<sup>118</sup> Such studio interference threatens independent film's foundational distinction from Hollywood, risking the independent arena's dissolution through the enforced absorption of Hollywood standards. In other words, such studio mandates force independent film to imitate the more powerful industry, rather than allowing it to emphasise its distinction by stressing differences between the two. This tends to eliminate or mitigate a 'cutting edge' quality, one of the characteristic attributes of independent film.

For example, in the instance of *Happiness*, objections from Universal seem to focus not on the fact that a pedophilic character, Bill Maplewood (Dylan Baker), is portrayed, but rather, on *how* he is characterised. 'It's not that the character's crimes are shown (they aren't) but that Solondz refuses to demonize him. He finds it far more interesting to try to understand what makes him tick.

This is what is truly shocking to some.<sup>119</sup> In other words, if Bill Maplewood's character had been demonised, clearly and simplistically, his presence in the film would not be a problem. Yet the film does not validate him in any sense for what he has done -- he, we, the represented community, and his entire family know what he has done is wrong. Rather, he is presented as an average, familiar social type. As *USA Today* explains, the problem is 'the character is presented as a normal, upstanding member of the community.'<sup>120</sup> Which is only to suggest that pedophiliacs do not take shape in some immediately recognisable ogre's outline or monstrous guise but are, indeed, secreted within the community at large.

Further, the character of the pedophile is hardly significantly worse than the rapist, the stalker or the wife batterer in the film. In fact, *Happiness* can be read as an initiation into the sordidness of male sexuality. After futile masturbatory efforts, when Billy (Rufus Read), the film's 11 year old protagonist, announces to his mother, aunts and grandparents gathered around the dining table, 'I came', his exuberant innocence seems shallow, illusive, and transitory as he steps into the world of adult male sexuality, governed by the disturbing cultural and psychological factors the film depicts. The criticism of the pedophile character in *Happiness* is that he is presented in a 'positive' light; yet, he is actually a cornerstone in the film's distressing, cumulative portrait of male sexuality. Bill Maplewood is, however, a complex character, just as the verbally violent stalker, Allen (Philip Seymour Hoffman), is depicted as an insecure, as well as angry, social outcast. Such complexity of character may well be equated in corporate studio minds, amongst others, as a 'positive' portrayal -- simply to be represented, made visible or shown to exist is to be dangerous.

Although issues of censorship may be the most overt indication of the consequence of studio ownership on independent companies, a bigger impact could well prove to be the effect of Hollywood expectations upon the independent industry. Most notably, there is an increasing pressure toward 'mini-blockbusters'

-- an effort to duplicate such hits as *The Crying Game*, *The Piano*, *Pulp Fiction*, *The English Patient*, *Shine*, and *Shakespeare In Love*. The model here, of course, is Miramax, an exception in the independent industry in many ways, but now the standard-bearer in terms of studio expectations. As a result, Fox Searchlight manages to replicate a Miramax-type success with *The Full Monty*, and the minimum performance expectation for a successful film rises from \$1 or \$2 million to \$10 million (*The Brothers McMullen*). As Mark Urman, president of Lions Gate Releasing, puts it, 'Hollywood and the indies are now cohabiting, and they've given one another their virus. Indies are dreaming about money, and studios are dreaming about prestige.'<sup>121</sup>

While the studios may value their specialty divisions primarily for their prestige potential rather than financial earnings, the more widespread the audience for a film, the more widespread the accompanying prestige factor. Further, only with breakout films such as *The English Patient* or *The Full Monty* does one achieve both the box-office benefits of a hit *and* the widespread attention which wins higher-profile, mainstream accolades such as Academy Award nominations<sup>122</sup> (versus, say, how a film does at the Rotterdam, Telluride or Toronto film festivals, of far less interest to the studios). And breakout successes usually occur only with the costly promotional efforts of newspaper and TV advertising, and viewer accessibility to the film provided by a wide release strategy. *The Blair Witch Project*, reaching blockbuster status of over \$100 million, is a potentially important departure in terms of costly newspaper and TV advertising. Artisan's original marketing strategy was to create a 'buzz' for the film 'via an Internet Web site, a comic book and other so-called "guerrilla" marketing tactics.'<sup>123</sup> However, as the film grew in popularity more media advertising was taken out, while its box-office phenomenon status was only made possible by its wide release (1100 screens its first week, 2000 its second) .

As Tom Bernard of Sony Pictures Classics puts it, 'There's an insatiable appetite to become bigger businesses, to carve out a bigger slice of the market',<sup>124</sup> pressure fuelled by studio ownership. In early 1996, for instance, Ira Deutchman was replaced as president of Fine Line Features by Ruth Vitale with 'the mandate to compete more aggressively with Miramax as well as to move into the production of higher-budget films.'<sup>125</sup> Along with the pressure to move towards large, upscale successes, both aesthetically and financially, the *means* to do so comes courtesy of the studios and their capitalisation. This, in turn, has the effect of further intensifying the distances and the differences in product between the mini-majors and the micro distributors.

This chapter has outlined some of the institutional and material dimensions of the independent film industry. The next chapter examines certain of the representational discourses that have most affected independent cinema: avant-garde and alternative filmmaking practices. Alongside the institutional and material dimensions already described, Chapter Two will bring into the picture some of the representational/textual discourses circulated via independent film. This will allow, in Chapter Three, an exploration of how material and representational discourses might co-exist, that is, the interaction of 'the means of production and the vision thing.'

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- <sup>1</sup> *New York Times Magazine*, 16 November 1997, Section 6, cover page.
- <sup>2</sup> 'Introduction', *New York Times Magazine*, p. 75.
- <sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Richard Corliss, 'Independent's Day', *Time*, 24 February 1997, pp. 62-66; Mike Clark, 'Smaller Films Were the Bigger Stars of the Year', *USA Today*, 27 December 1996, p. 5D.
- <sup>4</sup> *New York Times Magazine*, p. 128.
- <sup>5</sup> Jim Moran and Holly Willis, 'The War of Independents', *Filmmaker: The Magazine of Independent Film*, vol. 6, no. 2 (Winter 1998), p. 22. *Filmmaker* is a quarterly published by the Independent Feature Project (New York) and the Independent Feature Project West (Los Angeles).
- <sup>6</sup> Janet Maslin, 'Meeting Halfway', *New York Times Magazine*, p. 103.
- <sup>7</sup> John Pierson, *Spike, Mike, Slackers & Dykes: A Guided Tour Across a Decade of American Independent Cinema*, New York: Hyperion, 1995, pp. 332-333.
- <sup>8</sup> *Pulp Fiction's* storytelling structure and style are discussed in Chapter Six. Categories of art cinema, including foreign films and historical epics are covered in Chapter Two.
- <sup>9</sup> For instance, *USA Today* defines specialty films as those that open on 500 or fewer screens. Josh Chetwynd, 'Film Glut Freezes Out Independents', *USA Today*, 28 December 1998, p. 3D.
- <sup>10</sup> Manohla Dargis, 'The Vision Thing', *Filmmaker*, vol. 3, no. 3 (Spring 1995), p. 32.
- <sup>11</sup> James Schamus, 'American Independents Depending on Europe', *Off-Hollywood Report*, vol. 6, no. 4 (Winter 1992), p. 36.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> Dawn Hudson, 'Letters', *Filmmaker*, vol. 3, no. 4 (Summer 1995), p. 8.
- <sup>16</sup> Although detailed discussion is outside the bounds of this study, it is important to note that Hollywood, too, is a pliable and shifting formation. Indeed, one of the reasons independent film must constantly renew itself is in response to ongoing, contemporaneous changes in dominant discursive paradigms. Complicating the relationship further, Hollywood evolutions might well include appropriations of successful or noteworthy independent strategies.
- <sup>17</sup> Quoted in *The Hollywood Reporter*, 17 April 1996.
- <sup>18</sup> Jim Stark, 'Garage Movies: Part I', *Off-Hollywood Report*, vol. 5, no. 4 (July/August 1990), p. 13.
- <sup>19</sup> Scott Macauley, 'Take My Film...Please!', *Filmmaker*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Fall 1994), p.34.
- <sup>20</sup> Ted Hope, 'Indie Film Is Dead...Long Live Indie Film', *Filmmaker*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Fall 1995), p. 18.
- <sup>21</sup> James Schamus, 'Don't Worry, Be Happy', *Filmmaker*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Fall 1995), p. 22.
- <sup>22</sup> For instance, Paul Schrader comments, 'Ever since the liberation movements of blacks and women, of gays and grays, those segments of the population that



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were overlooked in movies are now addressed....Parts of the audience that were overlooked are now being addressed to the extent that they have economic clout.' Paul Schrader quoted in Carrie Rickey, 'Divide and Conquer: Selling the Movies', *Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine*, 19 November 1995, p. 26.

<sup>23</sup> Walter Kirn, 'Robert Redford Has This Problem', *New York Times Magazine*, 16 November 1997, p. 85. While the Sundance Film Festival has come to dominate independent festivals in the publicity and distribution deals it is able to secure for independent films, it has also provoked the most discussion about whether it is even an 'independent' festival any longer. This is due to its repeated screenings of higher budget films, 'repeat' directors, and star or known casts. For instance, Caryn James speaks of a 'direct link between Hollywood and Park City', where the festival is held, and notes, 'Even the hardest-nosed business people, the distributors who come here prepared to buy movies, now astutely describe this festival in terms of pop-culture celebrity. Their tone is usually stunned, as if visualizing money flying out of their pockets.' Caryn James, 'Hollywood Breathes In The Spirit Of Sundance', *New York Times*, 2 February 1997, Section 2, pp. 1 & 26. At 1999s Sundance, Robert Redford acknowledged that the event has become more a marketplace than a festival. Amy Taubin, 'Slippery Slopes', *Village Voice*, 16 February 1999, p. 148; Claudia Puig, 'Sundance: A Film Market, Certainly, But Still Surprising', *USA Today*, 26 January 1999, p. 4D.

<sup>24</sup> Jim Stark, *Off-Hollywood Report*, p. 12. See also, for instance, 'High Risk Distribs', *Off-Hollywood Report*, vol. 6, no. 6 (Winter 1990/91) p. 7; and John Pierson, *Spike, Mike, Slackers & Dykes*, p. 19 & p. 114.

<sup>25</sup> Jim Stark, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> Although the youth market in toto is important to Hollywood, the working assumption is that girls and young women will go to 'guy' films but not vice versa, therefore the boys and young male market is more specifically targeted. The exception to this has been the so-called 'date movies', dramas or romantic comedies that appeal to young women but which have enough other elements (casting, action) to make them acceptable to men. This was one of the most widely-held explanations for the astronomical success of *Titanic*.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Schatz, 'The New Hollywood', in *Film Theory Goes To The Movies*, Jim Collins, Hillary Radner & Ava Preacher Collins (eds), New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 19. However, it should also be noted that a widely regarded attribute of the new Hollywood was the rise, in the 1970s and 1980s of American auteurs such as Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Robert Altman and Brian DePalma. The work of these filmmakers also influenced and, arguably, paved the way for independent fare. The problem with the designation 'the new Hollywood' is that it is too unified and singular a category to describe a wide array of differing, sometimes competing, contemporaneous attributes and events.

<sup>28</sup> Yvonne Tasker, 'Approaches to the New Hollywood', in *Cultural Studies and Communications*, James Curran, David Morley and Valerie Walkerdine (eds), London: Arnold, 1996, pp. 217 & 219.

<sup>29</sup> The figures vary based on sources. Neal Gabler in the *New York Times* cites \$57 million, *USA Today* provides two different figures, \$59.7 and \$61 million, while Jack Valenti, head of the Motion Picture Association of America, supplies \$60 million. However, as all numbers are based on MPAA sources the discrepancies

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are due presumably to changing calculations predicated on date given. Neal Gabler, 'The End of the Middle', *New York Times Magazine*, 16 November 1997, p. 78; David Lieberman, 'Movie-Industry Costs Give Hollywood a Wake-Up Call', *USA Today*, 6 March 1997, p. 2B, and Tom Lowry, 'Hollywood Banks On Blockbusters', *USA Today*, 26 December 1996, p. 2B, respectively; and *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 6 March 1997, p. C2.

<sup>30</sup> Steven Rea, 'On Movies', *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 22 March 1998, p. F9.

<sup>31</sup> For instance, Neal Gabler, *New York Times Magazine*, p. 77; Tom Lowry, *USA Today*, p. 2B; Christopher Goodwin, 'It's The Pictures That Got Small', *The London Sunday Times*, 17 May 1998, section 11, p. 2; Louis Giannetti and Scott Eyman, *Flashback: A Brief History of Film*, 3rd edition, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996, pp. 533 & 537; Mike Clark, 'Profits Can Really Soar Overseas', *USA Today*, 31 December 1997, p. 1D.

<sup>32</sup> Neal Gabler, p. 77.

<sup>33</sup> David Lieberman, *USA Today*, p. 2B.

<sup>34</sup> '1997's Most Influential People: Harvey Weinstein, Movie Mogul', *Time*, 21 April 1997, p. 52.

<sup>35</sup> Ron Weiskind, 'Independents' Day', *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 8 December 1996, p. G11.

<sup>36</sup> Neal Gabler, p. 78.

<sup>37</sup> Isisara Bey, 'A Seat on the Aisle', *American Visions*, vol. 8, no. 3, p. 42.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Bart cited in Desmond Ryan, 'Multinationals Are Changing The Movies And Film Fans Are Not Going To Be Pleased', *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 28 March 1999, p. F5. Bart analyses the blockbusters of the summer of 1998, all of which grossed over \$100 million in domestic theatrical box office: *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, Touchstone), *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, Dreamworks), *Godzilla* (Roland Emmerich, TriStar), *There's Something About Mary* (Peter Farrelly & Bobby Farrelly, Twentieth Century Fox), *Deep Impact* (Mimi Leder, Paramount/Dreamworks), *Mulan* (Barry Cook and Tony Bancroft, Disney), *Doctor Doolittle* (Betty Thomas, Twentieth Century Fox), *Lethal Weapon 4* (Richard Donner, Warner Bros.), *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, Paramount). All of the films made at least as much in foreign grosses as they did domestically, and in half the cases significantly more. For instance, *Godzilla* grossed \$136 million domestically and \$240 million in foreign theatrical markets for a total of \$541 million, although it was widely perceived as a 'big disappointment' for Sony. *Ibid.*, pp. F1 & F5.

<sup>39</sup> All figures quoted are for domestic theatrical box-office grosses and do not include foreign theatrical, videocassette, or domestic and foreign television revenues. Sources for figures are *Filmmaker*, Winter 1995, insert preceding p. 42; *Filmmaker*, Winter 1996, p. 37; *Filmmaker*, Fall 1996, p. 40; *Filmmaker*, Winter 1998, p. 49 and insert preceding p. 49.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas R. King and Richard Turner, 'Disney Agrees to Buy the Distributor of *Crying Game* at Possibly \$60 Million', *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 May 1993, p. B13.

<sup>41</sup> Sources for figures on *The Crying Game*, *The English Patient* and *Pulp Fiction* are, respectively, Richard Natale, 'Indie Films No Longer Penny-Ante Affair', *Los Angeles Times*, 14 April 1995, Calendar, p. 4; Neal Gabler, *New York Times*

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*Magazine*, p. 78; Alice Rawsthorn, 'Movie Makers Vie for the Sundance Kid's Acclaim', *Financial Times*, 23 January 1996, p. 6.

<sup>42</sup> Amy Dawes, "'No-Budget' Filmmakers Tell Secrets of Their Quiet Success', *Variety*, 28 January 1991, p. 10.

<sup>43</sup> See, for instance, Carrie Rickey, 'Divide and Conquer: Selling the Movies', *Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine*, 19 November 1995, pp. 18-19, 26-28, 35; and Neal Gabler, pp. 76-78. Both bemoan the trend towards specific demographics fearing it will splinter audiences and eliminate common ground (Rickey) or further exacerbate the divide between 'entertainment' and 'art' (Gabler).

<sup>44</sup> John Pierson, p. 20.

<sup>45</sup> *Filmmaker*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Fall 1996), pp. 40-60. As the selection panel was composed of industry insiders, it should be noted that panelists would be likely to nominate films with which they had been involved. Although many documentaries appeared on the list, for the purposes of the discussion at hand I have excluded them and, rather, focused on narrative films -- the dominant fare at repertory houses.

<sup>46</sup> In another context, James Schamus finds logical the encompassing of art, cult and exploitation fare within one conceptual umbrella: 'in a society where both serious intellectual culture and serious working class culture are equally marginalized, it's not surprising that the film productions geared to both these audiences tend to repeat many of the same aesthetic gestures and speak to the same subjects.' James Schamus, 'Whatever Happened to B Movies?', *Off-Hollywood Report*, vol. 5, no. 5 (September/October 1990), pp. 19-20.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>48</sup> David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 5th edition, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997, p. 23.

<sup>49</sup> John Waters has stated, 'I've always said that what I do is make exploitation films for art theaters.' Quoted in J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies*, New York: Harper and Row, 1983, p. 152. Waters cites his three major influences as American Underground film (the Kuchar Brothers, Andy Warhol, Kenneth Anger), exploitation and nudist camp movies, and European art films. Peter Bowen, 'Flash In The Pan', *Filmmaker*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Fall 1998), p. 51.

<sup>50</sup> Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn (eds), 'Introduction', *King of the Bs: Working Within the Hollywood System*, New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1975, p. 15.

<sup>51</sup> Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn, p. 17. Richard K. Ferncase, *Outsider Features: American Independent Films of the 1980s*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996, p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> Richard Ferncase, p. 3; Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn, p. 15. Studio divestiture of theatre ownership, while causing the B studios to decline, at the same time provided an opportunity for independent film. Beginning in the 1950s, exhibitors could now programme non-studio fare, for instance, foreign films, enabling the influence of European cinema (Italian neorealism, Ingmar Bergman, the French New Wave) in the 1950s and 1960s in the U.S.

<sup>53</sup> Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986, p. 188.

<sup>54</sup> J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, pp. 115-116; Richard Ferncase, p. 7.

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- <sup>55</sup> Richard Ferncase, p. 7, Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn, p. 63.
- <sup>56</sup> J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, pp. 30-31.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 211.
- <sup>58</sup> *A Nightmare On Elm Street*, Wes Craven, 1984; *A Nightmare On Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge*, Jack Sholder, 1985; *A Nightmare On Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors*, Chuck Russell, 1987; *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master*, Renny Harlin, 1988; *A Nightmare on Elm Street 5: The Dream Child*, Stephen Hopkins, 1989; *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare*, Rachel Talalay, 1991.
- <sup>59</sup> *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Movie*, Steve Barron, 1990; *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 2: The Secret of the Ooze*, Michael Pressman, 1991; *The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles III*, Stuart Gillard, 1993.
- <sup>60</sup> 'In-House Boutiques', *Off-Hollywood Report*, vol. 5, no. 6 (Winter 1990/91), p. 9.
- <sup>61</sup> In May 1998, Polygram was bought from Dutch electronics company Philips, by Canadian-owned Seagram, which also owns MCA/Universal Studios (music, film and television). The sale prompted discussion that Seagram's would sell off the Polygram film division or perhaps absorb it into Universal. Dan Glaister, 'Sale Threat to British Film Industry', *The London Guardian*, 22 May 1998, p. 4; 'Seagram Buys Polygram From Philips for \$10.6 bn', *The Independent*, 22 May 1998, p. 24.
- <sup>62</sup> Marcy Magiera, 'Gramercy's Goal Is A Challenge For DDB', *Advertising Age*, vol. 64, no. 5 (1 February 1993), p. 42.
- <sup>63</sup> John Pierson, p. 17.
- <sup>64</sup> Orion itself was formed by former United Artists executives in the wake of the latter's absorption by MGM (to become MGM/UA) in 1981.
- <sup>65</sup> John Pierson, p. 120.
- <sup>66</sup> James Schamus, 'Points of Light: Orion Classics Stays At The Top', *Off-Hollywood Report*, vol. 6, no. 2 (Summer 1991), p. 20.
- <sup>67</sup> John Pierson, p. 334.
- <sup>68</sup> Lisa Gubernick, 'We Don't Want to Be Walt Disney', *Forbes*, 16 October 1989, p. 110.
- <sup>69</sup> *Filmmaker*, Winter 1998, insert preceding p. 49.
- <sup>70</sup> Figure for *The Piano* from Richard Natale, *Los Angeles Times*, Calendar, p. 4. Figures for *Life Is Beautiful* and *Shakespeare In Love* from Miramax. Figures are accurate as of May 3, 1999; both films continued in theatrical release after that date.
- <sup>71</sup> Lisa Gubernick, *Forbes*, p. 110. See also, Thomas King and Richard Turner, *Wall Street Journal*, p. B13.
- <sup>72</sup> Lisa Gubernick, p. 110.
- <sup>73</sup> Ross Johnson and Dana Harris, 'How Healthy is "The Patient"?' *Hollywood Reporter*, *New York Special Issue*, 16 September 1997, p. S-23.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. S-21.
- <sup>75</sup> \$6 million each for *Next Stop, Wonderland* and *The Castle*; \$2.75 million for *Jerry and Tom*.
- <sup>76</sup> John Horn, Associated Press, 'Sundance Festival Buries Indie Films In Money', *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1 February 1998, p. F11.

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- <sup>77</sup> See, for instance, Ted Hope, *Filmmaker*, Fall 1995, p. 18. At the 1999 Independent Feature Project Spirit Awards, Miramax was presented with a fake award called 'The Shelf', 'for the most films acquired for distribution but never actually released.' Stephen Garrett, 'Beach Blanket Bingo', *Filmmaker*, vol. 7, no. 3 (Spring 1999), p. 18.
- <sup>78</sup> Martin Grove, 'Showbiz Today', CNN, broadcast 24 October 1994.
- <sup>79</sup> Michael Lewis, 'The Capitalist: The Money Pit', *New York Times Magazine*, 16 November 1997, p. 68. Harvey Weinstein's response to charges of Miramax inaccurately reporting their box-office take is, 'It's absolute bullshit!', Ross Johnson and Dana Harris, *Hollywood Reporter, Special Issue*, p. S-21. However, Miramax/Dimension was accused of doing the same thing with *Scream 2*, inflating the opening weekend box office by \$6 million. This Miramax subsequently acknowledged, saying it had overestimated the number of screens at which the movie had played. Bruce Orwall, 'Miramax Admits It Overstated *Scream 2* Ticket Sales', *Wall Street Journal*, 22 December 1997, p. B1; Leonard Klady, 'Miramax Mixup Over *Scream*', *Variety*, 22 December 1997 -- 4 January 1998, p. 16.
- <sup>80</sup> Ronald Grover, 'All That Glitters Is Not Goldwyn', *Business Week*, 24 July 1995, p. 42.
- <sup>81</sup> Jon Elsen, 'Goldwyn Sues MGM Over Name', *Business News, New York Post Online*, 31 October 1997.
- <sup>82</sup> Figures from, respectively, *Filmmaker*, vol. 4, no. 2 (Winter 1996), p. 37, and Harlan Jacobson, 'Small Is Big', *USA Today*, 28 August 1998, p. 2E.
- <sup>83</sup> 'A Dollar and a Dream', *Filmmaker*, vol. 7, no. 2 (February--April, 1999), p. 30.
- <sup>84</sup> Mary Glucksman, 'Pushing Films', *Filmmaker*, vol. 3, no. 3 (Spring 1995), p. 23.
- <sup>85</sup> John Horn, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, p. F11.
- <sup>86</sup> Mary Glucksman, 'The State of Things', *Filmmaker*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Fall 1994), p. 24.
- <sup>87</sup> AP's John Horn puts the figure between \$500,000 and \$1 million, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, p. F11.
- <sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* 'Minimal marketing costs' by industry standards. Here Horn assumes a figure of approximately \$500,000.
- <sup>89</sup> Harlan Jacobson, *USA Today*, p. 2E.
- <sup>90</sup> Whether that approaches a break-even figure depends on how much was actually spent on prints and advertising.
- <sup>91</sup> Tom DiCillo, *Box of Moonlight & Notes From Overboard: A Film-maker's Diary*, London: Faber and Faber, 1997, p. 36.
- <sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>93</sup> John Horn, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, p. F11.
- <sup>94</sup> And although *Living In Oblivion* is considered a success at \$1.14 million and positive critical response; DiCillo's point, however, is that in comparison *The Brothers McMullen* earned over \$10 million and was seen by a much wider audience.
- <sup>95</sup> Mary Glucksman, 'The State of Things', p. 24. *The Full Monty*, for instance, had a general, rather than arthouse, release, reaching 783 theatres simultaneously at its peak. Steven Rea, 'On Movies', *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 5 October 1997, p. F9.

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>97</sup> Marcus Hu, 'Guerrilla Releasing: A Guide To No-Budget Film Distribution', *Filmmaker*, vol. 1, no. 4 (Summer 1993), p. 34. *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, John McNaughton, 1990, Greycat; *Vincent*, Paul Cox, 1987, Roxie; *Man Bites Dog*, Remy Belvaux, Andre Bonzel and Benoit Poelvoorde, 1992, Roxie; *The Vanishing*, George Sluizer, 1988, Tara; *Together Alone*, P.J. Castellaneta, 1992, Frameline; *Mala Noche*, Gus Van Sant, 1986, Frameline.

<sup>98</sup> Jon Jost, *Off Hollywood Report*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Spring 1992), p. 9.

<sup>99</sup> Marcus Hu, *Filmmaker*, p. 39.

<sup>100</sup> For instance, Marcus Hu cites Alive, Atlantic, Cineplex, Island, Vestron, Film Dallas and Spectrafilm as going out of business in the late 1980s, in the wake of the short-lived boom of video dollars, followed in the early 90s by Avenue, Cinecom and Circle. Marcus Hu, p. 34.

<sup>101</sup> Megan Ratner, 'Borderlines', *Filmmaker*, vol. 4, no. 4 (Summer 1996), p. 35.

<sup>102</sup> At the time of his comments, Sayles' ten films and their distributors were: *The Return of the Secaucus Seven*, 1980, Libra/Specialty; *Baby It's You*, 1983, Paramount; *Lianna*, 1983, United Artists Classics; *The Brother From Another Planet*, 1984, Cinecom; *Matewan*, 1987, Cinecom; *Eight Men Out*, 1988, Orion; *City of Hope*, 1991, Goldwyn; *Passion Fish*, 1992, Miramax; *The Secret of Roan Inish*, 1994, First Look; *Lone Star*, 1996, Sony Classics. He has since released two more films, *Men With Guns* (1998, Sony Classics) and *Limbo* (1999, Screen Gems).

*Baby It's You* was produced and released by a studio, Paramount. Of the remaining nine films, Libra, United Artists Classics, Cinecom, Orion, and Goldwyn are no longer in business, accounting for six of the nine films (Cinecom distributed two). With regard to the distribution of his most recent films, Screen Gems is a division of Columbia which in turn is owned by Sony Pictures. Screen Gems is a newly revamped company intended to distribute smaller budget projects; *Limbo* is their first release. Although sharing the same parent corporation, Screen Gems and Sony Pictures Classics are entirely different entities.

<sup>103</sup> John Pierson, p. 40.

<sup>104</sup> Jeff Lipsky, 'Wielding Influence: Jeff Lipsky On Distributing Cassavetes', *Filmmaker*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Fall 1996), p. 43.

<sup>105</sup> Although this study focuses on the distribution activities of companies, most of the mini-majors produce films as well. The substantial marketing costs include newspaper and TV advertising, wider releases beyond the arthouse circuit, and expensive Academy Award campaigns. On the last see, Alice Rawsthorn, 'Independent Films Are Becoming An Important Source Of Profit For Major Studios', *Financial Times*, 23 January 1996, p. 6.

<sup>106</sup> Steven Rea, 'On Movies', *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 11 May 1997, p. F7.

<sup>107</sup> Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn, pp. 24 & 36. The comparison with B studios is apt in another respect, in both industries' reliance on genre pictures. New Line financed Fine Line with such films as the high-grossing *A Nightmare On Elm Street* series. Miramax, with its 1993-founded subsidiary, Dimension, has moved into the production and distribution of genre pictures with such box-office successes as *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996), *Scream 2* (Wes Craven, 1997) and *Halloween: H20* (Steve Miner, 1998).

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- <sup>108</sup> Thomas King and Richard Turner, *Wall Street Journal*, p. B13.
- <sup>109</sup> Richard Corliss, 'Independents' Day', *Time*, 24 February 1997, p. 64.
- <sup>110</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>111</sup> Jeannie Williams, 'Weinsteins Picture Philanthropic Future', *USA Today*, 18 September 1997, p. 2D.
- <sup>112</sup> Thomas King and Richard Turner, *Wall Street Journal*, p. B13.
- <sup>113</sup> Richard Corliss, *Time*, p. 64; Jeannie Williams, *USA Today*, p. 2D.
- <sup>114</sup> Steven Rea, 'Driving Through Trouble', *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 16 March 1997, p. F4.
- <sup>115</sup> Steven Schiff, *Lolita: The Book of the Film*, New York: Applause, 1998, pp. xxv-xxvi. *Lolita* was subsequently theatrically released in 1998 by Samuel Goldwyn Films, an independent company newly-established by Samuel Goldwyn, Jr. after the demise of the Samuel Goldwyn Company. James Sterngold, 'For Artistic Freedom, It's Not the Worst of Times', *New York Times*, 20 September 1998, Section 2, p. 26.
- <sup>116</sup> Universal studio head Ron Meyer is reported to have said 'he would do everything in his power to keep the studio from releasing the film.' Claudia Puig, 'Happiness Has A Dark Side', *USA Today*, 21 October 1998, p. 1D. For additional reports on the October/Universal 'jettisoning' of *Happiness*, see Degen Pener, 'Happiness Is...', *Entertainment Weekly*, 17 July 1998, p. 12, and David Ansen, 'A Comedy of Cruelty', *Newsweek*, 12 October 1998, p. 87.
- <sup>117</sup> Degen Pener, *Entertainment Weekly*, p. 12.
- <sup>118</sup> Stephen Holden, 'Shouts Of Rage At The Way We Are', *New York Times*, 13 September 1998, Section 2, p. 41.
- <sup>119</sup> David Ansen, *Newsweek*, p. 87. Also, 'Though not graphic, the scenes centering on this deeply troubled character are all the more disturbing because he is almost sympathetic and because the boys he molests are his 11-year-old son's classmates.' Stephen Holden, *New York Times*, p. 41.
- <sup>120</sup> Claudia Puig, *USA Today*, p. 1D.
- <sup>121</sup> Cited in Claudia Puig, 'Sundance's Shifting Beat', *USA Today*, 21 January 1999, p. 1D.
- <sup>122</sup> *The Full Monty* received four Academy Award nominations: the prestigious Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, and Best Original Score (Musical or Comedy). It won for Best Original Score.
- <sup>123</sup> Michael Miller, 'Low-budget *Blair Witch* Causes Generation Gap', *Columbia, South Carolina State*, 13 August, 1999, Weekend, p. 3.
- <sup>124</sup> Steven Rea, 'Movie Madness', *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 8 September 1996, p. F12.
- <sup>125</sup> Mary Glucksman, 'Pushing Films', p. 21. Also Dan Cox, 'Fine Line Challenges Miramax For Indie Champ Title', *Variety*, 14-20 October 1996, p. 22. One of the results of the new Fine Line mandate is the 1998 release *Let's Talk About Sex*, Troy Beyer. Vitale has subsequently left Fine Line to head the newly formed Paramount Classics. She has been replaced by Mark Ordesky.

## CHAPTER TWO

### FILM AS ARTEFACT: ALTERNATIVE INFLUENCES ON INDEPENDENT CINEMA

In the Winter 1998 issue of *Filmmaker: The Magazine of Independent Film*, Jim Moran and Holly Willis respond to criticisms that the magazine, like the surrounding independent industry, promotes only a narrow and commercialised strand of independent film.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the cover of the same issue promises updates on recent work by Vincent Gallo, Robert Duvall, Alan Rudolph, Paul Schrader and Penelope Spheeris. Except for first-time feature director Gallo (*Buffalo 66*, 1998, Lions Gate), all of the others have long-standing name recognition and substantial ties to Hollywood.

Acknowledging the criticism that, overall, the independent industry is creating and promoting increasingly generic films, 'dominated by the success stories of college-age men', Moran and Willis leave open the question, 'Given the relative failure of much radical film practice to achieve the political goals it strove for as well as the fundamental shifts in how we question naive notions of "vision" and the role of the artist in contemporary society...what would we choose to celebrate in the independent cinema of the '90s?'

Although heavily influenced by mainstream filmmaking practices -- the dominance of features, plot-driven modes of storytelling, a central focus on character development, casting of stars, Hollywood-type promotional and



marketing techniques, and so on -- independent cinema embodies equally the legacies and affects of a number of alternative filmmaking practices.

Often used interchangeably, terms such as 'avant-garde', 'experimental', and 'alternative' are modes of cultural production meant to signify in opposition to 'dominant' forms of cultural activity. While the histories and traditions of avant-garde, experimental and alternative work are complex, and the meanings of each term far from fixed, for the purposes of this study, 'avant-garde' refers to two specifically historical modernist movements, as delineated below. 'Experimental' will be used to denote current work, in contrast to avant-garde's association with an historical moment. And 'alternative' is the more encompassing term applied here, enveloping avant-garde, experimental, and all forms of oppositional artistic practice in their various manifestations.

Concepts of 'dominant' cultural production, from which alternative work seeks to signify differently, are far too complex and intricate to be treated adequately here. However, in film theory these often have been encompassed by the notion of 'classic realist cinema', also known as 'classical Hollywood cinema' for its intimate association with that industry. But classic realist cinema has come to most commonly designate a specific era in Hollywood film practice stretching from the late 1920s to the 1960s, comprising a specific narrative and aesthetic style based on principles of temporal/spatial continuity and cause-and-effect coherency which, in turn, forge a particular ideological configuration of 'the world' or 'reality'.

Equally problematic are ideas of what constitutes 'realism'. In much current theory, all textual schools or artistic styles are material, social, and ideological *representations* of some portion of the world. Particular forms of realism are presented in such a way as to conceal their representative qualities in order that they can more convincingly stand in for 'the truth' of reality. Graeme Turner, citing Colin McCabe, describes dominant realism as 'a set of representational codes that

offers the viewer a comfortable position from which to see even bitter political struggles as natural and inevitable.' Hollywood realism 'precodes the reality it represents within commonsense understandings of the world.'<sup>2</sup> In this analysis, then, realism is a function of hegemony.

To function effectively as natural, invisible, or commonsensical views of reality, styles of realism must constantly revise and update their representational codes and signifying landscapes in order to keep up with changing historical circumstances. In 'On Realism In Art', for instance, Roman Jakobson describes realism as a highly relational notion based on prevailing social and cultural formations.<sup>3</sup>

To avoid the historical, geographical, and stylistic specificities associated with classic realist cinema and, equally, to capture the resonances of various forms of realism as shifting and ongoing discursive formations, this study refers to the range of dominant cinematic practices, most commonly but not solely emanating from Hollywood, as 'normative realism'. This term, itself relational, permits an evolving sense of what independent film and alternative cinema work in opposition to at any historical or contemporary moment.

Although influenced by various forms of alternative cinema, independent film stands in distinction to its avant-garde precursors and experimental contemporaries. This is indicated, for instance, by the manner in which the journal *Filmmaker* speaks of *Orlando's* (1993, Sony Classics) place in the cinematic landscape compared to Sally Potter's former filmic output. 'With her new feature, *Orlando*, Sally Potter has risen from the respectable obscurity of avant-garde fame into the upper echelons of the independent film world.'<sup>4</sup> Alternative practices have the tendency to comprise sharp breaks with dominant cinema, while independent film is inclined to formulate itself as a hybrid with allegiances to both alternative and normative realist cinematic practices.

Although it is not always apparent where independent film takes its departure from alternative practices -- for example, *Orlando*, *Daughter of the Dust* (Julie Dash, 1992, Kino) and *Poison* (Todd Haynes, 1991, Zeitgeist) all exhibit strong avant-garde or experimental traits -- certain distinctions are evident. Avant-garde and experimental film and video making are much more likely to encompass short works, while independent film is dominated by features. Respective institutional and economic structures account for this. The outlet for alternative work is largely film/video festivals; the lack of income-generating exhibition, as well as the characteristics of experimental aesthetic forms, tend to make shorts a more viable option. In contrast, independent films' intended markets are generally theatrical release, videocassette, and television, with festival play viewed largely as an intermediary step in acquiring any of the former. In turn, the greater potential market for independent film over alternative work, as well as the greater costs associated with making features over shorts, affects the nature of the artefact produced.

Although alternative modes of working are distinguished from independent ones as in the case of Sally Potter, in the Moran/Willis open question regarding which aspects of independent film should be celebrated and preserved as independent film evolves, the subtextual suggestion points to alternative representational practices. In a view expressed repeatedly in various independent forums, the concern put forth is that independent film continue to be a hybrid, incorporating alternative textual/artefactual strategies without veering too closely to mainstream or dominant models. Indeed, it is through its borrowing or absorption of alternative traditions that independent film receives much of its respectability and credibility.

This chapter is engaged in unravelling some of the representational discourses from which independent film is composed. Just as the last chapter looked at how economic and institutional factors affect the specific composition of

independent cinema, this chapter details how certain representational discourses are operationalised and what they 'stand for' or come to 'mean'. Representational discourses involve the historical aesthetic traditions within which cultural producers perform, as well as the formal and narrative languages their works enact. The representational discourses analysed here, then, are certain alternative filmmaking practices; the issue is how these discourses work towards shaping the specificity of the artefacts produced.

Representational discourses do not exist apart from their material form: a work of art, an aesthetic object, a cultural product, a text or an artefact. Each of these terms for the tangible formation occupied by representational discourses bears its own resonances. A cultural *product*, for instance, carries the spin of the economic and social forces which shape it -- an object intended to be produced, distributed, and consumed.

An artefact, like a text, conveys meanings beyond its tangible form, just as the more traditional notion of an archaeological artefact, such as an ancient shard of pottery, imparts meanings of or is open to interpretations about the past. An artefact is trace evidence of other qualities, attributes, aspects, times or places. The more currently used term for the material form resulting from representational discourses and practices, *text*, has a certain dichotomisation attached to its usage. In order to avoid these dichotomisations -- for instance, signified and signifier often lapsing into a form/content parallelism; or debates about meaning embedded in the text *versus* that brought to it by audiences -- this chapter introduces the concept of artefact to signify the material object created through representational, and other, discourses. 'Artefact' seems to allow for greater openness to a conception of multiple, layered, interactionally criss-crossing discourses, representational and otherwise, which en masse formulate the collage that is the end product of aesthetic activity.

Following, is an examination of six alternative practices: the aesthetic avant-garde, the political avant-garde, art cinema, personal film, identity cinema, and postmodern film. Each section briefly outlines how and why they function as representational discourses -- 'the institutional processes, ideological preferences, vested interests and aesthetic judgements'<sup>5</sup> behind each approach. The summaries also indicate how all these alternative practices have impacted upon, and the role each continues to play, in current configurations of independent film.

### The Aesthetic Avant-Garde

The avant-garde has been described as having two principal tendencies: one aesthetic, the other political. The first concerns itself with 'an exploration of the means of representation, and with a revolutionising of the language of cinema',<sup>6</sup> while the second is 'radically opposed to the dominant or mainstream cinema at the level of its content or subject matter.'<sup>7</sup>

Terry Eagleton, indicating his own position, calls these two avenues of the avant-garde 'negative' and 'positive'. The first, the aesthetic, is

shock, outrage, mustaches on the Mona Lisa. It is difficult to base a politics on it, and difficult to do it twice. This current of the avant garde takes up the negative aesthetic of modernism and destroys meaning. What is it, in the end, that the bourgeoisie cannot take? Meaninglessness.

The second, the political, is the

positive moment of the avant garde, that of Brecht rather than Dada. This proclaims: there is indeed a way of resisting incorporation by the ruling order, whatever the fashionable jeremiads about how they will simply hang Picassos on the walls of their banks.... The positive avant garde understands that the question of integration stands or falls with the destiny of a mass political movement.<sup>8</sup>

The avant-garde is generally considered to originate with the modernist art movements of the twentieth century, in particular with Cubism. However, in some analyses, Cubism marks a juncture in which the aesthetic and political avant-gardes are unified, but this unity soon dissolves in the work of subsequent modernist schools. Peter Wollen, for instance, describes Cubism as 'a critical semiotic shift, a changed concept and practice of sign and signification, which we can now see to have been the opening-up of a space, a disjunction between signifier and signified and a change of emphasis from the problem of signified and reference, the classic problem of realism, to that of signifier and signified within the sign itself.' The 'classic problem of realism' is to show something 'transparent' about an accessible social reality (the signified) via verisimilitude (the signifier). Cubism, in fracturing its subjects into numerous planes, addresses the problematic of being able to 'access' social reality at all by means of representation or language (the signifier). Wollen continues, 'When we look at the development of painting after the Cubist breakthrough, however, we see a constant trend towards an apparently even more radical development: the suppression of the signified altogether, an art of pure signifiers detached from meaning as much as from reference.'<sup>9</sup> In Wollen's analysis, the problem of realism is that between representation and social reality; the problem of Cubism between representation and our capacity to perceive social reality; but the problem of abstract and other modernisms, solely that of a now free-floating, non-anchored image/sound/etc. without representative power of anything beyond itself.

Sylvia Harvey takes up a similar point: 'Modernist aesthetics induces a reflection upon, a consideration of, the means of representation, and for lovers of art it generates aesthetic pleasure out of a series of "frame-shifts" (the procedures whereby the art work playfully refers to itself and its own processes of production).'<sup>10</sup> And it is this last which becomes identified as film's aesthetic avant-garde, beginning with surrealist filmmakers in the 1920s such as Salvador

Dali and Luis Buñuel (*Un Chien andalou*, 1928), Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy (*Ballet mécanique*, 1923-24), and the work of Man Ray. It revives and achieves perhaps its 'purest' form with the Structuralist/Materialist filmmakers in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s (the Co-op movement), and with the structuralist/minimalist filmmakers of North America in the 1960s and 1970s (Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, Andy Warhol).

Wollen's, Harvey's and Eagleton's descriptions of the aesthetic avant-garde are fairly condemnatory (to varying degrees) because the absence of representation linked to referent undermines the ability to establish a clear-cut political perspective or position from which to operate. It becomes almost impossible to comment upon the world, or upon conceptions of the world, in any shape or form. 'The danger of this position is that in concentrating on the "reality of reflection", on the means of representation alone, the sense of a productive tension between means of representation and that social reality which the means of representation strive to analyse and account for is lost.'<sup>11</sup> The issue, then, is to what degree such a modernist project can refer to a larger social and ideological environment or only to its own processes of production. The perceived value of aesthetically-driven film hinges on the outcome of this assessment. For some, like Harvey, the 'struggle within representation' can be considered political if it is understood to refer only to a limited 'politics of form'.<sup>12</sup> For others however, as Harvey notes, summarising the 1969 argument of the film journal *Cinéthique*, the cinema produces its own specific ideology, the 'impression of reality', an ideological construct which creates film's power of illusion, the sense that it is replicating 'reality'. The function of materialist cinema, which refuses the codes of realism, is to disrupt the 'illusion-generating mechanisms' and so the 'illusory reflections of reality' of dominant cinema.<sup>13</sup>

Lisa Cartwright and Nina Fonoroff argue this position in an essay from 1983, with an updated 1992 introduction, 'Narrative is *Narrative*: So What is

New?'. Approaching the issue from a feminist perspective, they defend the political value of a non-narrative, experimental film practice.

Much feminist study has been devoted to the development of a discourse that addresses the ways in which narrative functions to reproduce the patriarchal order. Processes of identification (with camera point of view, with characters depicted within the film), temporal continuity, the 'kind' of viewing required for narrative films -- these are just a few aspects of narrative cinema that are called into question.<sup>14</sup>

Cartwright and Fonoroff strive to sever the belief, propagated by the dominance of narrative film they argue, that there is a necessary or 'natural' link between image and referent, between pleasure and narrative, and between narrative and film.<sup>15</sup> Calling for an experimental, non-narrative aesthetic instead, they believe that 'structuralist, visionary and personal film'<sup>16</sup> are capable of breaking down the ideological association of (narrative) 'film' with (the illusion of) 'reality'. An embedded narrative tradition, based on a diegesis, psychologically developed characters, spatial and temporal continuity, and so on, will not serve to disconnect the elision between film as a time-based, photographic medium and its ability to replicate reality. Greater attention to the *language* of cinema and its means of (re)production, however, are more appropriate to rendering its representative and ideological qualities apparent.

### The Political Avant-Garde

Sylvia Harvey distinguishes a four-fold critique of the aesthetic avant-garde. First, that it dwells on a concept of art about art, using that notion 'to replace an interest in the *relationship* between specific means of aesthetic representation and a social reality.' Second, its pursuit of an essentialist position in which form *becomes* content, wherein for example, 'a particular style is essentially progressive or essentially reactionary.' Third, meaning is embedded solely in the



text and not in the political, economic, social or cultural institutions and discourses surrounding it, that is, 'within a system of consumption, distribution or exchange specific to a particular society and a particular historical moment.' And fourth, an emphasis on 'high' art and a disregard for audience accessibility by offering 'a puritanical defence of the "work"...and an accompanying underestimation of the importance of pleasure and entertainment.'<sup>17</sup>

Concern about the inability to reference an explicit 'social reality' is taken up by Marxist theorists such as literary scholar Peter Bürger who argues that the term 'avant-garde' should be applied solely to artists who undermine the *institution* of art (for instance, Dadaists and Futurists), while reserving 'modernist' for all those who pursue only formal aesthetic issues. Jochen Schulte-Sasse, in his Introduction to Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* explains that Bürger is concerned mainly with the *differences* between formalist modernism and the avant-garde. 'Modernism may be understandable as an attack on traditional writing techniques, but the avant-garde can only be understood as an attack meant to alter the institutionalized commerce with art.'<sup>18</sup> Although the modernist artist may alter aesthetic technique, s/he continues to work within established paradigms of art; it is the avant-garde artist who demolishes the paradigms themselves by attacking the institutions and discourses of art, as in the case of Marcel Duchamp and his Ready-Mades which question what constitutes 'art' or what defines the artist as individual creator.

According to Bürger, 'When the avant-gardists demand that art become practical once again, they do not mean that the contents of works of art should be socially significant. The demand is not raised at the level of the contents of individual works. Rather, it directs itself to the way art functions in society, a process that does as much to determine the effect that works have as does the particular content'.<sup>19</sup> The way art functions in society has to do with issues such as what constitutes the art object, notions of originality and authenticity, as well as

exhibition practices and structures of economic transactions. As such, the avant-garde artist maintains concern with the social environment while formal modernism 'has made the distance from the praxis of life the content of works',<sup>20</sup> ceasing to be connected with any social practice.

Within film theory, similar arguments have been taken up by, most notably, Peter Wollen. Wollen understands the problem as originating in false divisions within the conception of 'cinematic codes'. In the modernist attempt to define a 'pure' cinema, all non-cinematic codes are refused. Non-cinematic codes are attributes which do not appear *exclusively* in film, such as music, verbal language (theatre), and narrative (literature and theatre).<sup>21</sup> Next, focus is placed on the material, rather than on the semiotic or representational, aspects of the solely cinematic codes: film emulsion, light, projection, and so on.

The modernist current, in complete contrast, has sought to expel the non-cinematic codes, leaving the residue called 'film'....Film is now directed not towards the 'nature' of the pro-filmic event, but towards the 'nature' of its own material substrate.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, elements of *mise-en-scène*, what occurs in front of the camera, are no longer of comparable concern to what occurs in the camera, on the film base, and in the process of projection.

From Wollen's perspective, the 'crisis' of modernism that occurs across all the arts in the 1960s, and which he associates with the social changes of May '68, presents, rather than a decline, an opportunity for the political avant-garde, 'creating a host of new areas of commitment and inquiry: women's art, political art, popular imagery, environment, performance.'<sup>23</sup> 'The breakdown of this official modernism has been widely seen as a slackening, perhaps even a collapse of avant-gardism.' But from a socio-political perspective, '[i]n fact it represents a revival.' Like Bürger he terms the aesthetic avenue 'modernism', believing only

the political strand fully 'avant-garde', and sometimes also referring to it as the 'historical avant-garde'.<sup>24</sup>

Wollen's avant-garde lineage descends from Sergei Eisenstein and Bertolt Brecht to the counter-cinema of Jean-Luc Godard.

In Godard's post-1968 films we glimpse something of an alternative route between contentism and formalism, a recognition that it is possible to work within the space opened up by the disjunction and dislocation of signifier and signified.... Godard takes the idea of formal conflict and struggle and translates it into a concept of conflict, not between the content of images [like Eisenstein], but between different codes and between signifier and signifier.... He wants not simply to represent an alternative 'world' or alternative 'world-view', but to investigate the whole process of signification out of which a world-view or an ideology is constructed.<sup>25</sup>

In attempting to deal with the problem of 'repoliticising' modernism, the solution became the establishment of 'the two avant-gardes', aesthetic and political, creating a division into two distinct, even oppositional, projects. But having once defined two dichotomous avant-garde practices, politically concerned theorists have to then work to reunify them. From *Cahiers du Cinéma*, for instance: 'We would stress that only action on both fronts, "signified" and "signifier", has any hope of operating against the prevailing ideology. Economic/political and formal action have to be indissolubly wedded.<sup>26</sup> While exploration of the means of representation alone is insufficient, a work is fully avant-garde in this argument only if it employs both aesthetic and political innovation -- at the levels of signifier *and* signified.

To indicate how deep the bifurcation to be overcome, we have the commentary of Terry Eagleton, the symmetrically inverted form of *Cahiers du Cinéma's* position. Speaking of Theodor Adorno, Eagleton writes: 'It is possible to read his work as a retreat from the nightmare of history into the aesthetic....[T]hese two facets of thought [the aesthetic and the political] are

closely intertwined, as a defeatist politics generates a compensatorily rich aesthetics.<sup>27</sup> Here the two are seen as mutually exclusive operations, the one rising to fullness only as the other diminishes.

In its urging of an either/or oppositional conception of experimental artistic practice, the bifurcation of the two avant-gardes raises other questions. Why such a binary framing of the avant-gardes rather than one in which works might overlap in certain arenas or by certain measures, while in other aspects they remain distinct -- a more open instead of restrictive notion of alternative artistic activity? This would certainly be more in keeping with the multiple, ever-variable, non-fixed potential permutations of artwork. Further, the paradigm establishes a 'canon' of two avant-gardes. Why not more or others instead? The possibility of a narrative avant-garde is conceivable, for instance. This might open up a space for a filmmaker such as John Sayles who is determinedly independent in his method of working but who is difficult to classify as such because his work is not formally experimental. Yet, he has made a career-long commitment to exploring narratives of multiple, and shifting, perspectives (for example, *The Return of the Secaucus Seven*, 1980; *Matewan*, 1987; *City of Hope*, 1991; *Lone Star*, 1996, *Men With Guns*, 1998).

The issue of narrative raises another troubling concern for the conception of a political avant-garde. While the aesthetic avant-garde is largely anti-narrative, the position Cartwright and Fonoroff argue, the political avant-garde requires a referent in order to comment upon the socio-cultural landscape. Wollen's strategy to the problem of referent is to argue *in favour of* a narrative cinema, but one which is simultaneously anti-realist, or at any rate, anti-classic, that is, it must still remain experimental at the level of signifiers. He points out that the Soviet directors of the 1920s, although aesthetically alternative, were also preoccupied 'with the problem of realism' and remained 'within the bounds' of narrative cinema.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Brecht did not 'abandon the whole realm of reference outside

the play', nor did he equate 'anti-illusionism with suppression of any signified.'<sup>29</sup> Rather, his definition of anti-illusionism is meant to put forth a different 'version of realism',<sup>30</sup> while always retaining a representation *of* something, a referentiality to dynamics beyond the bounds of the play or stage.

Wollen believes that the anti-narrative, anti-realist mandate of the aesthetic avant-garde results from painting's dominance in modernism. 'The tendency of painting to concentrate on its own sphere of materials and signification, to be self-reflexive, has been translated into specifically cinematic terms and concerns, though here again "specifically cinematic" is taken to mean primarily the picture-track.'<sup>31</sup> Instead of modelling itself so closely on the visual aesthetics that overlap with painting, in this argument a fully-realised filmic avant-garde should consider what is omitted as well as what is included within the realm of the aesthetically permissible. And primarily excluded are verbal language and narrative, words and stories.<sup>32</sup> Instead of focussing on a narrow range of cinematic codes, avant-garde work should encompass all available codes, including the non-specifically cinematic.

However, while arguing for the inclusion of narrative codes in avant-garde work, Wollen is also adamant in maintaining that 'new content' requires new means of expression, that experimentation at the level of signifiers is also necessary. Alternative approaches at the level of content or politics are not sufficient in and of themselves.<sup>33</sup> The difficulty here, as Wollen acknowledges, is that the disruption of 'norms of diegesis, subversion and deconstruction of codes' unless 'thought through carefully or stopped arbitrarily at some safe point, leads inevitably straight into the positions of the other avant-garde.'<sup>34</sup> That is, because there is no clear-cut boundary between the deconstruction of narrative and aesthetic codes necessary to the political avant-garde, and the unlimited exploration of the means of representation by the aesthetic avant-garde, the

former can easily, perhaps inevitably, overlap with and merge into the activities of the latter.

Similarly and conversely, Wollen, equating words and stories with 'signifieds', recognises that the appropriation of narrative by the political avant-garde has no 'naturally visible' or logical demarcation from the more conventional narrative approaches of Hollywood or art cinema.<sup>35</sup> With the reintroduction of narrative practices to avant-garde work, where then is the turning point between representation as illusion versus politically productive, alternative 'versions of realism'? Independent film is one arena which attempts to reconcile this problematic, a discussion which will be returned to in Chapter Five.

### Art Cinema

Contemporary 'art cinema' developed in the late 1950s and solidified in the 1960s with the work of a number of European directors. Seminal directors and their initial films include Ingmar Bergman with *The Seventh Seal* (1956) and *Wild Strawberries* (1957), Federico Fellini and *La Dolce Vita* (1959), Alain Resnais with *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), and Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960).<sup>36</sup> Andrew Tudor argues that what serves to unite these films, and distinguishes them from mainstream classic realist cinema is that they are 'deliberately and obviously intellectual' and each bears 'extremely visible individual stylistic characteristics'.<sup>37</sup> By 'obviously intellectual' Tudor seems to mean that art cinema appeals to 'reason', to films which require careful decoding in order to 'make sense' of events, characters, symbolic objects, and so on, and additionally, which demand a weighing through of the dramatic problems depicted to reach such interpretive determinations as 'right' or 'wrong'. This is in contrast to the more immediately visceral audience positioning associated with being 'swept-along' by Hollywood-generated filmic events, in which what characters and objects 'stand for' is usually transparent, as is the location of moral authority, for instance,

where 'good' and 'bad' reside. Such a description refers to audience positioning and the quality of the viewing experience, not to the ideological impact of Hollywood films.

Similarly, Annette Kuhn citing David Bordwell speaks of 'being challenged or "made to think" by art cinema'.<sup>38</sup> She explains that in Bordwell's argument this is achieved by a different approach from that of mainstream film towards narrative structure in which concepts of causality are less strictly adhered to. So for instance, the connection between character motivation and plot events may not be clearly defined. Indeed, the narrative may be driven more by a character's subjective states rather than by plot at all.<sup>39</sup> This conforms to the conventional 'rule-of-thumb' that European films are character-oriented in contrast to Hollywood's 'plot-driven' material. Even so, character motivation may not be linear or causally explained and can, in turn, be further disrupted by the voice and concerns of the filmmaker, for instance by various means of filmic self-reflexivity or by a series of events or objects of focus which can only be united, that is, made sense of, as the vision or preoccupation of the artist/filmmaker.

Further, art cinema has traditionally had its own distinct distribution and exhibition system in which, for instance, films tend to be shown in art houses, at film societies, and so on. This, too, leads to 'different expectations' on the part of the audience,<sup>40</sup> primed to take in more intellectually or aesthetically challenging fare.

Such a concept of a different *level* of movie-going experience has its origins in more general cultural distinctions between 'high' and 'low' art. Len Masterman suggests that the turning point for film, enabling such a distinction to be made, came with the 1964 book by Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, *The Popular Arts*, in which the argument was put forth that 'discrimination ought to be exercised, not *against* mass-media products, but *between* them.'<sup>41</sup> Instead of finding *all* media texts artistically suspect and deficient, as had been the widespread critical

practice, *some* texts could be elevated to the level of 'art' or high culture, such as the work of directors Bergman, Buñuel, Vittorio de Sica, Antonioni, Jean Renoir and Akira Kurosawa.

In addition, in *The Popular Arts* Hall and Whannel forge a third category of film existing between the banality of Hollywood-inspired mass art and the exemplary creations of high art. Their intermediate grouping is 'popular art'.

[A] number of popular cinema-forms -- such as the western, the thriller and the musical -- have developed; and although most examples of these genres are banal, routine treatments of well-worn formulae (as is common in mass art), a number of gifted popular artists have been able to fulfill themselves while working within this popular tradition and using the familiar conventions.<sup>42</sup>

Among such popular filmmakers, Hall and Whannel include, for example, Howard Hawks. While not quite reaching the upper echelons of high art, his 'creative intention'<sup>43</sup> enables him to exceed the superficiality of mass art.

Subsequently, under the influence of the French New Wave, a group of both filmmakers and critics who came to the fore in the 1960s, the work of such Hollywood, genre directors as Hawks and Alfred Hitchcock was upheld as high art, along with the output of the French New Wave itself. Further, the increased textual presence of filmmakers (through self-referentiality, highly individualised stylistic characteristics, and so on) led members of the French New Wave to develop the concept of 'auteurism', an idea closely linked to the whole notion of art cinema. 'Auteur' signifies the director as identifiable, individual author, the creative genius or visionary artist recognisably responsible for the work of art. They 'stamp the marks of their personal genius on films bearing their names.'<sup>44</sup>

The auteur theory has been much criticised, for instance, by the argument that cinema is a collaborative and highly institutionalised endeavor, so how can one individual be considered responsible for a film's overall effects? Auteurism has also been part of a more widespread criticism, as have the avant-gardes, of



the very notion of 'high art'. Still, concepts of auteurism remain influential for both mainstream and independent film, Martin Scorsese and Quentin Tarantino serving as current prominent exemplars.

No clear boundaries exist between art cinema and avant-garde work, nor between art cinema and mainstream narrative film. For instance, the French New Wave encompasses both of the former, with members like Godard and Resnais more likely to be considered avant-garde, while Claude Chabrol and François Truffaut would tend to be thought of as makers of art films. Having emphasised this, the next section outlines some of the independent films that fall within various categories of art cinema. In the 1980s and 1990s, independent film has absorbed 'art cinema' as part of its terrain or discursive formation. The following categories of film, all of which can be considered independent in the U.S., also conform to some tendency of art cinema. It should be stressed the lists are exemplary, not exhaustive, and many, if not most, of the examples cited could fit into more than one of the five categories provided.

1. Films that are formally and/or narratively experimental but with some recognisable classic realist attribute(s), separating them from avant-garde work. Films which apply here might be: *Edward II* (Derek Jarman, 1992, Fine Line); *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (Patricia Rozema, 1987, Miramax); the works of Peter Greenaway (*Drowning By Numbers*, 1987; *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*, 1990; *Prospero's Books*, 1991, all Miramax); *Wings of Desire* (Wim Wenders, 1987, Orion Classics); Jim Jarmusch's films, for example, *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984, Goldwyn) and *Down By Law* (1986, Island); *The Icicle Thief* (Maurizio Nichetti, 1989, Aries); *Poison* (Todd Haynes, 1991, Zeitgeist); *Zentropa* (Lars von Trier, 1991, Miramax); and perhaps *Pecker* (John Waters, 1998, Fine Line).

2. Films that are dense or intellectual. The distinctions between this category and the first are very murky and many of the films listed could be placed in *either* category. However, the categories are maintained separately here because it is arguably possible for a film to be formally or narratively experimental without being intellectually provocative or for a densely challenging film to contain no formal or narrative experimental gestures. Films in this category might include the following: Eric Rohmer's ongoing work, for instance *Boyfriends and Girlfriends* (1987, Orion Classics) and *A Tale of Summer* (1997, Artificial Eye); *Rhapsody in August* (Akira Kurosawa, 1991, Orion Classics); Krzysztof Kieslowski's *The Colors Trilogy: Blue, White and Red* (1993, 1994 & 1994 respectively, all Miramax); Hal Hartley's output, including *The Unbelievable Truth* (1990, Miramax), *Trust* (1991, Fine Line), *Simple Men* (1992, Fine Line) and *Amateur* (1995, Sony Classics); *Metropolitan* (1990, New Line) and *Barcelona* (1994, Fine Line) by Whit Stillman; and *Waiting for the Moon* (Jill Godmilow, 1987, Skouras).

3. Historical or epic dramas. Hanif Kureishi, the screenwriter of *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1986, Orion Classics) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987, Cinecom), during a talk at the Toronto Film Festival in the early 1990s, referred to these as 'museum pieces', in a statement that makes overt their link to high art. Films here encompass Merchant/Ivory productions such as *Howard's End* (James Ivory, 1992, Orion Classics) and *A Room With a View* (James Ivory, 1985, Cinecom); *Henry V* (Kenneth Branagh, 1989, Goldwyn); *The Madness of King George* (Nicholas Hytner, 1994, Goldwyn); *Camille Claudel* (Bruno Nuytten, 1988, Orion Classics); *The English Patient* (Anthony Minghella, 1996, Miramax); *Mrs. Brown* (John Madden, 1997, Miramax); and *Elizabeth* (Shekhar Kapur, 1998, Gramercy).

4. Films that are based on a work of art in a different medium or whose subject matter is art. For instance, adaptations of novels and other literary works: *Madame Bovary* (Claude Chabrol, 1991, Goldwyn); *Much Ado About Nothing* (Kenneth Branagh, 1993, Goldwyn); *Smooth Talk* (Joyce Chopra, 1986, Spectrafilm) from the short story by Joyce Carol Oates; *Angels and Insects* (Philip Haas, 1996, Goldwyn) based on the A.S. Byatt work; Henry James' *The Wings of the Dove* (Iain Softley, 1997, Miramax); and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (Marleen Gorris, 1988, First Look).

Stories based on the lives of an artist or group of artists: *Prick Up Your Ears* (Stephen Frears, 1987, Miramax) about playwright Joe Orton; *My Left Foot* (Jim Sheridan, 1989, Miramax) centred on the painter Christy Brown; *Tom and Viv* (Brian Gilbert, 1994, Miramax) depicting poet T.S. Eliot's marriage and its relationship to his work; *The Moderns* (Alan Rudolph, 1988, Alive) detailing artistic Paris in the 1920s; *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle* (Alan Rudolph, 1994, Fine Line) focussing on writer Dorothy Parker and the members of the Algonquin Round Table; *Basquiat* (1996, Miramax) about the painter Jean-Michel Basquiat, directed by prominent painter Julian Schnabel; and *I Shot Andy Warhol* (Mary Harron, 1996, Goldwyn).

While the majority of films in this category focus on classical art, as in the instance of classical pianist David Helfgott and his mental illness in *Shine* (Scott Hicks, 1996, Fine Line), there is some range in this area as, for example, in the arguably thematically comparable film, *Sid and Nancy* (Alex Cox, 1986, Goldwyn) about punk rocker Sid Vicious.

5. International cinema. Quite obviously what constitutes a foreign film depends on the national context of perspective (in the case of this study, the United States). European work continues to dominate in this category: *Cinema Paradiso* (Guiseppe Tornatore, 1990, Miramax, Italy); *Il Postino* (Michael Radford, 1995,

Miramax, Italy); *Life Is Beautiful* (Roberto Benigni, 1998, Miramax); *Europa, Europa* (Agnieszka Holland, 1991, Orion Classics, France/Germany); *Babette's Feast* (Gabriel Axel, 1987, Orion Classics, France/Denmark); *Jean de Florette* and *Manon of the Spring* (both Claude Berri, 1986, France, Orion Classics); *When the Cat's Away* (Cédric Klapisch, 1997, Sony Classics, France); *Nenette and Boni* (Claire Denis, 1997, Strand); *The Nasty Girl* (Michael Verhoeven, 1990, Miramax, Germany); *Antonia's Line* (Marleen Gorris, 1995, First Look, The Netherlands); *The Celebration* (Thomas Vinterberg, 1998, October, Denmark); *Tango* (Carlos Saura, 1998, Sony Classics, Spain); and the films of Spaniard Pedro Almodóvar, such as *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988, Orion Classics), *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990, Miramax), *High Heels* (1991, Miramax), and *The Flower of My Secret* (1996, Sony Classics).

Other globally represented areas include Asia: *The Scent of Green Papaya* (Tran Anh Hung, 1993, First Look, Vietnam); *Tampopo* (Juzo Itami, 1987, Republic, Japan) and *The Funeral* (Juzo Itami, 1984, Republic, Japan); *Shall We Dance?* (Masayuki Suo, 1997, Miramax, Japan); *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen Kaige, 1993, Miramax, China); and the films of Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou, *To Live* (1994, Goldwyn), *The Story of Qui Ju* (1992, Sony Classics), and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991, Orion Classics). Latin America: *Like Water for Chocolate* (Alfonso Arau, 1992, Miramax, Mexico); *Man Facing Southeast* (Eliseo Subiela, 1987, Film Dallas, Argentina); and *Strawberry and Chocolate* (Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío, 1994, Miramax, Cuba); and from Brazil: *Central Station* (Walter Salles, 1998, Sony Classics). In addition, some representation from India exists with Sony Pictures Classics' re-release, beginning in 1995, of nine films by Satyajit Ray (*Pather Panchali*, 1955; *Aparajito*, 1958; *Jalsaghar*, 1958; *The World of Apu*, 1959; *Devi*, 1960; *Two Daughters*, 1961; *The Big City*, 1963; *Charulata*, 1964; *The Middleman*, 1975); as well as the work of filmmakers such as Mira Nair (*Salaam Bombay!*, 1988, Cinecom).

Art cinema, in all of the above permutations, continues to maintain a strong profile in current configurations of what constitutes independent film.

### Personal Cinema

The heritage of 'personal film' in the U.S. is often merged with the minimalist/structuralist movement as one linear tradition known as the American avant-garde or the American underground, as Lisa Cartwright and Nina Fonoroff do when they speak of 'North American structural, visionary, and personal film.'<sup>45</sup> While there is certainly overlap between the two, personal film has had an important, and distinct, influence on independent film and so will be considered separately here.

Influenced by the avant-garde movements of the 1920s, the advent of personal film was made possible by the development and accessibility of 16mm equipment following World War II.<sup>46</sup> 16mm technology changed the potential for individual filmmaking in several ways. Because it was cheaper it made equipment and film stock available to more people. Because it was lighter in weight, portable, and with fewer necessary accessories, it meant one or two people could comprise a crew and film in a variety of locales, resulting in a means of production with enhanced autonomy and mobility. The result was 'an emphasis on "self-expression" which is seen as standing in opposition to the representation of the world-view of a dominant class in commercial cinema....The psycho-dramas of *Breakage*, *Anger* and *Markopoulos*, and the "lyrical" films of Maya Deren are typical of the beginnings of the aesthetic of "personal vision" which was to become so influential in avant-garde filmmaking.'<sup>47</sup>

Although both the structuralist/minimalist and the personal/visionary filmmakers claim their legacies from avant-garde movements of the 1920s, personal film, like surrealism, is more heavily influenced by the medium of poetry and the dream world. In contrast, the structuralist/minimalists are affected by the

increasingly materialist/formalist concerns of painting. Both share in common, however, an anti-narrative drive, working in opposition to classic forms of cinematic storytelling.

Personal film also shares strong affinities with an auteurist position in their mutual emphases on the creative capacity and visionary genius of the individual artist.

For Brakhage, for instance, the film material represents a passive mass or body which is reorganized by the active agency of the artist into a meaningful system, a notion of the 'natural' as passive and the artist as central figure in the world which goes back to the Renaissance.... For Brakhage, the camera is an extension of the human eye, and in a hierarchy of discourses the discourse of the artist predominates, providing the overall coherence of the work.<sup>48</sup>

Under the growing impact of formalist concerns in the arts, one tributary of personal and visionary film of the 1940s and 1950s became, in the 1960s, the structuralist/minimalist/materialist movements, while the original impetus of personal, visionary production continued as a parallel presence. Personal film was usually considered a part of the aesthetic avant-garde, its use of 'a private language to convey the personal fantasies and obsessions of a single individual'<sup>49</sup> making it unamenable, in principle, to political applications.

However, the 1960s and 1970s also saw another development, the rise of various political movements based on arguments of equity and civil rights. In the wake of these political movements, personal filmmaking provided a new logic. Within the women's movement, for instance, in the light of concepts of consciousness-raising and notions of the personal as political, one thread of women's filmmaking resulted in autobiographical pieces and in personal explorations of self and others. Only a few of the many examples that could be cited here include, *Joyce at 34* (Joyce Chopra, 1972), *Daughter Rite* (Michelle

Citron, 1978), and *Rape Stories* (Margie Strosser, 1989). It is in both these senses of personal -- singular, artistic expression *and* political voice -- that the legacy of personal filmmaking has an ongoing impact and relevance for the independent enterprise.

### Identity Cinema

To many of those who work and believe in alternative cinematic practices, this is the most contentious grouping of films to be included under the heading of 'alternative cinema'. This is so because there is no specific aesthetic discourse or formal set of practices which can be associated with 'identity cinema', resulting in frequent discounting of its status as a genuinely alternative mode of production. While many political or identity films may well be aesthetically experimental, they need not be so. Maria Maggenti's *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (1995, Fine Line) is an example of a film which is not. A lesbian romantic comedy -- just as *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992, Miramax), for instance, is a play on the traditional heterosexual romance genre -- *Incredibly True Adventure* was criticised for it in some quarters.

In an interview with Maggenti for *Filmmaker*,<sup>50</sup> Scott Macaulay broaches the subject almost apologetically. 'What's amazing is that *Incredibly True Adventure* is totally a crowd pleasing film and I don't mean that in a condescending way.'<sup>51</sup> He rushes to assure her his intent is not condescension because 'crowd pleasing' is customarily understood as the antithesis of 'art', synonymous with 'mainstream', 'apolitical'(or politically suspect), and 'sell-out'. Macaulay's 'amazement' about Maggenti's film stems from his perception that it manages to be simultaneously 'crowd pleasing' and 'good', that is, successful in its political agenda.

He continues later in the interview, '[i]n terms of the New Queer Cinema films, there's been a distrust of some of the conventional narrative strategies that

you kind of embrace in your film.<sup>152</sup> In something of a tyranny of the formal, Maggenti is placed in the position of responding from a defensive, or at any rate, self-explanatory posture, 'I did go through many trials when I began to develop the script and I felt as if I were almost anti-intellectual, as if I were almost letting down the legacy of queer cinema.'<sup>153</sup>

Peter Wollen is clear that political militancy alone is no guarantee of 'being avant-garde',<sup>154</sup> equally required is 'a break with bourgeois norms of diegesis, [and] subversion and deconstruction of codes,<sup>155</sup> that is, a departure from normative realist modes of filmmaking. Indeed, theorists like Wollen criticise art cinema for similar reasons, feeling it fails to sufficiently subvert normative codes or effectively break down dominant narrative.

Lisa Cartwright and Nina Fonoroff, in their 1983 essay, are quite disparaging of the notion that there can be a cinema of political content *without* an accompanying destruction of dominant forms, 'A need for a break from narrative is nobly acknowledged by filmmakers, but deployment of narrative "form" is justified by a saving grace: political content.'<sup>156</sup> They elaborate their position further in an argument that is quite prescient, if disapproving, about the forthcoming development of independent film.

The issue of economic survival is of paramount importance, and the move to narrative reflects this concern. As funds for filmmaking become scarce, it becomes increasingly difficult and risky to depend on granting systems for support. Much current work is done with a view toward marketing potential: larger budgets, 'better' production values, and more topical themes all signal the move toward making films that are commercially viable products -- lifted from obscurity to greater 'public acceptance', from small film-screening spaces to art-movie houses -- and, by design or default, a shift from a concern for the possibilities of new uses of film to a concern for marketability and accessibility.... True, one might conclude from this upward mobility of the 'avant-garde' that, *finally*, new avant-garde film work is being



acknowledged with funds. But a more accurate reading might be that the avant-garde is formulating its own 'new' Hollywood through private and government money. The situation is neither new nor advanced.<sup>57</sup>

For Cartwright and Fonoroff, as for others associated with the political avant-garde, it is impossible to have a cinema of politics without an accompanying practice of nonconventional signifiers. This is so because dominant forms only replicate dominant ideologies, re-exerting existing power relations and defeating whatever else might be achieved at the level of 'content'. To claim a political cinema without the necessary aesthetic subversions is to advocate a (or the same old) cinema of illusory reality.

However, the same move away from the principally formal concerns of the aesthetic avant-garde, and which enabled the reemergence of the political avant-garde in Wollen's analysis, made it difficult to mandate or police the boundaries of any future state of production, in order to ensure it was unified in its uses of content *and* form, signified and signifier. 'Then in the sixties (with May 1968 as the emblematic moment), this modernism seems to go into crisis. The threads of the twenties are picked up again...and there is a revival of the historic avant-garde with a host of new areas of commitment and inquiry: women's art, political art, photography, popular imagery, environment, performance.'<sup>58</sup> It is the 1960s and post-60s emergence of such a diversified body of identities and concerns that results in an accompanying diversification of production practices.

Although the powerful influence of the avant-garde remains, and with it a hierarchy in which the aesthetic takes pride of place, 'It soon became clear that the old doctrines of purity, of self-definition, of art about art, had collapsed and been replaced by a new and extremely heterogeneous expansion of art into a whole range of semiotic practices, with new types of audience relationship and with new and unanticipated forms of signification.'<sup>59</sup> Along with this diversification -- a sudden heterogeneity of politicised concerns -- the 'purity' of any single 'style'

or mode of production, such as the subversion of traditional aesthetic codes and conventions, such as the development of an anti-narrative or a fragmented, dismembered narrative, could not be upheld, opening up the possibility of working in as many aesthetic forms as in politicised perspectives.

Further, the return to narrative, to the issues of 'marketing and accessibility' which Cartwright and Fonoroff deplore, offer solutions to two other problems encountered by the tenets of the avant-gardes and art cinema. The first is precisely the issue of audience and the notion of producing an art 'for the people' which the people neither appreciate nor find entertaining. As Sylvia Harvey notes, 'While it is not difficult to see how a "popular", mass cinema might not objectively serve the interests of the workers, it is much more difficult to see how or for how long the value of a cinema which objectively serves their interests but is *not recognized by them* can be defended.'<sup>60</sup>

The second but linked problem is the connection between the avant-garde and concepts of 'high art'. The aesthetic and political avant-gardes and art cinema are all a profound part of the legacy and practices of high art. For those concerned with issues of audience accessibility and/or the value of the popular, a politicised production which adopts narrative forms and genres, and works within traditional codes, holds the potential, in this view, of surmounting the over-intellectualisation and the over-aestheticisation associated with high art. However, the influence of the avant-gardes cannot be easily dismissed and, as formally non-experimental filmmakers such as Maria Maggenti have found, their 'place' within independent practice does not exist without questions.

Diane Crane points out that the redefinition of formal and stylistic features 'appears to be the most important factor' in an art work's acceptance as avant-garde (and by extension, as independent). 'Art movements that confine their iconoclastic activities to the redefinition of social content or the production and distribution of art works are less likely to be labeled avant-garde by members of

art worlds. For this reason, the Social Realists in the 1930s and the mural artists in the 1970s who redefined the social content of art and the settings for the production and the distribution of art are not considered to be avant-gardes.<sup>161</sup> In the hierarchy in which the formal predominates, if a film is aesthetically and politically alternative it is most likely to be considered independent. If a film is aesthetically experimental it is likely to be considered independent, even if it is not, in any way, alternative in content or social agenda. If a film is alternative in social agenda but formally conventional it is the least likely to find acceptance within the boundaries of independent film.

Identity cinema, whether aesthetically experimental or not (and the range is great), is included here as a constituent of alternative cinema because it is such an important component of independent film as it differentiates itself from normative realist practice. Although sometimes disowned by its precursor, identity cinema is very much heir to the principles of the political avant-garde. Second, while identity is a political category, and therefore more fittingly a cultural/historical discourse, the situation of identity cinema illustrates how representational discourses resonate inseparably with cultural/historical ones, just as the case of the political avant-garde, itself, makes clear. Third, identity cinema's inclusion as alternative practice points out the problem of the dominance of formal considerations in configurations of alternative representational discourse, excluding other discursive possibilities, for instance, narrativity. (The question of narrative will be returned to in Chapter Four).

Other examples of gay and lesbian films besides *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love*, include: *Desert Hearts* (Donna Deitch, 1986, Goldwyn); *Parting Glances* (Bill Sherwood, 1986, Cinecom); *Longtime Companion* (Norman Rene, 1990, Goldwyn); *The Hours and the Times* (Christopher Münch, 1991, Strand); *Poison, Swoon* (Tom Kalin, 1992, Fine Line); *The Living End* (Greg Araki, 1992, October); *Claire of the Moon* (Nicole Conn, 1992, Strand); *Go Fish*

(Rose Troche, 1994, Goldwyn); *Beautiful Thing* (Hettie MacDonald, 1997, Sony Classics); *Ma Vie en Rose* (Alain Berliner, 1998, Sony Classics); and *High Art* (Lisa Cholodenko, 1998, October).

The range of films exploring race and ethnicity comprise, amongst others: *Chan Is Missing* (Wayne Wang, 1982, New Yorker); *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart* (Wayne Wang, 1985, Orion Classics); *She's Gotta Have It* (Spike Lee, 1986, Island); *Sidewalk Stories* (Charles Lane, 1989, Island); *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (Matty Rich, 1991, Goldwyn); *Daughters of the Dust*, *Sankofa* (Hailie Gerima, 1994, Mypheduh); *Mississippi Masala* (Mira Nair, 1992, Goldwyn); *Bhaji on the Beach* (Gurinder Chadha, 1994, First Look); *Mi Vida Loca* (Allison Anders, 1994, Sony Classics); *Latin Boys Go To Hell* (Ela Troyano, 1997, Strand); *Smoke Signals* (Chris Eyre, 1996, Miramax); and *Strawberry Fields* (Rea Tajiri, 1999, Phaedra).

Films that focus on women and gender are disproportionately fewer (compared to population or audience percentage),<sup>62</sup> although some of the films that appeared in the previous groupings of race/ethnicity and sexual identity are equally appropriate here. Films within this grouping include, for example:

*Working Girls* (Lizzie Borden, 1987, Miramax); *Gas Food Lodging* (Allison Anders, 1992, Cineville); *My New Gun* (Stacy Cochran, 1992, IRS); *Orlando*, *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993, Miramax); *The Ballad of Little Jo* (Maggie Greenwald, 1994, Fine Line); *Girls Town* (Jim McKay/Collaboration, 1996, October); *The 24 Hour Woman* (Nancy Savoca, 1999, Artisan); and *Sugar Town* (Allison Anders and Kurt Voss, 1999, October).

British filmmakers have been particularly strong on films that focus on class, such as: Mike Leigh's work *High Hopes* (1989, Skouras), *Life Is Sweet* (1991, October), *Naked* (1993; Fine Line), *Secrets & Lies* (1996, October), and *Career Girls*, 1997, October); *The Snapper* (Stephen Frears, 1994, Miramax); Ken Loach's films, *Ladybird*, *Ladybird* (1994, Goldwyn), *Raining Stones* (1994,

Northern Arts), *My Name Is Joe* (1999, Artisan); and *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996, Miramax).

In addition, there are films which combine working within two or more political identity categories, for instance: *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1986, Orion Classics); *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (Stephen Frears, 1987, Cinecom); *Young Soul Rebels* (Isaac Julien, 1991, Miramax); and *The Wedding Banquet* (Ang Lee, 1993, Goldwyn).

Although this study is limited to narrative films there have also been a number of influential documentaries that could most readily be described as generically belonging to identity politics, some of which are: *The Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris, 1988, Miramax); *Incident at Oglala* (Michael Apted, 1991, Miramax); *Paris Is Burning* (Jennie Livingstone, 1991, Miramax); *American Dream* (Barbara Kopple, 1992, Miramax); *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives*, (Aerlyn Weissman and Lynne Fernie, 1992, Women Make Movies); *Silverlake Life: The View From Here* (Tom Joslin and Peter Friedman, 1993, Zeitgeist); *Hoop Dreams* (Steve James, 1994, Fine Line); *Stonewall* (Nigel Finch, 1995, Strand); *The Celluloid Closet* (Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, 1996, Sony Classics); and *The Big One* (Michael Moore, 1998, Miramax).

### Postmodern Film

An understanding of what postmodern film practices or, more generally, postmodern artistic practices might be is still very much in the process of cultural formation. However, some attributes are fairly widely recognised. For instance, the admissibility of all forms, elements, affects and variations of popular culture, in place of the exclusivity of high art. 'Popular culture could no longer be seen simply in terms of the old "Hollywood" mass-media model' or 'summarily

dismissed by monolithic reference to "dominant codes" or "classic texts",' as Wollen notes.<sup>63</sup> The change reflected an acknowledgment that the modernist dismissal of popular culture as empty, trivial and invalid had been a gross oversimplification. 'The implications of the developments appeared to be that, in a society dominated by the mass media, popular culture is better able than avant-garde art to provide visual metaphors that reflect the problems and dilemmas of everyday life.'<sup>64</sup>

Additionally, a number of stylistic features have become identified with the postmodern.

1. Compilation. Works that are accumulated from various dissimilar sources of origin. Concepts such as pastiche, bricolage, photo-montage and collage are associated with the practices of compilation.<sup>65</sup>
2. Repetition. Umberto Eco calls postmodernism an 'aesthetics of seriality' in which the concept of manifold reproduction as in industry and mass media is no longer seen, as it was for modernism, as alien to the enterprise of art.<sup>66</sup>
3. Lack of an original or the novel. Within modernism, every work of art, 'figures out a new law, imposes a *new paradigm*, a new way of looking at the world.'<sup>67</sup> This is displaced in postmodernism wherein artworks or cultural texts are based in a widely known and mutually experienced cultural imaginary rather than an individual artistic imaginary.
4. Fragmentation. Concepts of compilation, as well as the constant flow and simultaneous break-up of media information (such as TV commercials and channel surfing) result in far more fragmented texts rather than the unified and coherent works of modernist art.
5. Referentiality and appropriation. References to or appropriations from other works of art can be taken from the same medium or across media, from the contemporary moment or historically. In film this might take the form of incorporation from other films, either by reference to or wholesale appropriation of,

and can occur in any one (or more) of a number of forms -- parody, homage, straight rip-off, etc.

All of the above stylistic features of postmodernism overlap with each other; none are distinctly separable. Pastiche, for instance, implies compilation, appropriation, and fragmentation. Repetition and loss of the novel may well encompass, in addition, the referential.

There has also been considerable debate about the originating 'moment' of postmodernism and the demise of modernism. The difficulty may rest with our desire for 'clean' divisions. Instead of seeing the problem as the moment when one movement *breaks* with the other, perhaps it is more helpful to understand the transformation as the moments when one movement merges with, or emerges from, the other. In this dynamic, figures such as Godard, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Warhol and other Pop artists can be seen as, on the one hand, exemplary of a high point of modernism -- in their enshrinement as individual creative forces, artistic geniuses and auteurs; in their emphasis on work that is novel, original or 'strange'; in the density of their work as well as its presentation and marketing, all of which render it high art. On the other hand, these same figures can be viewed simultaneously as exemplary of an emergent phase of postmodernism -- in Godard's use of appropriation, cultural reference, and fragmentation, for instance; in Pop Art's seriality, constant citation of popular culture, and so on.

Another tendency has been a kind of 'cultural panic' in which postmodernism is assumed to signify the end of artistic practice. Arthur Danto writes, 'Recently people have begun to feel that the last twenty five years, a period of tremendous experimental productiveness in the visual arts with no single narrative direction on the basis of which others could be excluded, have stabilized as the norm....There is no a priori constraint on how art works must look -- they can look like anything at all. This alone finished the modernist agenda.'<sup>68</sup> Here,

diversity of styles and modes of production are identified as another attribute of postmodernism. However, rather than cause for panic, in an era marked by the urgency of pluralism this could prove to be one of postmodernism's richest and most beneficial aspects.

Yet Danto refers to the completion of the modernist project as the end of art, 'one mark of art having ended is that there should no longer be an objective structure with a defining style, or if you prefer, that there should be an objective historical structure in which *everything is possible*. If everything is possible, nothing is historically mandated: one thing is, so to say, as good as another. And that in my view is the object condition for post-historical art.'<sup>69</sup> By no 'objective structure with a defining style', Danto speaks of the loss of the art object, the artefact, in its expression within particular coded modes of representation which have gained certain recognised, exclusive, and valued significances. Although Danto does not decry the onset of such a 'post-historical' diversity of styles and practices, it seems somewhat dire (or premature) to refer to this as the end of art. The end of modernism, yes. Perhaps even the end of art as we have become accustomed to it. But the postmodern, by identifying work in terms of its diversity - - calling attention to its specific time, place and voice(s) of origin -- can be argued to historicise or provide specificity to art, precisely by removing it from the abstract realms of the universal and the eternal.

The diversity of practices associated with postmodernism, coupled with its inclusiveness towards popular culture, has meant the increased admissibility of more familiarly mainstream modes of storytelling and their accompanying formal approaches. As Craig Owens notes, if modernism 'proclaimed the autonomy of the signifier, its liberation from the "tyranny of the signified"; postmodernists instead expose the tyranny of the *signifier*.'<sup>70</sup> For independent film this has meant the reintroduction of concepts such as narrative, entertainment, and pleasure.



The postmodern, however, is not solely a changing aesthetic sensibility. As has been pointed out by many, it marks a different phase in capitalism, in the spread of information and communication technologies, in rapidly changing national and global political, financial and cultural economies. Filmmakers such as Michelle Citron, whose work originates within the discourses and aesthetics of the feminist avant-garde, have argued that such a differing context requires an accompanying shift in modes of production. Writing in 1988, Citron explains.

The context has changed since the 1970s, so those of us working within it must also change. On the simplest level, we have lost our audiences as previously defined (for example, the large network of broad-based women's centres has greatly diminished)....Only two distributors of women's films remain in the United States: New Day Films (which has expanded to include labour movement and health films) and Women Make Movies. Other films are occasionally picked up by broader-based independent distributors, this in itself is a kind of mainstreaming....In some cases, this can have the advantage of broadening a film's audience; in others, it can bury them out of sight.<sup>71</sup>

It is precisely the development of these broader-based independent distributors in the 1980s and 1990s, and the cultural climate which made them possible, that this study examines.

Citron argues that audiences are no longer 'out there' in the same way as they were in the 1970s, an era and political climate which fostered the production of avant-garde film. The move to more popular, narrative forms is a question of filmmakers following their audiences,<sup>72</sup> a corollary argument to the charge that the political avant-garde failed to reach the very audiences to and for which it claimed to speak. Citron is not unaware of the losses and compromises this position entails, nor of the criticisms it engenders.

We wanted to make films that challenged the status quo. Whether documentary or avant-garde, these were films for a purpose, for political-

organizing and consciousness raising in the broadest sense. This film practice challenged ideas about film language, the relationship between viewer and film, and the function of cinema in our society....What we sacrificed in a particular compromise was not in that context as important as what we gained. A film-maker might make a seventeen-minute film that would be seen by no more than 10,000 women. But the film had a clarity of political and aesthetic vision completely in the film-maker's control....But the shifting historical moment creates both a willingness and a need to make different compromises. Today, a woman can make a low-budget feature which gets theatrically distributed and seen by hundreds of thousands of women. But in this case, the demands of the market as 'safeguarded' by the producer circumscribe risks at the level of either form or content.<sup>73</sup>

Ultimately however, and unlike Cartwright and Fonoroff, Citron sees adaptation to the historical moment as the most effective strategy, and even, in the cultural context from which she writes, enticing. Chapter Six takes up the question of postmodern film in a more detailed manner, examining some of its possibilities and its possible limitations.

All of the previously described traditions of alternative artistic practice enabled, and continue to influence, the potentialities and parameters of current independent film. Independent cinema embraces numerous modernist notions: for instance, in its construction of the director as primary creative force (indeed, even more adamantly than in Hollywood, it is very often the *writer/director* who envisions and oversees the independent project, functioning very much as auteur); in the independent field's emphasis on personal expression; in the value placed on the original, the novel, the shocking, the strange; in the weight given to formal experimentation of the material and linguistic elements of the medium. And although independent film, in comparison to other alternative practices, reverts more to the narrative modes of storytelling and the psychological

development of characters associated with mainstream cinema as well as to its concern with wider marketability, it also frequently retains the more specialised, 'dense' language and use of codes connected with high art cinema. And in some cases, as in certain instances of modernist practice, independent film takes on overtly politicised perspectives and concerns.

Influences on independent film also include the postmodern, notably in its acceptance of popular culture, resulting in the greater permissibility of narrative (and specifically Hollywood-associated) genres and codes; in postmodernism's broader (some would say weaker) sense of what constitutes the 'political'; in both postmodernism's and independent film's increased concern with issues of marketability and accessibility -- the latter in both senses of readily available as well as easily read.

Alternative artistic practices, it should be emphasised, are not a series of fixed behaviours and activities (drip painting, scratch films) nor are they constituted by specific, recurring aesthetic works or styles (such as abstraction). 'Alternative' film is defined (and continually redefined) in contradistinction to changing forms of normative cinematic practices, and changing conceptions of the hegemonic.

A serious limitation in operative conceptions of representative practice lies in the dual division of form and content, and the similarly binary signifier and signified, in which signifier tends to parallel form and signified equate with content. Instead, a more suitably complex rendering of representation would be to understand it as the process of various discourses operating simultaneously. An artefact, then, is the confluence of meanings from multiple discourses, in varying configurations and states of interaction. In this paradigm, aesthetic discourses (abstraction, naturalism) converge with narrative discourses (art film vs. classic realism; fiction, non-fiction or experimental) which interact with cultural discourses (concepts of justice in courtroom dramas and detective stories; heterosexual

coupling in romance), and so on. All of these are put into play in every artefact in various formulations of relationship to one another, and *not necessarily* in concert with each other, that is, not working inevitably towards the same meaning constructions (accounting, in part, for the existence of conflicting textual elements and the possibility of multiple readings).

Each discourse (aesthetic, narrative, cultural, institutional) has its own series of codes formulated by signifiers and signifieds. For alternative and independent practices, in their struggle over what is 'legitimately' avant-garde in form versus what is genuinely 'progressive' in content, a disproportionate emphasis may be placed upon the aesthetic as the most immediately visible, and so most easily recognised, discursive field in operation. Conversely, films which put alternative narrative and cultural discourses into play may be less readily available to immediate recognition, and so less amenable to critical consensus that they display characteristics of 'alternative' significance.

It can also be argued that independent film exists as a hybrid not only because it borrows from both Hollywood and alternative filmmaking traditions, but also because it borrows from *among* elements within each of these large configurations, culling itself by referencing or appropriating within and across a number of, for example, alternative filmmaking practices. Further, it is possible that independent film's hybrid qualities, its composition from among and between various representational discourses, creates an artistic object which may contain gaps and fissures, a cultural product held together to whatever degree of coherency by 'leaky' joints or seams. This may account, in part, for what has enabled independent film to take up a place in the representation of multiple identity formations, the subject of the next chapter.

Having outlined some historical and contemporary representational discourses which have influenced independent film in Chapter Two, Chapter Three takes a more detailed look at how institutional discourses (distributors)

interact with alternative representational discourses, when those representational discourses are called upon to express the cultural/historical experiences of specific identities or communities (in this case, African-Americans). The approach followed is to undertake a close examination of how institutional and representational discourses within independent film might conflict with (or in a different instance, complement) each other. At the same time, the chapter introduces the further layer of cultural/historical discourses, in the particular form of identity politics.

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- <sup>1</sup> Jim Moran and Holly Willis, 'The War of Independents', *Filmmaker: The Magazine of Independent Film*, vol. 6, no. 2 (Winter 1998), p. 22.
- <sup>2</sup> Graeme Turner, *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, 2nd edition, London: Routledge, 1996 [1990], p. 100.
- <sup>3</sup> Roman Jakobson, 'On Realism In Art', in *Readings In Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (eds), Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971, pp. 38-46. This argument is not intended to dismiss formulations of realism as an important part of alternative production. For independent cinema, filmmakers such as Mike Leigh and Ken Loach for instance, represent significant practitioners.
- <sup>4</sup> Sande Zeig, 'Queens of England', *Filmmaker*, vol. 1, no. 4 (Summer 1993), p. 24.
- <sup>5</sup> Janet Wolff, *Aesthetics and the Sociology of Art*, 2nd edition, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1993 [1983], p. 107.
- <sup>6</sup> Sylvia Harvey, *Independent Cinema?*, Stafford: West Midlands Arts, 1978, p. 11.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- <sup>8</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990, pp. 371-372.
- <sup>9</sup> Peter Wollen, 'The Two Avant-Gardes', in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter Strategies*, London: Verso, 1982, p. 95. 'The Two Avant-Gardes' was first published in 1975.
- <sup>10</sup> Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture*, London: BFI, 1980 [1978], p. 82.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- <sup>12</sup> Sylvia Harvey, *Independent Cinema?*, p. 12.
- <sup>13</sup> Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture*, p. 38.
- <sup>14</sup> Lisa Cartwright and Nina Fonoroff, 'Narrative is *Narrative*: So What is New?', in *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*, Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar and Janice Welsch (eds), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994, p. 128.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124. Personal film is discussed below, in a separate category. It should also be noted that while Cartwright and Fonoroff argue here for an entirely non-narrative tradition, alternative cinema has created almost every imaginable 'hybrid' as well, for instance experimental documentaries such as the work of Marlon Riggs (*Tongues Untied*, 1989; *Affirmations*, 1990), and a large and varied range of experimental narratives (Jane Campion's *Passionless Moments*, 1983, serves as only a single instance).
- <sup>17</sup> Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture*, pp. 69-70.
- <sup>18</sup> Jochen Schulte-Sasse, 'Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde', in Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Michael Shaw (trans.), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. xv.
- <sup>19</sup> Peter Bürger, 'The Negation of the Autonomy of Art by the Avant-Garde', in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, Thomas Docherty (ed.), New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 239.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

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- <sup>21</sup> Peter Wollen, "'Ontology" and "Materialism" in Film', in *Readings and Writings*, p. 197. Essay published originally in 1976.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.
- <sup>23</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Mexico/Women/Art', in *Readings and Writings*, p. 114. Essay first published in 1979.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 113-114.
- <sup>25</sup> Peter Wollen, 'The Two Avant-Gardes', pp. 99-100.
- <sup>26</sup> Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture*, p. 67.
- <sup>27</sup> Terry Eagleton, pp. 359-360.
- <sup>28</sup> Peter Wollen, 'The Two Avant-Gardes', p. 98.
- <sup>29</sup> Peter Wollen, "'Ontology" and "Materialism" in Film', p. 201.
- <sup>30</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Semiotic Counter-Strategies: Retrospect 1982', in *Readings and Writings*, p. 212.
- <sup>31</sup> Peter Wollen, 'The Two Avant-Gardes', p. 97.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.
- <sup>36</sup> Andrew Tudor, 'Genre', in *Film Genre Reader*, Barry Keith Grant (ed.), Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986, p. 9.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>38</sup> Annette Kuhn, 'History of Narrative Codes', in *The Cinema Book*, Pam Cook (ed.), London: BFI, 1987 [1985], p. 216.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 216-217.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216.
- <sup>41</sup> Len Masterman, *Teaching the Media*, London: Routledge, 1994 [1985], p. 299.
- <sup>42</sup> Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, *The Popular Arts*, London: Hutchinson Educational, 1964, p. 77.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- <sup>44</sup> Annette Kuhn, p. 216.
- <sup>45</sup> Lisa Cartwright and Nina Fonoroff, pp. 124-125.
- <sup>46</sup> Pam Cook, 'The Point of Expression in Avant-Garde Film', in *Catalogue: British Film Institute Productions, 1977-1978*, Elizabeth Cowie (ed.), London: BFI, 1978, p. 54.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- <sup>50</sup> Scott Macaulay, 'True Romance', *Filmmaker*, vol. 3, no 4 (Summer 1995), pp. 32-33.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- <sup>54</sup> Peter Wollen, 'The Two Avant-Gardes', p. 93.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- <sup>56</sup> Lisa Cartwright and Nina Fonoroff, p. 129.

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- <sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 130.
- <sup>58</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Mexico/Women/Art', pp. 113-114.
- <sup>59</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Semiotic Counter-Strategies: Retrospect 1982', p. 213.
- <sup>60</sup> Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture*, p. 80. On this problem see also p. 64 of the same essay, and 'Independent Cinema?', p. 20.
- <sup>61</sup> Diane Crane, *The Transformation of the Avant-Garde: The New York Art World, 1940-1985*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 15.
- <sup>62</sup> See, for instance, 'It isn't fashionable to talk about the alarming low number of American women directing independent features....[I]Independent film is no more hospitable to female directors than Hollywood is.' Manohla Dargis, 'Even In Independent Film, A Suit Is A Suit Is A Suit', *New York Times*, 31 January, 1999, Section 2, p. 13.
- <sup>63</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Semiotic Counter-Strategies: Retrospect 1982', p. 213.
- <sup>64</sup> Diane Crane, p. 76.
- <sup>65</sup> Collage, for instance, is also a characteristic of modernism. Certain traits may not represent complete breaks from past modernist usage, but rather, signify developments or evolutions of stylistic features with variations in intent and result. In terms of collage or referentiality, for instance, modernist efforts are more likely to draw from other art or classical sources; the postmodern from the popular.
- <sup>66</sup> Umberto Eco cited in John Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, p. 22.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>68</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 16.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 44.
- <sup>70</sup> Craig Owens, 'The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism', in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays On Postmodern Culture*, Hal Foster (ed.), Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983, p. 59.
- <sup>71</sup> Michelle Citron, 'Women's Film Production: Going Mainstream', *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, E. Deidre Pribram (ed.), London: Verso, 1988, pp. 54-55.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 55.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid., pp. 58-59.



### CHAPTER THREE

#### 'FIXING' DIFFERENCE: IDENTITY CINEMA AND INDEPENDENT DISTRIBUTION

When a work is so densely seeded within black culture, a lot of people who are not from the culture will say that they find the film inaccessible or they find it is not engaging. What they are saying is that they do not feel privileged by the film.

Julie Dash<sup>1</sup>

I have wanted always to develop a way of writing that was irrevocably black. I don't have the resources of a musician but I thought if it was truly black literature it would not be black because I was, it would not even be black because of its subject matter. It would be something intrinsic, indigenous, something in the way it was put together -- the sentences, the structure, texture and tone -- so that anyone who read it would realise.

Toni Morrison<sup>2</sup>

One of the principal means independent cinema uses to distinguish its cultural mandate from that of Hollywood is through the voices of those for whom it ostensibly speaks and the lives it seeks to represent. Identity politics is one of the constituting threads from which independent film weaves its discourse. Rosalind Brunt suggests that the starting point for a politics of identity is, 'the issue of representation: both how our identities are represented in and through the culture and assigned particular categories; and also who or what politically represents us, speaks and acts on our behalf. These two senses of "representation".... help us think how we both "make sense" of the world and get a sense of our "place" in it -- a place of many, and increasing, identities.'<sup>3</sup> Making sense of the world, and of

our place in it, is a multi-tiered process in which our identities are shaped by how we come to perceive ourselves, as well as how we are perceived by others -- the development of psychic and social being.

The dual inscription of the term representation is echoed by Paul Gilroy, 'the idea that artists are representative, public figures has become an extra burden for them to carry. Its weight can be felt in the tension between the two quite different senses of a word which refers not just to depiction but to the idea of delegation or substitution.'<sup>4</sup> Representation as substitution, of speaking and acting on behalf of an entire multi-faceted social identity, presents its own complexities. While Gilroy indicates the difficulty for a member of a subcultural group to both depict and be delegate for the 'place' from which she or he emerges, Brunt pinpoints the all-too-frequent occurrence in which a cultural outsider, with greater access to the means of representation, becomes the substitute delegate.

One of the cornerstones of the recent wave of independent cinema which began to consolidate in the 1980s are films associated with an emerging identity politics, following in the wake of the various 1960s and 1970s civil-rights movements. Included in this early grouping are films such as *Chan Is Missing* (Wayne Wang, 1982, New Yorker Films), *Parting Glances* (Bill Sherwood, 1986, Cinecom), *Desert Hearts* (Donna Deitch, 1986, Goldwyn), *She's Gotta Have It* (Spike Lee, 1986, Island Pictures), and *Working Girls* (Lizzie Borden, 1987, Miramax). As Peter Wollen has noted, the 1960s and post 60s era saw the emergence of a diversified array of identities and concerns which resulted in an accompanying diversification of production practices.<sup>5</sup> A consequence of the political movements of the 1960s and 1970s was a growing awareness of co-existing but distinct social formations -- women, gays and lesbians, racial and ethnic minorities, and so on -- each with differing needs, desires, and agendas. A universal or homogenous approach no longer was perceived to fit all.

With the 1980s and 1990s this evolved into the urgency of multiculturalism: the opportunities and issues surrounding a multiply-identified, multiply-experienced society. A recognition of the swiftly diversifying nature of society, and the concomitant creation of multiple, 'specialised' markets, underscored the need for concepts and frameworks which promoted the modes and means of pluralistic existence. These social and political conditions enabled the establishment of independent film in the 1980s and 1990s as a cultural field whose mandate and marketshare involved, precisely, the representation of underrepresented, marginalised or otherwise ignored subcultural communities and consumers. Independent film has become one of the cultural arenas where concepts and strategies for multicultural existence are experimented with and experienced through representational discourses.

In the complexity of its creation and dissemination, independent film embodies both sets of dynamics cited by Gilroy and Brunt: Gilroy's in the work of specific filmmakers trying to make sense of the world and their place in it; Brunt's in the surrounding institutional framework which selects specific work and then markets it back to its originating community and to communities beyond. The intent here is to show how the infrastructures of the independent industry, despite claims of a cultural mandate to the contrary, narrow the permissible range of subcultural representations through the persistent framing of films by, about, and for marginalised social subjects as instances of 'otherness'. The consequence is that space is created for *some* versions of particular identities, but not for others.

Such an analysis necessitates an examination of the cultural spaces occupied by independent distributors, in terms of their avowed political role as well as economic relations. This chapter will explore how the specifics of the independent industry, at the levels of both individual practices and institutional processes, shape and so help define the 'identities' of identity politics. Producer James Schamus observes that '[M]any people who used to be shut out of the

public sphere -- women, gays and lesbians, African-Americans -- have found a place in our problematic landscape precisely through the process of getting organized as a "market".<sup>6</sup> Here we will consider how such identities are also organised by other forces, in this instance, distribution and marketing mechanisms. And how this shaping occurs within specific, limited, and set parameters which, in significant ways, are not to the advantage of the particular community being identified.

As in most cases of hegemonic power structures, the organising of identities does not occur principally in a self-conscious or straight-forward manner but, rather, is mediated through complex, intricate cultural discourses. Such discourses include concepts of 'history' and the complicated processes of reading texts. At issue are such considerations as what is historically valid knowledge, and what are 'legitimate' representational discourses for transmitting such knowledge. I would like to utilise the distribution histories of three African-American independent films, *Daughters of the Dust* (Julie Dash, 1992, Kino), *To Sleep With Anger* (Charles Burnett, 1990, Goldwyn), and *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* (Leslie Harris, 1993, Miramax), with the closest reading devoted to *Daughters of the Dust*, in order to compare the varying responses to each film on the part of independent distributors, the decisions then made about how that picture was 'handled', and the effects of that treatment on the reception to each film. Such 'pragmatic' institutional decisions, mediated by preferred readings and discourses of historical knowledge, as will be shown, form a significant means by which particular identities achieve or fail to achieve representation.

No doubt independent film provides opportunities and a cultural presence for filmmakers otherwise denied the ability to create and disseminate their work. In turn, such films help to further extend the independent arena. For instance, *She's Gotta Have It* enabled Spike Lee's transition to Hollywood, where he has worked since, one of the few African American writer/directors to successfully

sustain a career with the major studios. At the same time, *She's Gotta Have It* arguably helped pave the way for other films by, about, and for African Americans, both independent -- *Hollywood Shuffle* (Robert Townsend, 1987, Goldwyn), *Sidewalk Stories* (Charles Lane, 1989, Island), *To Sleep With Anger* (Charles Burnett, 1990, Goldwyn), *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (Matty Rich, 1991, Goldwyn), and emanating from Hollywood -- *I'm Gonna Get You Sucka* (Keenen Ivory Wayans, 1988, MGM/UA), *Boyz N the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991, Columbia), *New Jack City* (Mario Van Peebles, 1991, Warner Brothers), *The Five Heartbeats* (Robert Townsend, 1991, Twentieth Century Fox), *Juice* (Ernest Dickerson, 1992, Paramount), and so on.

Simultaneously, however, independent discourse, as currently configured, has restricted depictions of members of marginalised communities in, most notably, three ways. First, the tendency to adopt an 'it's been done' mentality, whether referring to having championed one's women's film, gay film, lesbian film, African-American film, Latino/a film, or any other categorisation of social identity which reduces a complex of experiences into a single rendition -- once, and for all time.<sup>7</sup> The it's-been-done plea may be applied within an individual distribution company or across the industry. That is, a film may be turned down because a company has already done 'its' women's, gay, black, etc. film, or because the market for that 'type' of film has already been saturated by other companies, or because it fails to add anything 'new' to our understanding of that particular social category from what's already 'out there'. All arguments which are unimaginable if applied to films by, about or for the dominant market group ('Sorry, we've already done our straight white male film for the year').

Second, the independent arena has limited the range of representations through the industry's failure to cultivate a sufficient array of specialised audiences. Instead of recognising and carefully appealing to new audiences, particularly the communities of origin for subcultural filmmakers, the industry relies

on a known and established concept of art film viewers -- traditionally white, urban, middle-class ticket buyers. Further, there is a strong tendency within the independent industry to mirror Hollywood's ideal demographic target -- young males. This leads to Jim Moran and Holly Willis' description of the independent arena as increasingly 'dominated by the success stories of college age men.'<sup>8</sup> Although Moran and Willis refer to the writer/directors making contemporary film, their comment applies equally to the subject matter which dominates independent practice. James Schamus, for one, concurs with this widely-held analysis of the ascendant trend in independent film.

Oddly, as the independent infrastructure grays ...the subculture that infrastructure promotes grows, depressingly, more and more stupidly ageist and infantilized -- a trait shared to great extent by Hollywood, too. The 'independent' scene, unlike the earlier Euro-inflected 'art-house' culture, has a hard time dealing with mature and experienced voices -- we're too busy rushing around looking for the next barely post-pubescent auteur to market.<sup>9</sup>

The desire to reach a young, male audience is rationalised by the percentage of the movie-going public young men represent compared to their percentage in the overall population. Younger viewers do go to the movies in disproportionate numbers to their total population, however, they do not represent a disproportionate percentage of the *overall* movie tickets sold. That is, while 16 to 20 year olds make up 8% of the total population, they account for 17% of movie tickets sold. However, 30 to 39 year olds, representing 20% of overall population, also comprise 19% of ticket buyers. Thus the older demographic, although not as sought after an audience, actually exceeds the total number of tickets purchased or dollars spent than the younger group as a whole.<sup>10</sup> The emphasis on a youthful male audience is further bolstered by conventional wisdom which suggests that boys and young men will not go to films by, about, and for girls and

young women, but that girls and young women will attend movies aimed at male viewers.<sup>11</sup> The result is surprise every time a 'new' audience is rediscovered, as in the case of young women viewers, following the success of films such as *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, Paramount) in 1995,<sup>12</sup> and again, in the wake of the box-office achievements of *Scream* (Wes Craven, Miramax/Dimension) and *Titanic* (James Cameron, Paramount) in 1997.<sup>13</sup>

Third, and as a result of the two previous factors of singular filmic instances deemed sufficient portrayal of entire cultural formations, and the invisibility of many particularised audiences, is the narrowing of the *diversity* of the films promoted. This can be seen in the recent, heralded wave of African-American cinema which has solidified largely into the stories of young urban men, depictions dominated by gangs, drugs and violence, in both the Hollywood and independent spheres. Such confined representation has been much criticised for providing a distorted image of the multifacetedness of African-American lives and experiences, as well as playing to negative stereotypes of African Americans in communities beyond. This is not to suggest that the films which do receive distribution are not good in and of themselves, just that they are too narrow and singularly repetitive to be considered anything near a significant depiction of the full range of African-American culture. As filmmaker Robert Townsend notes, when complaining that most black films must contain violence in order to be considered marketable, 'We've got to do all kinds of stories. If the films all have the same kinds of tones, then it will be another black exploitation period.'<sup>14</sup>

While the independent industry can argue that they are merely attempting to compete with what's 'out there', or replicating what has previously proven commercially successful, the narrow depictions do in fact coincide with the dominant audience's stereotypical perception of African-American existence -- largely inner city, poor and crime-ridden. In other words, the films are being assessed from, in this instance, a white, middle-class viewing position.

Independent industry personnel stand in for, and indeed themselves largely conform to, the assumed white, male, middle-class, heterosexual ticket buyer. These industry representatives, for commercial reasons as well as ideological identification, ensure that the dominant audience they resemble will be served, not the subcultural audience which may be portrayed. The narrow spectrum of films available and experiences depicted is not simply a transparent rendering of how various social identities have come to perceive themselves -- despite industry marketing and philosophical claims to the contrary. Rather, such depictions are filtered through the perceptions and agendas of those who represent, in the sense of speak on behalf of, marginalised communities. Such delegates, because of their greater access to the means of representation, in this specific instance, distribution, 'manage' available subcultural representations.

The issue is not solely the inequity of exclusion for those audiences left unaddressed. At stake is the 'fixing' of a given identity in terms of how it is understood by an outsider audience as 'otherness'. The consequence is gay films dealing primarily with sex (and AIDS), black films about race, and so on. As Kobena Mercer points out, 'the idea of speaking as a "representative of the race" reinforces the myth, on which ideologies of racism crucially depend, that "the black community" is a homogenous, monolithic or singular entity defined by race and nothing but race.'<sup>15</sup> Industry promotion and public conviction that films based on identity politics are works in which representatives of specific communities speak for that community too often conceals that what is actually being spoken are the ideologies of those occupying the dominant distributing and viewing positions.

The distribution history and audience reception of Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* illustrates some of the complex ways in which the narrowing of subcultural representations is operationalised. I would like to use its example to examine some of the intricacies of a filmmaker attempting to speak from her own



cultural position and experiences within a broader institutional and discursive context, and the limitations of an industry which advances itself as speaking on behalf of others. As a white viewer, to assist in doing this I will borrow readings of *Daughters of the Dust* from Toni Cade Bambara, focus groups of African American women conducted by Jacqueline Bobo, and writer/director Dash's own comments. This is not to suggest that what results is somehow a racially 'neutral' reading. Quite the contrary, it is an attempt to account for racialised readings of the film, and to analyse how and why the film was misread by so many white viewers, and in particular, by industry personnel.

Through close textual and institutional analysis, this chapter tracks a number of discursive interactions:

1. How identity groups can use alternative representational discourses to convey cultural/historical meanings and experiences, in the instance of *Daughters of the Dust*, an African-American version of history.
2. How alternative means of storytelling, such as the subject matter, aesthetics, and narrative formation of *Daughters of the Dust* can encounter difficulties within an industry formation, even one supposedly designed to represent just such alternative discourses.
3. The ways in which independent institutional entities approach the business of representing various cultural/historical discourses.
4. How identity and industry formations may collide over cultural/historical discourses. This also involves the question of power as not all social formations wield the same levels of influence, economic and beyond. In this instance, *Daughters of the Dust* is an exception which illustrates the point by having slipped through distribution barriers.
5. The ways in which the cultural/historical discourses of identity politics, as conveyed through representational discourses, can be interpreted differently by other discursive agents, in this instance, independent distributors, and as such

are, in political terms, 'misread'. The examples here are *To Sleep With Anger* and *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.*

As a representative of one of the mini-majors admitted retrospectively, in light of *Daughters of the Dust's* success at the box-office, the film had been 'kicking around for awhile', meaning it had been offered to, and passed on, by the full range of independent distribution companies.<sup>16</sup> Dash's description of the film's distribution difficulties matches this acknowledgement.

I was certain that now that the film was completed, distribution would not be a problem. It had been hard in the early days to convey in words the idea of this film. But now that it was done, I figured there'd be no more blank looks. They wouldn't have to imagine a film about African American women at the turn of the century. There it was, right in front of them. I was wrong. All of the distribution companies turned it down. I was told over and over again that there was no market for the film....Again, I was hearing mostly white men telling me, an African American woman, what my people wanted to see. In fact, they were deciding what we should be allowed to see.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, it appeared that the film was not going to get theatrical distribution at all when, finally, it was picked up by Kino International, a company dealing primarily in classic foreign films.<sup>18</sup> *Daughters of the Dust* opened at Film Forum, a specialty theatre, in New York on January 15, 1992, the first feature film by an African American woman in theatrical release.

Despite the assurance of distribution, Dash remained concerned that a smaller company such as Kino meant a limited exposure for the film during its initial run -- for instance, the fact that it opened only in New York rather than simultaneously in numerous U.S. urban markets. General wisdom holds that a film needs the initial 'buzz' of wide release and promotion in order to succeed. Otherwise it takes time to build audience awareness and word of mouth. The danger of a limited release and promotional strategy is that a film will be pulled

from the theatre(s), due to insufficient business, before its likely audiences have had a chance to identify it. The widespread view exists -- including in Dash's assessment<sup>19</sup> -- that this was the fate met by Charles Burnett's *To Sleep With Anger*.

*To Sleep With Anger*, starring Danny Glover, was released in October, 1991 in multiple markets. A month later it had earned only \$325,000 at the box-office. This despite a strong critical response to the film from early on. *To Sleep With Anger* was runner-up for the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival in 1990, and *Variety's* very favourable review, following its Sundance screening, described it as a film that, 'simmers for a long time before it begins to percolate a pungent, stimulating brew. With special handling, pic could appeal to a sizable audience....Once its theme takes hold, *To Sleep With Anger* is a fascinating piece that proves Burnett a filmmaker of rich imagination and talent.'<sup>20</sup>

In contrast, when *Daughters of the Dust* screened at Sundance in 1991 it won only the cinematography award, for Arthur Jafa Fielder's work, and received a scathing post-festival review from *Variety*. 'Nobly intended as an investigation into a little known African-American culture, *Daughters of the Dust* plays like a two-hour Laura Ashley commercial....Talent is definitely on view here, and certain viewers will assuredly fall in with the slow rhythm and privileged mood Dash sets up. But on any serious level, two hours of visual lyricism do not substitute for good drama and historical substance.'<sup>21</sup>

Despite positive critical response and the assessment that *To Sleep With Anger* had the potential of addressing a 'sizable audience', Goldwyn marketed and released it largely as a specialty, that is, art film, and was subsequently much criticised for this strategy. Tom Rothman, then head of production at Goldwyn, argued that their sincere efforts to market to black audiences had met with failure, 'The numbers and the pattern have been the same everywhere, regardless of how we use television, radio, newsprint and public appearances to support this

picture....[It] has performed well in specialty houses, but in so-called black theaters across the country, the performance has been significantly less.<sup>122</sup> Responses to this by representatives of the film are two-fold. First, that Goldwyn did not know how to promote the film to African American viewers. Writer/director Charles Burnett attributed the film's poor performance among black audiences to 'not an absence of interest but rather a lack of effective marketing. "It's not that the black community is not responding...It's that they don't know anything about it. The problem has really been trying to communicate with black audiences".<sup>123</sup> This seems borne out by even some mainstream newspaper reviewers' responses to the ad campaign. For instance, 'Like, who put together that newspaper ad with a fat quote from Vincent Canby of the New York Times? "A Big Movie, Full of Big Comic Scenes!"<sup>124</sup> and 'All of this would suggest that viewers -- and perhaps the distributor of the film -- may not know just what to make of *To Sleep With Anger*. Curiously, though it is a compelling drama, ads have stressed the film's humor.'<sup>125</sup> Second, representatives of the film complained that the amount of Goldwyn's promotional budget was woefully inadequate. A year after its release, co-producer Caldecott Chubb remarked, 'In its defence, Goldwyn was the only company that expressed any interest in distributing it. Everyone else thought it too daunting.' He goes on to add, however, that eight weeks previously they had released David Lynch's *Wild At Heart* with ten times the promotional budget of *To Sleep With Anger*, 'They didn't really focus on this movie until it was too late, they had no strategy for reaching the African-American community.'<sup>126</sup>

Rather than revamping the nature of their campaign and increasing the promotional budget in reaction to the film's early slow showing, Goldwyn narrowed its focus and abandoned potential black audiences. Instead, it sold *To Sleep With Anger* as art house fare, screened only in those specialised theatres, relying on an audience with which it was familiar and its previous promotional strategies had worked. 'Goldwyn executives argue that they cannot afford to aim such efforts

primarily at the black audience that had been assumed to identify most closely with the film. "The audience for any specialized picture is the white audience," Mr. Rothman said. "That audience tends to be more review-driven, and this film has gotten absolutely fabulous reviews".<sup>27</sup> In a convoluted argument, Rothman suggests that Goldwyn cannot afford the expense of marketing to African American audiences but must rely instead on the unpaid promotional value of positive reviews. And because it is a white audience who primarily reads and responds to those reviews, the principal audience for *To Sleep With Anger* is white, not black, and the picture generically an art film.

Influential producer's representative John Pierson, who describes *To Sleep With Anger* as 'beautifully made, slightly obscure', comments:

Glover's name got the film made, but caused terribly confused expectations when Goldwyn later released it. If his screen partner Mel Gibson had been in it, that probably would have changed the commercial prospects. Goldwyn was roundly thrashed for treating it like an art film, which is exactly what it was. Admittedly, their grass roots outreach to the black audience was almost nil.<sup>28</sup>

In this rather schizophrenic analysis, although Pierson reports the criticisms meted out to Goldwyn, he simultaneously defends the company by blaming the film's poor showing on its 'mixed-signal' casting which caused 'confused expectations' -- as if one can not have Danny Glover without Mel Gibson -- and thus rendered the film less or un-commercial. However, this contradicts conventional industry urging to cast known actors in independent films precisely in order to have a marketing hook. Pierson further defends Goldwyn's strategy on the basis that they marketed *To Sleep With Anger* for 'exactly what it was', an art film, while only half-heartedly acknowledging that the distribution company ignored a large and significant audience base.<sup>29</sup>

Certainly a drama with white characters centring on intergenerational family relations, in the manner of *On Golden Pond* (Mark Rydell, 1981, Twentieth

Century Fox) or *Dolores Claiborne* (Tayler Hackford, 1995, Columbia/TriStar), for instance, would hardly be considered an art film. The criteria by which Goldwyn, Pierson, et al. designated *To Sleep With Anger* an art film appears to have been based on three determinants: first, known audiences; second, subject matter; and third, their own position vis-à-vis the film's address.

Considering *To Sleep With Anger* as an art film, rather than as a drama with black characters, conforms to a known category of viewers for independent distributors instead of an unfamiliar audience which needs to be cultivated. Second, *To Sleep With Anger* does not conform to the subject matter or genre of youth-oriented films preoccupied with inner city violence which dominate the perception of what 'black film' is; instead, characters from an older generation head the story's focus on family relations and community interactions. Third, and in a theme to which I will return in connection with *Daughters of the Dust*, the tendency exists for industry members to classify any film they do not 'get', or in Dash's terms are not privileged or addressed by, as an art film. It is important that the Goldwyn company is not singled out but that these problems are viewed, rather, as industry-wide. Indeed, Goldwyn has at least as good a track record of picking up films by, about, and for African Americans, while not limiting their selections solely to the 'inner-city' genre, as any other independent (or studio) distributor.<sup>30</sup>

*To Sleep With Anger* ultimately earned \$1.16 million at the box-office; *Daughters of the Dust* earned \$1.7 million.<sup>31</sup> While seemingly not an enormous difference in hard figures, at the profit margins involved with independent film \$540,000 is a substantial discrepancy, equalling about half of *To Sleep With Anger's* gross and a third of *Daughter of the Dust's*. Further, the concept of box-office success is not calculated solely on the basis of box-office gross. Also considered in the equation are the distributor's purchasing price to the filmmakers for the film's rights, and the distributor's promotional and marketing costs. For

instance, *The Spitfire Grill* (Lee David Zlotoff) sold at the Sundance Film Festival in 1996 to Castle Rock for a calamitously overpriced \$10 million. That price took what might have been a modest success and turned it into a major commercial failure.<sup>32</sup> Released through Columbia, although *The Spitfire Grill* earned \$12.66 million at the box-office,<sup>33</sup> its advance costs were disproportionately high compared to what the film could reasonably be expected to earn. So, despite the dollar figure of what it grossed, within the industry the film is widely viewed as a commercial failure.

The difference between *To Sleep With Anger* and the greater box-office success enjoyed by *Daughters of the Dust* appears to be attributable to KJM3 Entertainment Group, a then recently-formed African American public relations firm hired by Kino to promote and market the film. KJM3 advertised *Daughters of the Dust* in newspapers and on radio stations with a largely African American audience, arranged interviews and stories on black radio and TV programmes and in black newspapers and magazines, placed posters in community bookstores, schools and churches, and elicited the support of black social and political organisations. The film's opening date of January 15 was planned to coincide with the celebration of Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday and February as the month in which Black History is honoured. KJM3 vice-president Marlin Adams explains, 'We knew the audience for this film. We knew that there is a complete cross section of the black community who are concerned with the questions this film addresses -- what about ourselves should we retain? Questions around history and identity, the past vs. the future.'<sup>34</sup> KJM3's and Kino's strategy was to pursue cheaper, grass roots promotional techniques, and then to rely on what turned out to be very positive, and vocal, word of mouth.

These focussed efforts to reach and develop the film's likeliest audience(s) resulted in its sold-out run at the Film Forum, attended by non-traditional independent film viewers, individuals as well as groups from schools and

churches, who went to an art theatre specifically to see *Daughters of the Dust*. Ninety percent of this initial audience was composed of African American women,<sup>35</sup> and from there the film went on to find a wider release and appeal. For instance, when it subsequently opened for a regular run at New York's more mainstream Village East Cinemas it played to sold-out audiences, prompting a theatre spokesperson to comment, 'It's been a big surprise. It's primarily a middle-class black female audience. We sell out weekend performances, and during the week, we get busloads of church groups, high schools, and senior-citizen groups coming in for matinees.'<sup>36</sup>

It is worth noting that while KJM3's promotional *strategies* were unusual, the efforts expended to promote *Daughters of the Dust* were not excessive or out of the ordinary for an independent film. For instance, producer's representative John Pierson, describes the difficulties in getting *Slacker* (Richard Linklater) into the pivotal Sundance Film Festival in 1991, where it had been rejected the previous year. (A producer's representative is a position found particularly in independent film, not within a Hollywood paradigm where financing/producing are tied up with securing a film's distribution rights. A producer's rep views available films, decides which are significant and marketable, has them play the 'right' festival circuit to create a buzz or at least positive response to ensure their marketability, and then shepherds and negotiates the deal with the distributor for a percentage of the advance). Orion Classics had already signed on to distribute *Slacker*, and despite their involvement and a highly influential producer's rep, the film's admission to Sundance, or to other important festivals, was far from a given. Further, Pierson describes the significant efforts made to overcome negative newspaper reviews, such as in the *New York Times*, before *Slacker* ultimately 'found' its audience.<sup>37</sup>

Although the gamut of independent distribution entities insisted there was no market for *Daughters of the Dust*, filmmaker Dash ultimately succeeded in



reaching the audiences she had intended to address, 'I wanted black women first, the black community second, white women third.'<sup>38</sup> The question is why did the independent industry insist there was no market for the film, and then when audiences flocked to it, why were these same distributors taken by surprise? In the cases of both *To Sleep With Anger* and *Daughters of the Dust*, why was the industry unable to recognise the films' audiences -- an untested potential in the former; proven in the latter instance? What are the specific appeals of *Daughters of the Dust* for its intended audiences, and what makes it so difficult for the independent industry to recognise those pleasures?

The year is 1902. We meet a family, the Peazants, at a critical moment: several members have elected to migrate north for better jobs and schooling. Nana, the head of the family has called the Peazants together for a reunion picnic. She performs a ritual of protections against the hazards of 'crossing over'. She creates an amulet from scraps of the ancestral past: her most potent gris-gris is a clump of her mother's hair, a last minute keepsake the mother yanked from her scalp before she was snatched from Nana, the child, and sold down river.<sup>39</sup>

Julie Dash describes the sea islands off the coast of the Carolinas and Georgia, home to Gullah communities and the setting for her film, as the Ellis Island for African Americans, 'the processing center for the forced immigration of millions.'<sup>40</sup> *Daughters of the Dust* tells the stories of four generations of women and of an important segment in African-American history.

One of the aspects which attracted African American women viewers to the film was the direction and nature of the film's gaze. For instance, 'The thing that struck me about *Daughters of the Dust* was that there were different-looking black women -- different hairstyles, different shapes; the difference within blackness was just really striking to me and nice because they were all very beautiful in their

own way<sup>41</sup>, and 'In *Daughters of the Dust*, the configuration of all these women together is extremely seductive.'<sup>42</sup> This perspective is affirmed by Toni Cade Bambara: 'What draws black women in particular to the lengthy movie theater lines again and again is the respectful attention Dash gives to our iconography -- hair, cloth, jewelry, skintones, body language.'<sup>43</sup>

Yet it is this same aspect of mise-en-scène which prompted one of the major criticisms of the film. In the same review in which it called the film a two hour Laura Ashley commercial, *Variety* further describes it as, 'Gorgeously shot in the style of a fashion layout...On view for reel after endless reel are countless silent shots of women.' And *New York* magazine, despite an article probing the film's popularity with African American women, finds, 'At times, with its one representative Indian and its endlessly kaleidoscopic pairing of women, men, and children with elaborate hairstyles, *Dust* looks like a parody of a Benetton ad.'<sup>44</sup> These readings are in stark contrast to the seductive pleasure black women viewers attribute to these same 'endless' images. The repetition of the sentiment of tediousness by both reviewers suggests that the film addresses someone else's imaginary, not their own.

What many of the film's African American viewers seem to recognise but is consistently missed by white (re)viewers is, precisely, the historical and cultural dimensions of the film's iconography of appearance. In an interview with Dash, bell hooks asks her about this criticism of the film, 'we know that a lot of people have crassly said that this is a film about hair....What do you think about the critics and others who have said that there is too much emphasis on the aesthetic elements of appearance -- the hair, clothes?.'<sup>45</sup> Dash responds

The hairstyles we're wearing now are based upon ancient hairstyles, and there is a tradition behind those hairstyles. They mean things. In any West African country, you know, if you are a preteen you have a certain hairstyle. If you are in puberty you have another hairstyle. Menopausal, another

hairstyle.<sup>46</sup>

And in another context, Dash elaborates further.

Everything means something; there's a source for everything. You just don't put a scarf up on someone's head. You just don't put jewelry on someone; you put it on in a certain way. People's motor habits -- the way they stand and the way they walk, the way they laugh -- I tried to maintain the integrity of West African motor habits. An example would be of turning the head slightly to the left when listening to an elder and putting a hand over your mouth when you laugh. All this is approached from an Afrocentric perspective.... Afrocentrism, as I'm applying to this film, is that your actions are derived from West African culture rather than from the hinterlands of Europe.<sup>47</sup>

In other words, African American women viewers recognise in the film's iconography of appearance precisely what is absent in a Benetton ad: the specificities of individual, cultural, and historical contextualisation. Many white (re)viewers, not primarily addressed by the film, are unprepared, whether unwilling or untrained, to recognise those resonances, and so, are left linking the film to the artifices and superficialities they associate with a Benetton ad. Such ads are purposefully designed to display the absence of individual, cultural or historical contextualisation, and to focus attention, instead, on surface appearance in order to create a universalising, 'we are the world', iconography.<sup>48</sup>

The film's representation of a range of black women is enacted additionally through its depiction of characters in which there is a group dynamic instead of a single protagonist. The resulting diversity of experiences becomes clear in instances such as Jacqueline Bobo's character summary along a barometer of spirituality.

Nana Peasant places her faith in her ancestors and the relics from their past lives; Yellow Mary clings to her St. Christopher charm and her strong conviction that she can always make her way in the world; and Eula sets a letter beneath a glass

of water under her bed to summon the spirit of her mother to guide her. Haagar believes firmly in herself and doesn't need any of what she terms 'that hoodoo mess'. Viola, more than anyone else, has entrusted her life to the belief systems of the dominant culture.<sup>49</sup>

The diversity of women characters, across generations and life circumstances, is inseparable from an historical context in *Daughters of the Dust*. From Bobo again,

Viola's attempts to restrain her sexual feelings were not unusual, for many black women of that era attempted to present themselves as refined and genteel in response to the pervasive sentiment that black women were loose, untamable sexual creatures....The presentation of Viola and her starched, restrained, religious countenance provide a stark contrast to Eula's rape and to Yellow Mary [a prostitute]. Their two stories, coupled with Nana Peasant's history, are a dramatic reconstruction of one of the most devastating myths about black womanhood.<sup>50</sup>

Instead of the complex, confusing or impenetrable film so often described by white reviewers, African American reviewers point to the simplicity or transparency of the narrative's historicising. Jacquie Jones in *Cineaste* writes, 'The irony is that, on a certain level, the film's narrative is quite simple....In one scene, children pour over a "wish book" picking out all the things they will be able to buy once they leave their isolated homeland. In this, *Daughters of the Dust* is a familiar immigrant drama. The young reach for change while the old cling to tradition.... [T]he tension between tradition and modernity, is symbolic of a classic African American discourse: reconciling collective memory and the legacy of slavery with upward mobility and the American dream.<sup>51</sup> And Valerie Boyd in *American Visions*:

The premise is simple....The matriarch of the family, Nana, doesn't want them to move north and leave their culture behind, so she evokes the spirits of the ancestors to communicate with the younger people and to keep the family together, in spirit if not in reality....And African Americans should not depend solely on marketing executives

to get the word out. *Daughters* will likely build its audience through black America's oldest marketing strategy -- word of mouth....Historically significant and visually sublime, *Daughters of the Dust* is like a sacred secret whispered in your ear. Pass it on.<sup>52</sup>

However, if that historical significance is invisible because unknown to a segment of viewers, they will see a parade of interchangeable African American women, rather than the range of women's experiences cited earlier by Bobo's focus groups.

The film also addresses the absence, for African Americans, of 'history' as a continuous written record, a cultural genealogy, due to forced immigration into slavery, separation from homeland and the compulsory dissolution of families, followed, in turn, by the mandatory assumption of owners' names in order to be identified as his or her property. Writing of diasporic people of colour, Stuart Hall observes, 'Because they are irrevocably the product of several interlocking histories and cultures...people belonging to such cultures of hybridity have had to renounce the dream or ambition of rediscovering any kind of "lost" cultural purity or ethnic absolutism. They are irrevocably translated.'<sup>53</sup> Such 'translated people' nonetheless still long for cultural and self knowledge, as a woman following a screening of *Daughters of the Dust* explains, 'It makes you feel connected to all those before you that you never knew, to parents and grandparents and great-grandparents ....Whatever color you are, people want to feel that sense of belonging.'<sup>54</sup>

'The whole film is about memories, and the scraps of memories, that these women carry around in tin cans and little private boxes...."Scraps of memory" is also taken from a paper that W.E.B. DuBois wrote about the fact that African Americans don't have a solid lineage that they can trace. All they have are scraps of memories remaining from the past.'<sup>55</sup> So it is fitting that the film is told in such bits and pieces -- whatever individual characters hold. The 'scraps' become a tradition, a way of historicising, a 'translation'. And in the process, the film

contests European-derived notions of what constitutes 'the historical', another source of mainstream criticism about the film: 'Dash displays an antihistorical, anti-informational bent that is highly frustrating.'<sup>56</sup> The film's ostensible 'antihistorical bent', its lack of 'historical substance' is another factor cited in complaints about the narrative's incomprehensibility.<sup>57</sup> *Daughters of the Dust*, then, sets in motion questions surrounding which modes of discourse are empowered or authorised as history, and as such, suitable for historical representation.

Ibo captives, African captives of the Ibo tribe, when they were brought to the New World, they refused to live in slavery. There are accounts of them having walked into the water, and then on top of the water all the way back to Africa, you know, rather than live in slavery in chains. There are also myths of them having flown from the water, flown all they way back to Africa. And then there is the story -- the truth or the myth -- of them walking into the water and drowning themselves in front of the captors. I was able, in my research, to read some of the accounts from the sailors who were on the ship when supposedly it happened....Watching the Ibo men and women and children in shackles, walking into the water and holding themselves under the water until they in fact drowned. And then interestingly enough, in my research, I found that almost every Sea Island has a little inlet, or a little area where the people say, 'This is Ibo Landing. This is where it happened'....It's because that message is so strong, so powerful, so sustaining to the tradition of resistance, by any means possible, that every Gullah community embraces this myth.<sup>58</sup>

The family gathering in *Daughters of the Dust* begins at this particular island's Ibo Landing. The story of the Ibos' drowning as resistance to the conditions of slavery, whether originating as 'the truth or the myth', reverts to mythical account through its dispersal from Sea Island to Sea Island. It becomes a shared or communal story, 'flying' across space like the Ibos fly back to Africa, occurring

everywhere and, hence, in European-American terms, occurring nowhere. In Dash's and others' opinions, the refusal to identify a single, specific location in the African-American rendition undermines the story's 'historical accuracy' in terms of Western historiography. For descendants of an oral tradition and a people of the diaspora, however, this same attribute of 'dispersal' ensures that the message of resistance is embraceable by all.

While Western European and European-American traditions in the discipline of history are multifaceted and complex, some African-American cultural theorists argue that a central trait, perhaps *the* central tendency, is to place written and factual material at the top of the hierarchy of what constitutes the 'historical', valuing such material as closest to ascertainable and objective truth. In this paradigm, 'myths' and other forms of oral cultural tradition are considered less historical, and so, are relegated to a lower position of value in the recording of a cultural past. Because they are not factually-based or factually verifiable, they are, in this estimation, closer to fiction than to science.

Michelle Wallace, for instance, who defines African-American oral tradition as including 'jokes, stories, toasts, black music from spirituals to funk, and black English,'<sup>159</sup> argues that a significant part of contemporary African-American literary and historical practice is 'the writing down, or the translation, of a predominantly oral or mythic tradition.' But, she continues, this tradition is viewed by dominant historiography as an inferior process of historicising, used of necessity by 'people who lack the broader, more "universal" knowledge of the scholar and the historian.'<sup>160</sup>

Although certain schools of Western history have been formulated to avoid precisely such limitations, as in the cases of social history and, more recently, cultural history,<sup>61</sup> Ella Shohat and Robert Stam concur that it is an always-potential danger of Eurocentric thinking 'to equate the "non-literate" with the

"//literate", valuing literacy over orality, and assigning 'the prerogative of interpreting history to the literate European.' They continue

But one can appreciate literacy as a useful tool  
and still question the equation of the written  
with the lofty, the serious, the scientific, and  
the historical, and of the oral with the backward,  
the frivolous and the irrational.<sup>62</sup>

Or at any rate, avoid equating the written with fact and the oral with fiction; the one with truth and the 'other' with myth. Raymond Williams explains that the word 'myth' came into use in the English language in the early 19th century, from its precursor 'mythos', a fable, story or tale, used as an antithesis to logos and historia. In Williams' analysis, one significant sense of myth has been to use it 'negatively as a contrast to fact, history and science.'<sup>63</sup>

The historical tradition Dash, Wallace, and others critique descends from Enlightenment-based concepts of rationality in which reason and analysis are used to 'prove' evidence beyond doubt or subjective interpretation, indeed, to an objective measure of accuracy or 'reality'. Such notions of history are indicated in 19th century Cambridge historian J.B. Bury's contention that while history 'may supply material for literary or philosophical speculation, she is herself simply a science, no less and no more.' Or the view of Thomas Macauley, author of the mid-19th century, *History of England*, who saw 'history as a duel between reason and superstition, the modern and the medieval world.'<sup>64</sup> In some instances of postcolonial theory, 'history' is considered 'the discourse through which the West has asserted its hegemony over the rest of the world,' in part by equating 'history' with 'civilisation', and then allocating civilisation as a property of the West.<sup>65</sup> Much is at stake in the conceptualising of 'history' -- how it is and should be represented.

Similar concerns to Dash's regarding the processes of historiography, and of 'history' as contested terrain, are taken up by British filmmaker, Maybelle Peters, in an animated short entitled, *A Lesson In History* (1990). Peters' is a



lesson in history in two parts. In the first, a male narrator transports us through a European-derived definition of history, through the facticity of dates, major events such as wars, and a recitation of prominent individuals -- kings and queens, explorers and conquerors, akin to what 19th century biographer and historian Thomas Carlyle conceived of as the Great Man theory of history.<sup>66</sup> In this segment of Peters' piece, we find that many events from black history have not been included or 'made famous' within European historical discourse. '1490: Portugese ascend River Congo about 200 miles and convert King of Congo to Christianity'; '1562: John Hawkins starts slave trade from West Africa to the Indies.'

In the second, longer segment, images of blacks largely excluded from the annals of European history float past (Madame C.J. Walker, Charles White, Matthew Henson, and so on), and then recur later in the segment gracefully flying among widely-known, 'crossover' personages such as Sojourner Truth, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Ethel Waters. These images interplay with photographs of blacks in political struggle and resistance around the world, and animated, constantly moving, cut-out figures and objects of African origin. Set to African music, a woman narrator (Peters herself) provides an African-derived version of history, tales of unnamed people told in narrative form, for instance, 'It was said that the slaves flew. That magic words were known. In the sky flew inventors, explorers and artists.'

The piece's transformation in content *and* structure from part one to part two, in both the nature of the stories told and the mode of storytelling, occurs as a way to disprove the European-derived view, as Peter's narration tells us, that 'In order to teach history you need written facts. Otherwise it ceases to exist.' The second portion of *A Lesson In History* provides history that is, for many Western eyes, non-existent. This is elucidated, for example, in the following excerpt from

the film's historical account of slavery, told in a narrative mode of anonymous, representative characters, not through the facticity of names, dates and place.

The young woman falls, begins to rise up. But too late. The driver sees her and uncoils the whip. He brings it down on her back again and again. She falls and is still....They remember together the words of the ancestors, criss-crossing paths, wandering rivers, the beating of wings, grandmothers' whispers. She climbs to her feet. She grasps her baby and begins to rise above the cotton. Past the crack of the whip she soars over the plantation not looking back.

*A Lesson In History* dramatises the proposition that European historical traditions include and exclude certain people and certain ways of understanding experience. 'It is said that we flew. I don't know where that is written. There is no evidence of the event. Historians don't look for feathers or listen for patterns in the wind. They look for nests and eggs. Western history tends not to look for the subtextual traces, the whispers; it seeks the tangibles, as exemplified in the following excerpt from a review of *Daughters of the Dust*.

Despite Dash's famous research, it's hard not to wish for more explicit detail. I came away stuffed with questions: What's the economy of the community? Who catches those shrimp? What do the houses look like?<sup>67</sup>

The very terms of the concept of history is the problem, not an omission of content, of certain individuals and events. One kind of history cannot be made to encompass the other. Which is not equivalent to saying that the other history does not exist. Rather, it means that those of us who are heir to an absolutist notion of history are restricted in our ability to record or acknowledge the other.

The point that Peters conveys about the inter-relatedness of content and form, between the kind of story told and the mode of storytelling, between cultural/historical and representational discourses, is applicable to *Daughters of the Dust*. It is within the mandate and parameters of Peters' film to provide

comparative versions of historicising. But this is not Dash's intent. Her purpose is not to create a translation from one civilisation to another -- a crossover film, culturally subtitled for a white audience -- but rather to depict what Peters means by a 'history of non-existence.' In other words, this is another way of understanding what is implicated in the privileging of a specific audience, but in this rare instance, 'black women first, the black community second.'

Dash chose a structure for the film that mirrors how an African griot, or storyteller, might tell a family history within the practices of an oral literature. Rather than a cause-and-effect linearity, the story moves off in tangents and returns, 'The model is Black dialogue -- how they recount tales, the grammatical patterns, the cadence, the way it digresses, goes forward and back.'<sup>68</sup> Toni Cade Bambara describes the film's storytelling mode as, 'the African-derived communal, purposeful handing down of group lore and group values in a call-and-response circle.'<sup>69</sup> Criticising the dominance of the text as the overwhelming determinant upon which artistic judgement is rendered in European aesthetics, Paul Gilroy describes antiphony, or call and response, as the principal formal feature of nontextual modes of signifying practices such as, 'mimesis, gesture, kinesis, and costume'.<sup>70</sup> In other words, the difference is not solely between an oral versus a written literature, in which the former involves an eloquent and complex use of verbal arts, but also a process of narrativity in which non-verbal communication plays a pivotal role. The interactions and relationships created by call and response are as central to meaning production as the specifics of the story told. 'The *griot* comments on the past in the light of the present and vice versa, communicating not in the disengaged, third person voice that has been the hallmark of conventional Western history, but in a manner fully engaged with the ongoing drama of the group.'<sup>71</sup>

According to Adetokunbo Knowles-Borishade, there are three primary participants in a call-and-response speech formation: the Caller, the Chorus and the Responders. 'In classical African rhetoric, the Caller is the primary creative element because s/he initiates the speech ritual. This person bears the responsibility of presenting solutions to the social and political problems of the people. Thus, the individual desires of the Caller are subsumed as s/he becomes a conduit who speaks on behalf of the group.'<sup>72</sup> The Caller is joined by the Chorus, 'whose role is to validate, to bear witness to the truth of the Word (Nommo).' In this format, the Caller 'is accompanied by the echoes of the Chorus with cries of "teach", "that's right", "preach", "Amen", and "Go ahead on!"....In African culture, the concept symbolizes and perpetuates the ultimacy of the collective, whereby decisions are made and actions are taken by consensus rather than by solitary decree.'<sup>73</sup> Finally, there are the Responders, 'who either sanction or reject the message -- the Word -- based upon the perceived morality and vision of the Caller and the relevance of the message.' The significance of this relationship is that 'a vital portion of the prepared message is not available to the Caller and must be provided by the Responders spontaneously during the speech act.'<sup>74</sup>

The lesson in narrativity, here, is that social formations select and shape cultural activities in keeping with their particular, situated identities. This is apparent if we take as an example two classical forms of music -- symphony and jazz -- one associated predominantly with European Americans, the other with African American audiences. For the former, the audience experience tends to be quiet, orderly and controlled, down to the moments when people are meant to applaud or coughing is sanctioned, while jazz is a more participatory, interactive and social event. The social functions of these two cultural practices vary along with the musical forms. Part of appreciating the text in both cases is 'getting' the social function of the event, whether that entails being quiet during the

performance, or conversely, interacting with the performance by showing vocal appreciation.

Similar differentiated behavioural patterns have been attributed to black and white movie-goers. For instance, the reactions of some black viewers have been explicitly linked to a call-and-response heritage in which the audience takes up the position of the Responders and 'either sanctions or rejects the message', just as characters do within the text of *Daughters of the Dust*. Journalist Kevin Carter describes the black movie-going experience as louder and often funnier, 'because, basically, many black folks don't watch a movie. They talk to it.'<sup>175</sup> His article quotes producer Warrington Hudlin (*House Party I, House Party II*): 'We don't wait and politely applaud at the end: We respond moment to moment.' Hudlin continues, speaking to the invisibility and 'naturalness' of cultural practices, 'When you're born into a tradition, you just continue the tradition. Only when I began studying film in college did I realize that people of European descent think in a different way.'<sup>176</sup>

Such differentiated audience patterns may result in one group finding the other's viewing behaviour 'passive', as Hudlin does, or conversely, 'disruptive' -- or when employed within the text, 'confusing'. Further, socially differentiated modes of interaction with cultural products contribute to the nature and constitution of specific cultural works. As an interviewee in Carter's article points out, the give-and-take of vocal audiences may enhance some types of movie-viewing experiences but is not conducive to others, for instance, subtitled art films.

Much is at stake in the manner in which various social formations choose their cultural activities and shape them. In the following, Bambara refers to the difficulties for a national community in selecting an appropriate spoken/written language, but what she says could apply equally to filmic representational discourses.

In the anticolonial wars and since, language has

been the subject of hot debate in both diplomatic and cultural arenas. It is key to the issue of cultural-political autonomy, as in, for example, the development of national literatures and national cinemas. Which language shall a newly independent country adopt -- that of the largest ethnic group within its colonialist-created borders, that in which the oldest literature is written, that in which the most compelling oral literature is transmitted, that which has been taught in the schools, namely the colonialists'?<sup>77</sup>

She goes on to argue that what is needed are instances of 'noncapitulation to the strategies of containment by official and monied types who argue that vernacular is neither a dignified vehicle for presenting the culture nor a shrewd way to effect a crossover to cosmopolitan audiences who may enjoy your cuisine and appropriate your music but prefer that you speak in standard Europese.'<sup>78</sup> For Bambara, *Daughters of the Dust* is an undertaking in noncapitulation. If it had attempted to create itself for a 'crossover', that is white, audience, it would have become an entirely different film, and privileged a different audience than the one Dash aspired to reach.

Indeed, with its iconography of appearance, history told in feathers and patterns in the wind, call-and-response mode of narrativity, multiple perspectives rather than single protagonist, or better, an entire community as protagonist, one imagines that *Daughters of the Dust* is what Toni Morrison had in mind when, in the citation at the beginning of this chapter, she speaks of a literature that is 'irrevocably black', not because its characters or author are black, but because of 'something in the way it was put together -- the sentences, the structure, texture and tone.' However, there are serious risks in a strategy of noncapitulation, for instance, never reaching one's desired, or any, audience, as was almost the theatrical case of *Daughters of the Dust*<sup>79</sup>.

And it is Dash, herself, who raises the greatest difficulty. In Morrison's terms, such a literature is 'irrevocably black' because 'anyone who read it would realise.' But as Dash's opening citation points out, and as the distribution history

of *Daughters of the Dust* makes clear, if an audience, particularly the socio-politically hegemonic audience and its representative gatekeepers of culture, are not privileged by a film, they may well fail to 'get it', and therefore cannot make exactly the kind of realisation Morrison posits.

Morrison's and Dash's statements reveal a contradiction in possibility at an historical moment in time when 'multicultural' merely nods to the fact of other existences, but does not refer to being versed in or informed by other culture's discourses. This is in contrast to 'multilingual' which can refer to a degree of familiarity and proficiency with languages other than one's originary own. This is not to suggest that an outsider can somehow possess another language (or culture), can claim it from an insider's position. Such possession is impossible unless that language or culture is one's own from birth or early life. But it is to say that people can become sufficiently skilled in a non-originary language to the extent that they are able to operate or make a good faith effort within another lingual landscape. Multicultural in this sense, like multilingual, would entail not only acknowledging, in principle, that other cultures and practices exist, but in addition, would signify the ability to travel to such landscapes. This represents an intermediary stage of cultural understanding -- that of a visitor, somewhere between an insider and a stranger.

In his book, *Spike, Mike, Slackers & Dykes*, producer's representative John Pierson writes, 'I read once that she [Dash] believed that "white male gatekeepers" were blocking her film and ignoring its waiting audience, and wondered if she put me in that category.' And then, as if inadvertently answering his own question, 'I couldn't stay awake through the film, and I had no feeling for her following.'<sup>80</sup> This, of course, is *precisely* the problem Dash identifies. If he, or others in similar positions, cannot personally relate to the film at hand or to its intended viewers, then that film has little chance of distribution, or beyond that, the

kind of marketing which would favour its relevant reception. The political dimension of this is that the void in the *personal* experiences of cultural 'delegates', speaking on behalf of others, results in the larger cultural absence of those subcultures. Industry personnel are best equipped to promote films which impinge upon some aspect of their own experiences, for instance, stories about young men grappling with identity -- in Pierson's case, films such as *Slacker* (Richard Linklater, 1991, Orion Classics), *Laws of Gravity* (Nick Gomez, 1992, RKO), *Clerks* (Kevin Smith, 1994, Miramax), and *Chasing Amy* (Kevin Smith, 1997, Miramax).

That Pierson, as he acknowledges, has no affinity for the audiences receptive to *Daughters of the Dust* is evident when he retrospectively finds Dash 'absolutely right that the college-educated, black, middle-class, female, Toni Morrison-reading audience would line up for her feature,'<sup>81</sup> making that viewership sound so narrowly focussed as if to say, who, besides one of its own members, would not have overlooked it? In almost identical phrasing later in his book, Pierson again describes those who view *Daughters of the Dust* as 'an audience of black women who read Toni Morrison novels,'<sup>82</sup> pondering an audience that evidently mystifies him.

In the aftermath of independent distribution's miscalculations over *Daughters of the Dust*, the film most frequently cited as redressing the industry's omission of the audiences appealed to by Dash's film was Leslie Harris' *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* It had the early support of producer's rep Pierson, went on to win the 1993 Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival, and was released by Miramax in the same year.

At the time, Pierson was overseeing a completion fund for first time directors, financed by Island Pictures. Well before *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* had even finished principal photography, he was prepared to put \$100,000 into the film's post production. As he describes it, between *Daughters of the Dust's*



1991 premiere at Sundance and its theatrical release a year later, 'I found a more contemporary project written and directed by a black woman.'<sup>83</sup> Given Pierson's track record and industry standing, this was an enormously influential stamp of approval for *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.*, although he never made the investment in the film. Once Harris had finished production, negotiations between the two broke down, though Pierson says he later helped her close the distribution deal with Miramax.<sup>84</sup>

Still to be accounted for are the reasons the industry was willing to champion *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* but not *Daughters of the Dust*. Why, in Pierson's terms, could they (or believed they could) a. relate better to the text, b. have a better 'feeling' for its potential viewership, and c. see it as more 'contemporary', beyond the obvious fact of respective settings and historical eras? Discussion here, as with the urban male youth genre (*Boyz N the Hood*, *Straight Out of Brooklyn*, etc.) is not focussed on the merits of specific films but rather on *patterns* of independent film distribution. Regardless of the strengths or weaknesses of individual texts, certain subjects, genres and styles of filmmaking find favour while others do not.

The key to industry support for the film, the story of bright, ambitious, seventeen year old Chantel (Ariyan Johnson) whose plans for college followed by medical school are derailed when she becomes pregnant, appears to be its familiarity. In contrast to *Daughters of the Dust*, *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.*'s modes of storytelling, the representational discourses employed, more easily allow for a range of readings of the text as a 'known quantity'. First, it conforms to culturally dominant forms of narrativity instead of *Daughters of the Dust*'s filmic structure based on oral literature and call-and-response storytelling.

Second, with its inner-city setting, the poverty of Chantel's overcrowded housing project residence and its depiction of the difficulties of growing up as a teenager on the city's 'mean streets', the film is an inversion of the urban, young

male tales dominating recent African-American cinema, and as such, generically familiar. Some commentators on the film suggested otherwise, for instance, Peter Rainer in the *Los Angeles Times*: 'Most movies about black innercity life have been so male-oriented that *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* seems like a bulletin from the other side of the tracks.'<sup>85</sup> But with its dominant problem of teenage pregnancy in place of violence and drugs, 'babies making babies' as much in the headlines of black urban woes as guns and crack, the film can be read, just as easily, as a remake from the same side of the tracks -- but with a female lead.

For distributors, generic familiarity translates into a known category of film and, therefore, belief in a ready-made audience as well as a tried-and-true marketing and promotional process. This apparently was not lost on Miramax which followed a distribution strategy, less successful in this instance but similar to that employed with films aimed at African American urban male teenagers, releasing it in mainstream, 'downtown' theaters in the hopes of capturing a wide, young audience inclined to repeat viewings of favourite films.<sup>86</sup>

Third, and most significant, the readings more readily available for *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* than *Daughters of the Dust* return to Kobena Mercer's terms of the ideologies of racism in which 'the black community is a homogenous, monolithic or singular entity defined by race and nothing but race,' leading to black films about race (gay films about sex, women's films about gender relations, and so on). '[B]lacks tend to be depicted either as the source and cause of social problems -- threatening to disrupt moral equilibrium -- or as the passive bearers of social problems -- victimized into angst-ridden submission or dependency. In either case, the tendency whereby images of blacks become fixed into such stereotypes functions to encode versions of reality that confirm the ideological precept that "race" constitutes a "problem" *per se*.'<sup>87</sup>

Applied to *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* as an affirmation of a dominant cultural perspective of race as a problem *per se*, the film's spunky, outspoken and

intelligent hero, Chantel, becomes, in some readings, the 'source and cause' of the social problems depicted. Vincent Canby in *The New York Times* determines that it is Chantel's 'mouth that gets her in trouble', not what enables her to succeed to the extent that she does, nor what accounts for her ambitiousness and self-confidence. Although an A student, 'her attitude is impossible' and she's 'more wise-mouthed than wise.'<sup>88</sup> The failings are all Chantel's; nothing to do with the world in which she exists. We have, here, an uppity woman who deserves her comeuppance. Hal Hinson in *The Washington Post*. '[I]f Chantel is confident, she is also willful; that if she's goal-oriented, she's also grasping and materialistic and cruelly selfish.....*Just Another Girl* is really the story of Chantel's comeuppance.'<sup>89</sup>

Charmed by Chantel in the film's first half, reviewers write her off once pregnant, reading the film as a 'cautionary and heavy-handed'<sup>90</sup> message against teen pregnancy and teenage arrogance, rather than in writer/director Harris' terms: 'Asked whether she sees Chantel as a role model, Harris says she was not developing a character to voice a particular moral position, but just to explore the stresses facing teens on the streets today.'<sup>91</sup> The alternative would have been to applaud Chantel's perseverance in the face of mounting pressures, managing, by film's end, to not be locked into the welfare system, to be taking classes at community college, and all the other things she does to avoid becoming what she so fears: just another girl. Instead, in these reviewers' readings Chantel is abandoned as a lost cause because she gets pregnant and then fails to abort the baby, 'Chantel might also have a future if she can avoid getting pregnant or, at least, if she follows good advice when she does.'<sup>92</sup>

In other words, a (white) spectatorial position and cultural discourse which permits race to be located as the source and cause of the problem per se is inserted or incised into the text, exactly as was so difficult to effect with *Daughters of the Dust*. A cautionary tale about self-destructive behaviour bringing one's social ills upon one's self is not the only way to read *Just Another Girl on the*

*I.R.T.*, but the ability to do so makes the film more institutionally appealing, precisely because it is more familiar material, and so, more easily marketable to a 'crossover' audience. The film is brought into familiar cultural and economic terrain, rendering it more comprehensible to white industry personnel, and therefore, easier to target as a commodity to known audiences. A film must first verify its crossover ability for industry members before it has any hope of reaching either home or crossover audiences beyond. Put another way, in Stuart Hall's words, 'I acknowledge that the spaces "won" for difference are few and far between, that they are very carefully policed and regulated....I know that what replaces invisibility is a kind of carefully regulated, segregated visibility.'<sup>93</sup>

Completely omitted by many white readers of such films are considerations of the role of whiteness in representations of blackness, and therefore, in the received meanings of those texts. This is not to say that minority filmmakers are somehow responsible for referencing whites in their work, that their texts should be culturally subtitled for a white audience. Quite the contrary, if the independent arena does not want to be taken by surprise at every unexpected success of an 'unmarketable' film or at the '(re)discovery' of each new audience base, the onus falls to industry personnel. For it is the distribution and promotional systems which, in the first instance, decide what work the public will have access to, and in the second instance, market and sell that film in specific ways. How a film is promoted, how it is 'explained' for consumption, influences how it will, in turn, be read.

For these same reasons, Julie Dash opposes *Daughters of the Dust's* label as an 'art film'. 'Dash, justifiably, refuses to accept the film's designation as an experimental, avant garde, or art house film, labels that attempt to distance the film from its desired audience. Dash conceived the film as one that would be accessible to the primary audience at which she aimed it -- black women.'<sup>94</sup> To the audiences for which it was intended, *Daughters of the Dust* is an historical

drama. In the eyes of its nonprivileged viewers, it is an art film, the nearest means those not primarily addressed by the film have of understanding it. This is accomplished by an inversion in which, if the film feels dense or 'slightly obscure' as John Pierson says of *To Sleep With Anger*, the text itself is considered unfathomable, rather than the limitation resting with the viewer in failing to 'get it'. A representational category is imposed upon the text -- in this instance, 'art film' -- instead of perceiving the rift between reader and text as a reflection of the reader's own situated viewing position. But the point is that alternate viewing position(s) can open up the text to entirely different sets of meanings.

If reviewers considered it part of their mandate to offer multiple or alternative readings for films such as *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.*, if the distributor's marketing campaign helped audiences understand *To Sleep With Anger* as, for example, a drama dealing with a generational transition from a rural southern culture to an urban one, those films might have had a better chance of reaching the audiences who could most relate to them, as occurred with *Daughters of the Dust*. And from there they might have spread to audiences beyond, as happened in *Daughters of the Dust's* case via positive word of mouth, reaching Dash's intended 'the black community second, white women third,' who, sparked by its appeal among black women viewers, attended and attempted to understand the film from another spectatorial perspective.

One of the limitations of identity cinema, as currently configured, is that it is a means of verifying and maintaining 'otherness', used to locate and *situate* categories of difference. Within the independent film community identity politics is too often a means of 'fixing' the other, of securing a cemented position for otherness, while forgetting that industry members, too, are situated beings, located by race amongst other categories. Their racial identity, like everyone's, is not invisible nor is their viewing position universal.

'Fixing' is the photographic process which gives substance to an otherwise momentary visual image. It is the agency by which the image is given permanency, solidifying or authenticating the image with a materiality as if of its own essence. 'Fixing' is also the act of correcting or solving a problem; the term is prescriptive as well as stabilising. This returns us to Kobena Mercer's critique of the all too-frequent perception of race as a *problem per se*, in which the racialised other is either the cause or passive bearer of social problems. Such a perception of race is in keeping with the preferred white interpretations of Chantel in *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* On the other hand, if race can not be 'fixed' -- in both senses of the term of positioned and solved, and thereby making the 'problems' it poses seem less complex or threatening -- it is difficult for representations by, about or for minorities to be recognised by or rendered visible in dominant culture, as was almost the case with *Daughters of the Dust* and was the case, arguably, with *To Sleep With Anger*.

To the dilemma of the dual inscription of representation, in which artists of color are expected to, in Paul Gilroy's terms, both depict and serve as delegates for the place from which they emerge, Mercer's solution is that artists be understood as speaking from, not for. 'The critical difference in the contemporary situation thus turns on the decision to speak *from* the specificity of one's circumstances and experiences, rather than the attempt, impossible in any case, to speak *for* the entire social category in which one's experience is constituted.'<sup>95</sup>

Mercer's reframing applies equally well to Rosalind Brunt's twin demarcations of representation: illustrative of identity formations, and indicating political delegation. In the latter instance, the concern is that cultural outsiders, with greater access to the means of representation, are positioned to substitute for or speak on behalf of others. The alternative is to conceive of those with access to the means of production and dissemination - indeed, all viewers -- as speaking *from* a racially and otherwise situated position, and not *for* communities of others.

It is also to recognise that interpretations of a text can vary greatly for a viewer when informed by the readings of other audience members, as the secondary and tertiary audiences (the black community; white women) for *Daughters of the Dust* found after the film's appreciation by its primary audience of black women. This is to take pleasure in a more comprehensive sense of multiculturalism, a state informed by the interpretations and experiences of others. Like a multilingual person, a multicultural viewer or a multicultural distributor in the expanded sense attempts to understand a film from other spectatorial positions, attempts to find multiple or alternative readings to one's own. Seeking to occupy alternative viewing positions opens up a text to divergent series of meanings. And if such a multicultural (re)viewer cannot see an entirely different film -- the film its primary audiences recognise -- he or she can at least see the same film differently, that is, visit the landscapes of other viewing positions.

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<sup>1</sup> In Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, p. 133, from an interview with Julie Dash.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 78, from an interview with Toni Morrison.

<sup>3</sup> Rosalind Brunt, 'The Politics of Identity', in *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (eds), London: Verso, 1990, p. 152.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Gilroy, from 'Cruciality and the Frog's Perspective: An Agenda of Difficulties for the Black Arts Movement in Britain', cited in Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 239.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Mexico/Women/Art', *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter Strategies*, London: Verso, 1982, p. 95.

<sup>6</sup> James Schamus, 'Don't Worry, Be Happy', *Filmmaker*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Fall 1995), p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this point, and the implications for an independent women's cinema, see E. Deidre Pribram, 'Institutional Power and Independent Film Funding', *Afterimage*, Summer 1993, pp. 3-5.

<sup>8</sup> Jim Moran and Holly Willis, 'The War of Independents', *Filmmaker*, vol. 6, no. 2 (Winter 1998), p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> James Schamus, 'Don't Worry, Be Happy', *Filmmaker*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Fall 1995), p. 60.

<sup>10</sup> 'USA Snapshots', *USA Today*, 5 November, 1998, p. 1D, based on figures from the Motion Picture Association of America. Similar reasoning can be seen at work with U.S. television networks. While CBS actually has the largest number of viewers, NBC is number one in revenues because it reaches a more desired, younger demographic. Meanwhile, many cable stations have staked a claim in the market, and eroded network strength, precisely by targetting specific, otherwise overlooked demographic groups.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Jim McKay, *indieWire*, vol. 1, no. 29 (22 August), Internet; and Claudia Puig, 'Little Girl Power in Hollywood', *USA Today*, 29 July, 1998, p. 1D.

<sup>12</sup> Peggy Orenstein, 'The Movies Discover The Teen-Age Girl', *The New York Times*, 11 August, 1996, Section 2, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Janet Weeks, 'Scream Movies Cultivate Special Audience: Girls', *USA Today*, 12 December, 1997, p. 1A. On *Titanic*, for instance, Sarah Jacobson, 'Being and Nothingness', *Filmmaker*, vol. 6, no. 4 (Summer 1998), p. 47. Comparable but equally rare attempts to reach young women in the independent area include *Girls Town* (Jim McKay, 1996, October) and *Manny and Lo* (Lisa Krueger, 1996, Sony Classics).

<sup>14</sup> Mark Lowery & Nadirah Z. Sabir, 'The Making of Holly-Hood', *Black Enterprise*, December 1994, p. 108.

<sup>15</sup> Kobena Mercer, p. 250.



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<sup>16</sup> Michael Barker, Co-President and founding partner, Sony Pictures Classics, Cold Spring Film Workshop, Cold Spring on-the-Hudson, NY., July 11 & 12, 1992.

<sup>17</sup> Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African-American Woman's Film*, New York: The New Press, 1992, pp. 16 & 25. Other sources on the film's distribution history include Rebecca Godfrey, 'Straight Outta Sea Island', *Off Hollywood Report*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Spring 1992), p.17; E. Deidre Pribram, *Afterimage*, pp. 3-5; Jesse Algeron Rhines, 'Distributing Difference', *Afterimage*, vol. 21, no. 1 (Summer 1993), p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Dash found it fittingly ironic that foreign-film distributor Kino was to release *Daughters of the Dust*. It underlined reluctant reception to the work as though it were 'a foreign film. An American-made foreign film.' David Mills, 'A Dash of Difference', *Washington Post*, 28 February, 1992, pp. C1 & C3.

<sup>19</sup> Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust*, p. 26.

<sup>20</sup> *Variety*, 31 January, 1990, p. 33.

<sup>21</sup> *Variety*, 11 February, 1991, p. 112.

<sup>22</sup> Larry Rohter, 'An All-Black Film (Except the Audience)', *The New York Times*, 20 November, 1990, p. C15.

<sup>23</sup> Larry Rohter, *The New York Times*, p. C15.

<sup>24</sup> David Mills, 'Out of Obscurity', *The Washington Post*, 28 October, 1990, p. G10.

<sup>25</sup> David Nicholson, 'Reaching for Realism In Black Filmmaking', *The Washington Post*, 28 October, 1990, p. G11.

<sup>26</sup> Johanna Steinmetz, 'One Man's Families', *Chicago Tribune*, 8 December, 1991, Section 13, p. 17.

<sup>27</sup> Larry Rohter, *The New York Times*, p. C15.

<sup>28</sup> John Pierson, *Spike, Mike, Slackers & Dykes: A Guided Tour Across a Decade of American Independent Cinema*, New York: Hyperion, 1995, p. 205.

<sup>29</sup> Needless to say, Pierson does business with Goldwyn; for instance, they distributed *Go Fish* (Rose Troche, 1994), a film he handled.

<sup>30</sup> In addition to *To Sleep With Anger*, their catalogue includes *Hollywood Shuffle* (Robert Townsend, 1987), *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (Matty Rich, 1991), *Mississippi Masala* (Mira Nair, 1992), *Living Large* (Michael Schultz, 1992), *Fear of a Black Hat* (Rusty Cundieff, 1994), and *You So Crazy* (Thomas Schlamme, 1994).

<sup>31</sup> Figures from *Filmmaker*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Winter 1995), insert preceding page 42. In the independent arena, a film's actual production costs are of concern to the film's producers, but not taken into account in the distributor's calculations, unless they have financed or co-financed it themselves. *To Sleep With Anger* cost \$1.2 million to make; *Daughters of the Dust's* budget was \$1.25 million. Figures from the same source.

<sup>32</sup> Caryn James, 'Hollywood Breathes In The Spirit of Sundance', *New York Times*, 2 February 1997, Section 2, p. 26.

<sup>33</sup> Box-office figure from *Filmmaker*, vol. 6, no. 2 (Winter 1998), insert preceding p. 49.

<sup>34</sup> Rebecca Godfrey, *Off Hollywood Report*, p. 17.

<sup>35</sup> According to Susan Jacobs of New York's Film Forum, cited in Rebecca Godfrey, *Off Hollywood Report*, p. 17. Jacobs also comments that she did not

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hear similar complaints about the film's difficulty or comprehensibility from black women as she did from 'the white crowd'.

<sup>36</sup> Phoebe Hoban, 'A Building *Dust Storm*', *New York Magazine*, 30 March 1992, p. 27. On the film's popularity with black women and sold out performances see also, for example, Sheila Rule, 'Director Defies Odds With First Feature, *Daughters of the Dust*', *The New York Times*, 12 February 1992, p. C15; David Mills, 'A Dash of Difference', *The Washington Post*, 28 February 1992.

<sup>37</sup> John Pierson, pp. 190-194. Similarly, it is reported that *The Full Monty* 'just barely squeezed into' the 1997 Sundance Festival after 'a last-minute plea from Fox Searchlight president Lindsay Law.' Gregg Kilday, 'Independent Thinking', *Entertainment Weekly*, 19 September 1997, p. 56.

In terms of the process of film selection, I was present at a week-long course on independent film taught by John Pierson at the Maine Photographic Workshop in the summer of 1990. During that week Pierson screened two films for workshop participants: *Slacker* and *All The Vermeers in New York* (Jan Jost, 1992, Strand). Pierson told us he was trying to decide which between the two to next represent, that is promote and sell. After the screening, one member of the workshop, a college-aged man, responded extremely enthusiastically to *Slacker*, stating repeatedly, 'I went to school with people just like that!' while the 'older' members of the workshop, i.e. those in our thirties, were not as intrigued. Nor did we respond with a comparable enthusiasm to the screening of *All The Vermeers In New York*, which it appeared had been targeted to our demographic. I've since wondered if the outcome might have been different had the 'older' test viewers been as gripped by *All The Vermeers* as had our younger colleague by *Slacker*. Michael Barker of Orion Classics, which distributed *Slacker*, was also present at the workshop.

<sup>38</sup> Julie Dash, p. 40.

<sup>39</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, 'Preface', in Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust*, pp. xii-xiii. Nana Peazant is played by Cora Lee Day.

<sup>40</sup> Julie Dash, p. 6.

<sup>41</sup> Jacqueline Bobo, p. 55.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>43</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, 'Preface', p. xv.

<sup>44</sup> *Variety*, 11 February, 1991, p. 112 and Phoebe Hoban, *New York Magazine*, p. 27. And, 'I realize this is supposed to represent the "new black aesthetic" but it sure looks like *Vogue*, Fellini, even Spielberg to me.' Georgia Brown, 'How We Grew', *Village Voice*, 21 January, 1992, p. 52. See also B. Ruby Rich's incisive critique of critical reception to the film's aesthetics, 'In The Eyes of the Beholder', *Village Voice*, 28 January, 1992, pp. 60 & 65. It should also be noted that reviews of *Daughters of the Dust* appear to grow more positive with the film's success and evident audience popularity; presumably black women's responses suggested to reviewers that the film merited a second or closer examination.

<sup>45</sup> 'Dialogue Between bell hooks and Julie Dash', *Daughters of the Dust*, p. 52.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>47</sup> Zeinabu irene Davis, 'An Interview with Julie Dash', *Wide Angle*, vol. 13, no. 3 & 4 (July-October 1991), p. 116.

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- <sup>48</sup> See chapter 5 in this volume for criticisms of *Orlando* (Sally Potter, 1993, Sony Classics) similar to those aimed at *Daughters of the Dust* for its emphasis on superficiality and devotion to appearance.
- <sup>49</sup> Jacqueline Bobo, p. 155. Yellow Mary Peazant (Barbara-O); Eula Peazant (Alva Rogers); Haagar Peazant (Kaycee Moore); Viola Peazant (Cheryl Lynn Bruce).
- <sup>50</sup> Jacqueline Bobo, pp. 157-158.
- <sup>51</sup> Jacquie Jones, 'Daughters of the Dust', *Cineaste*, vol. XIX, no. 2-3 (1992), pp. 68-69.
- <sup>52</sup> Valerie Boyd, 'Daughters of the Dust', *American Visions*, vol. 6, 1991, pp. 46 & 48.
- <sup>53</sup> Stuart Hall, cited in Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, pp. 27-28.
- <sup>54</sup> Phoebe Hoban, *New York Magazine*, p. 27.
- <sup>55</sup> Julie Dash, in Zenabu irene Davis, *Wide Angle*, p. 114.
- <sup>56</sup> *Variety*, 11 February, 1991, p. 112.
- <sup>57</sup> For instance, 'Daringly, Dash's moviemaking embraces the rhythms and textures of another culture and age. But she isn't always successful in making it clear or accessible for modern viewers', Jack Garner, 'Daughters Is Pretty, And Pretty Hard to Follow', *Gannett News Service*, 13 May, 1992.
- <sup>58</sup> Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust*, pp. 29-30. Two different versions of the Ibo captives' story are told within the film, one by Eula, the other by Bilal Muhammed (Umar Abdurrahman).
- <sup>59</sup> Michelle Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory*, London: Verso, 1994 [1990], p. 78.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 243-244.
- <sup>61</sup> See for instance, Janet Wolff and John Seed (eds), *The Culture of Capital: Art, Power and the Nineteenth-Century Middle Class*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988, pp. 8-9.
- <sup>62</sup> Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 298.
- <sup>63</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, 2nd edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 210 & 212.
- <sup>64</sup> Bury and Macauley cited in Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud, Volume IV, The Naked Heart*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1995, pp. 189 and 197, respectively. Also, 'one of the foundations of modernity has been the distinction between fact and fiction, a distinction that did not have the same preeminence in premodernity, where it was the distinction between sacred and profane that was paramount.' Wlad Godzich, 'Foreward', in *Narrative as Communication*, Didier Coste, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. xiv.
- <sup>65</sup> Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, pp. 170-171.
- <sup>66</sup> 'The History of the World is but the Biography of Great Men.' Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience, Volume IV, The Naked Heart*, p. 158. Carlyle citation from his *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, 1841.
- <sup>67</sup> Georgia Brown, *The New York Times*, p. 52.

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- <sup>68</sup> Julie Dash cited in Patricia Thomson, 'The Screenplay's the Thing', *The Independent*, December 1988, p. 27.
- <sup>69</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, 'Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: *Daughters of the Dust* and the Black Independent Cinema Movement', *Black American Cinema*, Manthia Diawara (ed.), New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 124.
- <sup>70</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p. 78.
- <sup>71</sup> Cheryl Chisholm, cited in Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, p. 298.
- <sup>72</sup> Adetokunbo F. Knowles-Borishade, 'Paradigm For Classical African Orature', *Black Studies Journal*, vol. 21, no. 4 (June 1991), p. 490.
- <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 494.
- <sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 497-498.
- <sup>75</sup> Kevin L. Carter, 'Blacks' Reaction to Films Add Theater to the Theater', *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 14, 1996, p. F1. An example of interaction cited in the article occurs with the film *Eraser* (Charles Russell, 1996, Warner Brothers) when star Vanessa Williams is comforted by Federal Agents after narrowly escaping her pursuers. The Federal Agent assures her, 'Don't worry, you'll be fine'. Williams answers, 'No, I'm not going to be fine', to which a man in the audience responds, 'Vanessa, you'll always be fine!'.
- <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. F1.
- <sup>77</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, 'Reading The Signs, Empowering The Eye', p. 127.
- <sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 127-128.
- <sup>79</sup> From its point of production, *Daughters of the Dust* was guaranteed television broadcast on PBS due to being largely funded by American Playhouse.
- <sup>80</sup> John Pierson, p. 98.
- <sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- <sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.
- <sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- <sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- <sup>85</sup> Peter Rainer, 'Just Another Girl on the I.R.T. Moving in the Right Direction', *Los Angeles Times*, 2 April 1993, p. F4.
- <sup>86</sup> See David J. Fox and Nina J. Easton, *Los Angeles Times*, who explain that one of the reasons films such as *New Jack City* and *Boyz N the Hood* make money is because they 'draw teenagers who will stand in long lines and see a movie more than once'. Cited in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 21 July 1991, p. F1. That Miramax's releasing strategy may have been a miscalculation concerning the film's likeliest audiences is indicated by *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.*'s box-office take of \$479,000. *Filmmaker*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Winter 1995), insert preceding p. 42. In addition, Miramax's wide-release strategy would have entailed higher film print and promotional costs.
- <sup>87</sup> Kobena Mercer, pp. 82-83.
- <sup>88</sup> Vincent Canby, 'Brains, a Gift of Gab And Headed for Trouble', *The New York Times*, 19 March 1993, p. C12.
- <sup>89</sup> Hal Hinson, 'I.R.T.: Express Line to the Inner City', *Washington Post*, 2 April 1993, p. D6.

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<sup>90</sup> Peter Rainer, *Los Angeles Times*, p. F4. Even proponent Pierson says, 'The movie tends to split into two halves' and the story is 'not entirely coherent'. *Spike, Mike, Slackers & Dykes*, p. 100.

<sup>91</sup> Pat Wechsler, 'The Focused Filmmaker', *Washington Post*, 2 April 1993, p.

D2.

<sup>92</sup> Vincent Canby, *The New York Times*, p. C12.

<sup>93</sup> Stuart Hall, 'What is This "Black" in Black Popular Culture?', *Black Popular Culture: A Project By Michelle Wallace*, Gina Dent (ed.), Seattle: Bay Press, 1992, p. 24.

<sup>94</sup> Jacqueline Bobo, p. 195.

<sup>95</sup> Kobena Mercer, p. 92.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### TELLING TALES: NARRATIVITY AND INDEPENDENT FILM

In the beginning was the gene. And the gene was hungry; to live was to multiply.

Donna Haraway<sup>1</sup>

I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions. I do not mean to say, however, that truth is therefore absent.

Michel Foucault<sup>2</sup>

Discussing the science of biological determinism and human nature, Donna Haraway writes, 'one thing is undeniable about biology since its early formulations in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: biology tells tales about origins, about genesis, and about nature.'<sup>3</sup> She calls such tales -- for instance, those surrounding what has become known widely as the aggressive and selfish gene -- the 'fictive strategy for producing facts.'<sup>4</sup>

Carolyn Steedman tells a similar story of history.

[T]he historian can always, in this manner, present a plot that seemingly *had* to be shaped in a particular way, according to what the documents used for its composition authorized, or what they forbade: can always present herself as the invisible servant of her material, merely uncovering what already lies there, waiting to be told. It is as well that readers are alerted to the fact that the historian is able in this way to appropriate to herself the most massive authority as a narrator.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, Susan Hekman, writing on moral theory, suggests, 'we are told stories about who we are and hence what we ought to do. Our belief in those narratives provides us with both an identity and a moral practice.'<sup>6</sup>

As more disciplines come to understand their project, and product, as narratively based, it grows increasingly pressing to conceive of narrative as a process of explanation and normalisation that establishes power by determining laws (scientific, historical, moral, and so on), values, and codes of behaviour. In discursive relations, '[w]e discover not a configuration or a form, but a set of *rules* that are immanent to a practice and define it in its specificity.'<sup>7</sup> This applies to various forms of 'nonfictional' narrative such as science and history, as well as to more familiar, fictive configurations like the novel and film.<sup>8</sup>

At issue for film studies are the ways narratology, the study of storytelling practices, is currently framed. Ideological studies of representation appear to have evolved on a separate, distinct path while the field of narratology has largely sidestepped the question of narrative as ideological practice. At issue for independent film is the lack, currently, of a theory outlining what might constitute an independent narrative as an alternative to normative realist film; this remains a largely overlooked, unaddressed subject. However, the breach between ideological discourses and representational ones in the discussion of narrativity is not a problem originating solely in the independent arena but an omission in film studies across the board, including, most notably, theorisations of classic realist and other forms of dominant cinema. Such a forced breach hampers the ability to fully conceptualise narrative discourses, or to analyse how they might interact with other discourses in the formulation of a cultural product.

Avant-garde traditions and alternative practices have emphasised formal aesthetic discourses as a primary means of signifying differently from Hollywood, and so as a fundamental basis of their identity in contradistinction to mainstream practices. In the process, alternative modes of production largely have bypassed

or abandoned narrativity (or to be more accurate, a coherent theorisation or approach to alternative narrativity has been bypassed, although many instances of alternative work do take on narrative forms). In contrast, independent film largely has returned to narrative forms, staking this out as one aspect of its territory in distinction from alternative work. What remains less clear conceptually, however, is how independent film's use of narrativity departs or could depart from Hollywood usage. The effect of alternative influences on independent film as well as the lack of an integrated approach to narrativity in film studies has resulted in independent cinema's overdetermination of formal (stylistic and structural) aspects, at the cost of narrative considerations, as the means of identifying a film as either mainstream or independent. The outcome of this can be seen in the difficulty of categorising a film such as Maria Maggenti's *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls In Love* (1995, Fine Line), discussed in Chapter Two.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the emphasis on a film's formal discourse creates difficulties in accounting for an entire body of work such as John Sayles' which tends to be stylistically straightforward but *narratively* explores multiple and shifting perspectives.<sup>10</sup>

Whether it is possible to have a narratively alternative film that is aesthetically normative realist (as is arguably the case with Sayles and Maggenti), or conversely, whether it is possible to have an aesthetically and politically (in subject matter or 'content') alternative film that is narratively normative realist, impacts directly on large sequences or modes of filmmaking practice within independent film. For instance, women's independent films have tended to be, overall, less aesthetically experimental than much male-originated work. As was noted in Chapter Two, films that focus on women and gender are disproportionately fewer in the make-up of the independent field given the population and audience percentages women comprise. Could one of the reasons for the difficulty independent films by women have getting picked up and



disseminated, leading to their respective paucity, be attributed to the less aesthetically alternative approach these films take, for example as in the (successful) instances of *Gas Food Lodging* (Allison Anders, 1992, Cineville) and *Working Girls* (Lizzie Borden, 1987, Miramax)? Do such films arguably take an alternative narrative approach? To begin to address these issues I would like to consider the case of *Naked* (Mike Leigh, 1993, Fine Line) as an alternative independent film aesthetically and in terms of political content but which, in certain other significant ways, conforms to normative realist narrativity.

With films such as *High Hopes* (1989, Skouras), *Life Is Sweet* (1991, October), *Naked, Secrets & Lies* (1996, October), and *Career Girls* (1997, October), British director Mike Leigh has made a significant contribution to independent film of the past two decades. Leigh's work is considered independent because of its non-Hollywood financing and distribution, its subject matter -- dominantly an exploration of working-class culture, its production process in which rather than a pre-written script Leigh and his actors are involved in a lengthy period of improvisation and rehearsals before filming begins, its prolonged, seemingly meandering scenes, and its character and dialogue driven quality.

*Naked* in particular, at the time of its release, was described as a strikingly original departure from traditional models, singled out for its grittiness, bleakness, and 'super-realism'.<sup>11</sup> The film was described as nasty and uncompromising,<sup>12</sup> remarkable, unnerving, and raw,<sup>13</sup> and as though it 'lunged at us' with a jagged edge.<sup>14</sup> Leigh is hailed as being a stubborn individualist,<sup>15</sup> a director who has never done anything conventional<sup>16</sup> and whose films spring, successfully, 'from their being made within a strictly independent context....as far from the Hollywood model as can be imagined.'<sup>17</sup>

In subject matter, structure and form, and in *some* of the cultural discourses it invokes, *Naked* is rightly considered an important and aggressively original

independent film. However, it can equally be argued that within the framework of narrativity, *Naked* conforms to as much as it departs from familiar Hollywood models. I would like to compare *Naked* to *Shoot the Moon* (Alan Parker, 1982, MGM/UA) as a paradigmatic three act story of redemption. *Shoot the Moon* serves as a standard or generic sample of Hollywood narrative structure. My intention is, first, to show how the formal system of three act structure and the ideological construct of redemption operate in concert. This necessitates some discussion of current narrative theory. And subsequently, to provide a close comparison of *Shoot the Moon* and *Naked*. For if certain cultural discourses are fundamental to hegemonic narrative traditions and practices, then presumably this is another realm *against which* independent film defines itself and strives to depart. Yet, this is not so with *Naked*. When analysed via the thematic of redemption and forgiveness, within the matrices of masculinity, heterosexual relations, and the family romance with its redemptive power of love, *Naked* follows the structural, representational, and ideological contours of *Shoot the Moon* to a remarkable degree.

In *The Television Handbook*, Patricia Holland suggests that the gap between film/television practitioners and film/television theorists is widest over narrative theory. She describes the theorists' version as 'tortuous complexities', and the practitioners' model as 'pragmatic common sense'. Yet, she continues, despite the schism, 'many of their concerns are similar.'<sup>18</sup> Citing Robert Mackie and Syd Field as proponents of the practitioners' three act structure, Holland outlines their arguments about narrativity: a. there are rules, b. the rules work, and c. they underlie all dramatic construction. 'Despite the multitude of actual stories with which the world is filled, there are, underneath, very few narrative structures.'<sup>19</sup>

Three act structure does not refer solely to a narrative's structural aspects (although that too) but to all aspects of textuality, including subject matter, point of

view or perspective, principles of continuity (unity of time and space), psychological realism, cause-and-effect ordering -- indeed, many of the traits of normative realist film. The system of three act structure can be viewed as the practitioners' roughly equivalent term for the normative realism of Hollywood or hegemonic production.

Central to the concept of three act structure, in addition to formal, rhetorical or narrational concerns, are certain thematics, for instance, that of heroism or redemption and forgiveness. This is made evident in the numerous books which analyse and instruct in the writing of narrative scripts for Hollywood consumption. For instance, Linda Seger's *Making A Good Script Great*, states

Although the hero myth is the most popular story, many myths involve healing. In these stories, some character is 'broken' and must leave home to become whole again. The universal experience behind these healing stories is our psychological need for rejuvenation, for balance....In all cases, something is out of balance and the mythic journey moves towards wholeness. Being broken can take several forms. It can be physical, emotional, or psychological. Usually, it's all three. In the process of being exiled or hiding out in the forest, the desert, or even the Amish farm in *Witness*, the person becomes whole, balanced and receptive to love. Love in these stories is both a healing force and a reward.<sup>20</sup>

The redemption of the individual in these stories normally occurs via love (interest).

Paul Lucey in *Story Sense* takes up a similar viewpoint: 'Audiences prefer stories about characters who struggle through to some sort of victory or self-realization. This aesthetic -- the cinema of optimism and a strong narrative line -- is a defining trait of American movies.'<sup>21</sup> Significantly, Lucey refers to this as an 'aesthetic' rather than an ideology. And indeed it is. For the formal and structural system of three act structure is intimately and inseparably bound up with thematics such as redemption or heroism. The design of three act structure not

only assists in, even urges, the formulation of certain cultural/historical discourses, but makes them difficult to resist.

In his introduction to *Narration in the Fiction Film*, David Bordwell defines three ways of analysing storytelling:

1. 'narrative as a *representation*, considering the story's world, its portrayal of some reality, or its broader meanings.'
2. 'narrative as a *structure*, a particular way of combining parts to make a whole. This approach is exemplified by Vladimir Propp's analysis of the magical fairy tale and by Tzvetan Todorov's studies of narrative "grammar".'
3. 'narrative as a *process*, the activity of selecting, arranging, and rendering story material in order to achieve specific time-bound effects on a perceiver.'<sup>22</sup>

Bordwell calls this last 'narration' and while he points out that 'the three approaches often crisscross', his concern is to explore the latter: process or narration.

By narration, Bordwell refers to the formal elements or stylistic aspects of a narrative film, 'all materials of cinema function narrationally -- not only the camera but speech, gesture, written language, music, color, optical processes, lighting, costume, even offscreen space and offscreen sound.'<sup>23</sup> His concern in analysing *how* these elements function narrationally is to redress an imbalance in film studies in which the role of the camera is prioritised, followed by editing. Further, Bordwell wishes to establish that a film's formal systems are equal in importance to the processes of 'plot', or narrative as structure, in the light of the predominance given to the work of the Russian Formalists in recent narrative study.

Yet, while limiting himself in *Narration and the Fiction Film* to a study of narration, or narrative as process, Bordwell complains that

The value of this approach [Russian Formalist] for film studies would be a little clearer if there were a wide range of work on narrative theory in the field. Unfortunately, the literature on the problem remains thin. There are virtually no theoretical studies of the representational dimension of film narrative, although

some work in the theory of genre has been useful.<sup>24</sup>

A similar concern is expressed elsewhere by Teresa de Lauretis.

While narrative film has always been the primary area of reference for critical and theoretical discourses on cinema, narrative structuration has received on the whole much less attention than have the technical, economic, ideological, or aesthetic aspects of filmmaking and film viewing.<sup>25</sup>

The puzzle is how to account for this shared view from scholars working on opposite sides of the dilemma: de Lauretis as a theorist of narrative as representation and Bordwell as a contributor to the study of narrative as formal system. Or perhaps more to the point, what keeps their two approaches, despite the mutual recognition of need, from being more easily integrated?

Although Bordwell and de Lauretis lodged their complaints on the state of narrative theory in the mid 1980s, the deficiencies they identify preceded that moment and continue unresolved. For instance, Krystyna Pomorska, in an anthology of the work of the Russian Formalists published in 1971, writes

The question now posed regarding works of literature was not 'What is it about?' or 'Why and how did it appear?' but '*How is it made?*' Thus, the literary work was now defined, not in terms of its subject matter nor its origins, but in terms of its construction.<sup>26</sup>

And Sarah Kozloff, summarising the state of narrative theory in 1992, explains

First, however, we must understand the limitations of narrative theory as a tool. Because this field is concerned with general mappings of narrative structure, it is inescapably and unapologetically 'formalist' (that is, it concentrates on describing or analyzing the text's intrinsic formal parameters), and it is up to the individual practitioner to use the insights gained about narrative structure to analyze a text's content or ideology.<sup>27</sup>

The dilemma rests, therefore, on what aspects of the theory render it 'unapologetically formalist' and make the inclusion of work on narrative as

representation difficult to incorporate, so that considerations of content and ideology are left up to the devices of the individual practitioner (one assumes readers, not solely critics). In order to address this question, it is helpful to look at examples of specific narratological constructs and how those constructs are framed.

Borrowing from the Russian Formalist tradition, Bordwell describes *fabula* as the story, 'the pattern which perceivers of narratives create through assumptions and inferences.'<sup>28</sup> The *syuzhet* is the plot, 'the actual arrangement and presentation of the *fabula* in the film.'<sup>29</sup> But Bordwell's model gives greater emphasis to the system of *style*: 'the film's systematic use of cinematic devices.'<sup>30</sup> 'The *syuzhet* embodies the film as "dramaturgical" process; style embodies it as a "technical" one.'<sup>31</sup>

Together, the two systems of *syuzhet* and style appear to equate with or create the *fabula*, 'I take narration to be the all-inclusive process which uses both *syuzhet* and style to cue spectators to construct a *fabula*, or story.'<sup>32</sup> Bordwell insists *fabula* is not equivalent to *histoire* in the *histoire/discours* (story/discourse) split of narratologists such as Gérard Genette and Seymour Chatman.<sup>33</sup> Nor does he consider it equivalent to the diegesis as the *fabula* is 'never materially present', but is what occurs in or is created by the perceptions of spectators. This appears to force a breach, in Bordwell's analysis, between 'narration' as the material aspects of a film (*syuzhet* and style), and 'the narrative' as imagined construct (*fabula*). Narrative as imagined construct is conceptualised as such in other quarters. Literary theorist Didier Coste, for instance, describes narrative as having 'no substance': 'The word "narrative" is basically an adjective, not a substantive.'<sup>34</sup> The difficulty in Bordwell's system, however, arises from the forced breach between the *outcome* of the processes of narrativity and the material processes themselves.

While there are efficacious reasons for a segregation of narration from narrative (for instance, the handling of a vast web of interacting, complex, often competing elements in a narrative text), doing so also produces all the problems of partition. Edward Branigan attempts to explain why narratologists 'identify "narration" as a special area of inquiry within a spectator's overall comprehension of narrative.'<sup>35</sup> He cites as a fundamental concept of narrative theory the idea 'that narration is concerned with *how* an event is presented, how it happens, rather than *what* is presented or what happens'; 'narrative' is then 'construed narrowly as *what* happens in the story -- is then seen as the *object* of some mechanism or process -- narration.'<sup>36</sup> This effectively divides 'narration' and 'narrative' into distinct procedures, indeed into discrete areas of inquiry. Once this fundamental distinction is enacted, Branigan continues, theorists like Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell are able to 'forcefully argue that the goal of narrative criticism is not to uncover meanings or connotations, or to produce interpretations, but to analyze the actual patterns of the specific and concrete devices in each art medium that engage our perception of narrative.'<sup>37</sup>

Similar difficulties and 'deep divisions' can be found, for instance, in the application of Roman Jakobson's work on poetic language. Robert Stam summarises Jakobson's theory of communication: 'sender and receiver have a common code, and can send a message via a channel between them, about the context or world. Together this ensemble of elements produces *meaning*,'<sup>38</sup> or poetry and prose as signifying practices. However, although Jakobson's model describes a complex of interactive factors in the production of meaning, when applied within film studies, the elements of his paradigm become segregated. 'Romantic approaches [such as auteurism] might be said to emphasize the role of the sender and therefore the emotive function of art. Realist approaches, including some Marxist and early feminist approaches, emphasize the context and

therefore the referential function of art. Formalism emphasizes the message [text] and therefore the poetic function of art,' and so on.<sup>39</sup>

The difficulty, of course, is how can these elements be separated out and considered in distinction? How can 'narration' and 'narrative' be partitioned? To do so is to understand 'narrative' as an act of signification but, disturbingly, removes 'narration' from the realm of signifying practice to that of simply 'means' or 'process' towards a signifying end. In other words, such a paradigm excises the meaning of production (narration) from the production of meanings (narrative).

Robert Burgoyne concurs with the assessment that the most significant work on ideological aspects of narrative have developed outside of narrative theory, particularly in psychoanalysis.<sup>40</sup> He believes this is so because, '[n]arrative analysis traditionally endeavors to disclose the deep structural patterning beneath the surface features of the artifact.'<sup>41</sup> All textual specificities, then, any and all elements which historicise or contextualise, are part of the 'surface features' of a film; attention in their direction serves only to distract from the ability to recognise the authentic or universal core of the story. In much of narrative theory, film texts are dehistoricised, their aspects, procedures and meanings universalised, in order 'to provide a comprehensive account of the laws of narrative structure which operate across genres and across different media.'<sup>42</sup> The tendency, in order for narrative theory to achieve these goals, is to exclude from consideration any elements which do not speak to all narrative texts, across genres and across media. In other words, referential aspects are omitted because they are not given to universal applicability -- in the same manner as are plot functions or character actants. Specifics of content and context -- cultural and historical discourses -- become points of exclusion rather than signposts of significance in the production of meanings.

The tendency to homogenise does not occur solely in the realm of narrative as representation. For instance, Burgoyne points out that although Bordwell



argues extensively for the equivalently important role of style along with structure, he [Bordwell] is also aware that style has been excluded or minimised by many narrative theorists because 'the inclusion of stylistic features makes it seemingly impossible to derive general patterns of composition which might be applied to a variety of narrative texts in different media.'<sup>43</sup> The formal and aesthetic discourses of style are overlooked for 'confusing' the problem by complicating the ability to draw universal narrative rules, laws or conclusions, for making the creation of a science of narratology more difficult.

Sheila Johnston cites a parallel strategical logic on the part of Vladimir Propp.

One of the main sources of confusion and ambiguity in earlier studies of the tale was, Propp found, the researchers' assumption that their material should be classified according to its *theme*. The trouble was that often one tale incorporated either several of their themes at once or none of them. Propp also argued that this kind of taxonomy was fallacious, masking basic similarities between thematically dissimilar tales and lumping together quite different, but thematically related ones. He even asserted that 'the division of fairy tales according to themes is in general impossible'.... Rather than looking at the apparent subject-matter of his tales, he set out to discern their latent, 'skeleton' formation.<sup>44</sup>

This assessment of Propp's position raises the spectre of arbitrariness in what is given precedence. Why classify according to skeletal structure rather than theme? What seems to gain priority is what is most manageable, that which is most amenable to 'scientific' rationality and precision.

Semiotic analyses of narratives attempt to avoid the problem of the exclusion of narrative as representation by emphasising the concepts of signifier and signified in place of a fabula/syuzhet split. In principle, because a signifier always signifies *something*, this brings the role of the referential nature of narrative

to the fore. According to Christian Metz, 'the filmic signifier is as indicative as its signified of the latent significations of the film, the entire apparent material is open to a symptomatic reading (here we recognize the banal but true observation usually rather badly expressed as "the form" of a film tells us as much as its "content" about its "true meaning").'<sup>45</sup>

Yet here, too, similar divisions surface. Citing Metz' 'Notes towards a phenomenology of the narrative', Johnston outlines his argument.

Denotation, in the cinema, is the literal meaning of the spectacle; connotation encompasses all its elusive, symbolic meanings. The artistic status of the cinema resides in its connotative qualities, but it is, Metz argued, through the procedures of denotation that the cinema is *langage*. He hoped that eventually the semiotic model could be refined sufficiently to analyse both these strata and their interplay in producing meaning. Meanwhile however it should confine itself in the first instance to the denotative.<sup>46</sup>

Denotation and connotation are viewed as separate strata, with the hope that one day the two can be examined in terms of their interplay. But without both strata, and in particular their *interplay*, in conjoined consideration, much of the meanings produced are unrecoverable. What is lost is precisely the slippage, the forming and reforming of meanings in interplay. A narrative is not fully apprehensible in terms of 'component' parts.

Contrary to Bordwell's contention that the three approaches to narrative as representation, structure and process (or however many categories a theorist chooses to configure) 'often crisscross', they are inseparable in the sense that a loss of (potential) meanings occurs when the three are not considered in conjunction with each other -- contextually and relationally together. Each category considered in distinction produces meanings, certainly; but such a process of separation fails to do justice to the range of meanings surrounding any

given text. To equate 'narrative as structure', for example, with a fully sufficient notion of narrativity is to be left with an impoverished reading.

Simplifying all narrative texts to the same structure or few structures, limits the ability to identify two texts which might be similar in unusual but significant respects. Conversely, it also eliminates the ability to see differences. In any instance of comparison between two signs, intra- or inter-textual, the signifiers may be identical while the signifieds depart in intentions, or conversely, the signifieds may be comparable although the signifiers vary, the result of the effects of form, style, structure, context of use, and so on, the cumulative effects of representational and cultural/historical discourses.

Much of current film narratology exemplifies theoretical approaches to narrative which remove the specificities of content and context, the cultural/historical discourses, and create categories, such as narrative and narration, which serve as false divisions. What is required, more helpfully, is an integrationist approach towards narrativity of multiple, layered, and interacting discourses. This would better account for similarities and differences *simultaneously* within, between and across a variety of narrative texts. It would also take up a view of the processes and products of narrativity as shifting and provisional, a theory of continuous relationality.

In describing 'narrative' as an adjective, not a substantive, Didier Coste is motivated by concerns similar to Bordwell's: to emphasise narrativity as an imaginary construct, forged in the mind of the spectator from material ('narrational') aspects of a text. And in phrases such as 'narrative film', the term indeed functions as an adjective, indicating that the work in question is a. fictional and b. that it tells a story. But this far from exhausts the possible meanings of the term. Nor does it negate for narrative a position as a substantive, as an *object* of knowledge. For narrativity is both a material and imaginary construct.

Cultural production has been understood too often as a construct of seemingly insurmountable binary structures: form and content, art versus politics, Hollywood or avant-garde, aesthetics versus ideology. These are conceptualisations based on the recurring division of representational from cultural/historical discourses. I would suggest that what holds these oppositions together, providing the sense of coherency of a single, unified text, is narrativity. Narrativity here is both a material and imaginary construct, the formulation of representational and cultural/historical (as well as interpretive) discourses. Such a unified concept of narrativity, as representation (referential), structure, and process, has been insufficiently explored in cinema studies.

From the perspective of ideological investigations in film studies, of narrative as representation, the issue is not solely that texts operate ideologically, or in analysing which ideological positions a particular text might convey, but in addition, determining *how* that ideology is operationalised. How does it appear in the written text or on the screen? How does ideological content take form -- material and imagined -- in conjunction with aesthetics? I believe it is questions such as these that de Lauretis references when she observes that 'narrative structuration has received on the whole much less attention than have the technical, economic, ideological or aesthetic aspects of filmmaking and film viewing.'

Further, questions of how ideology is operationalised are of critical concern to practitioners who wish to represent alternative identities and experiences. Their task is not limited to analysing how existing texts function, but in being able to imagine otherwise, to construct other ways of telling stories and understanding a plurality of experiences. This is what is at stake politically in the interlacing of cultural production and identity politics.

Applied to three act structure as a dominant narrative paradigm, these concerns result in questions such as, why is it so difficult to produce around,

outside or beyond the three act structure of normative realist cinema if is simply a representational (formal, aesthetic) structure? Why are certain representational discourses, if oppressive or 'complicit with dominant ideology' so difficult to abandon or work in opposition to? What makes some stories possible, or even likely, while others are almost impossible to tell? The answer I would suggest, and as the following close analysis argues, is that narrativity is never solely aesthetic, but is always constructed simultaneously from representational and cultural/historical discourses, mobilised by functions such as structure and (the often theoretically under-considered process of) characterisation.

Released by MGM/United Artists in 1982, *Shoot the Moon* was greeted with mixed reviews. Some were decidedly negative such as Andrew Sarris in the *Village Voice* ('I cannot figure out what it is about, nor why it was made') and *Variety* ('A grim drama of marital collapse which proves disturbing and irritating by turns').<sup>47</sup> Other reviewers were laudatory, for instance, Pauline Kael ('there isn't a scene in...*Shoot the Moon* that I think rings false') and Richard Schickel ('something rather special is at hand').<sup>48</sup>

The screenplay was written by Bo Goldman who, at the time *Shoot the Moon* was released, had already won academy awards for co-writing *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Milos Forman, 1976, United Artists) and writing *Melvin and Howard* (Jonathan Demme, 1980, Universal). He went on to become one of Hollywood's highest paid writers, doing the scripts for such films as *Swing Shift* (Jonathan Demme, 1983, Universal) and *Scent of A Woman* (Martin Brest, 1992, Universal), in addition to becoming a very successful 'script doctor', a person hired by studios to rewrite screenplays slated for production but plagued by problems.<sup>49</sup> The director for *Shoot the Moon* was Alan Parker. His previous films included *Midnight Express* (1978, Columbia) and *Fame* (1979, MGM), and he went on to direct such films as *Birdy* (1985, Columbia), *Mississippi Burning* (1988, TriStar),

*The Commitments* (1991, Twentieth Century Fox) and *Evita* (1996, Buena Vista). Both men's standing within the film industry (although Parker is British), as well as the nature of the story, render *Shoot the Moon* an apt exemplification of three act structure. There is nothing particularly startling or exceptional about it as a Hollywood film.

Starring Albert Finney and Diane Keaton, *Shoot the Moon* is the story of a married couple, George and Faith Dunlap, and how they cope with the disintegration of their marriage. Act I introduces us to their domestic situation, including their 4 young daughters, depicts the strains and hostilities between the couple, and culminates in their decision to separate. Act II is driven by the question of how each will cope with the separation (although the story is more centrally George's). The consideration in act II is not whether the couple will or will not separate -- that was determined in act I -- but how each fares. However, the possibility that they will reunite is raised in act III which deals with whether there is a 'place' for George in the family and what he must do to 'earn' it.

*Naked*, winner of Best Director for Mike Leigh and Best Actor for David Thewlis as Johnny at Cannes in 1993, and released generally in the U.S. by Fine Line in 1994, also fits into the divisions of three act structure. Act I details Johnny's escape to London, his turning up at Louise's (Lesley Sharp) and Sophie's (Katrin Cartlidge) flat, and the establishment of his relationships with both women. Act II consists of Johnny's two day journey on the streets of London, in which if Johnny as a character learns very little about himself, we the audience learn a great deal about his life circumstances. Act III returns Johnny to the flat, along with Louise, Sophie and the mysterious but persistent character, Jeremy (Greg Cruttwell).

However, the significant series of equivalences from a narratological perspective is not that both films conform to the structural pattern of three acts per se, but the similar trajectories of the lead characters' stories and the parallel

treatments of those characters. That is, the invoking of similar cultural discourses (heterosexual coupling, masculinity) via, most notably, the representational function of characterisation. In both instances, the main characters' stories are played out through their central relationships -- George and Faith, Johnny and Louise. The main character's search is formulated through his relationship with these women and his (misplaced) role in the institutions of heterosexuality and masculinity. In both films, the lead character has an affair with another woman, largely the response to, or the attempt to get a response from, his female partner. And both films are punctuated by disturbing acts of violence, directed principally at the women surrounding the two leads, but in both instances culminating in one last, most brutal beating enacted upon themselves.

Although the triggering incident for George and Faith's separation is Faith's discovery of George's affair with another woman, Sandy (Karen Allen), the film indicates that the two have been unhappy prior to that event. It is not entirely clear if Faith's silent hostility is newly onset, but George's anger and dissatisfaction are evidently ongoing. Just prior to the couple's confrontation and separation, we witness a presumably average morning between the two. The kids have just departed for school; George, an award-winning writer, works at home. As Faith clears the breakfast dishes, George begins what appears to be his usual routine, complaining and slamming drawers because he can not find his glasses, then dissolving into an outburst because, he claims, his daughters take all his pencils and ruin their points.

The previous evening, on the way to an awards presentation, Faith is wordless in the car on the drive from their rural home into San Francisco. George, in contrast, glibly maintains a conversation single-handedly. The ability to talk, to philosophise, to prattle on oblivious to whether anyone is listening marks a connection between George and Johnny. While Johnny is skilled at

argumentation, lashing others with his point of view, George is adept at making excuses, at using talk to keep up appearances.

Despite the fact that his wife has barely spoken a word to him that evening, George convincingly feigns warmth in his acceptance speech when thanking her as his friend and helpmate. Later that night as his eldest daughter, Sherry (Dana Hill), questions him about his sleeping alone in a room separate from Faith, he responds, without missing a beat, by providing the excuse that, 'Mummy hurt her back in the crowd. And I'm all pumped up, I can't sleep, I don't want to keep Mummy up', although Sherry, on the verge of adolescence and aware of his affair, does not believe him. And when the woman at the local restaurant where, since the separation, George regularly takes his three other daughters before school, asks after Sherry, George smoothly explains that she's fine but, '[t]akes the bus; likes to go with her friends', rather than have to admit that Sherry refuses to speak to or see him. Both George and Johnny use their verbal skills for purposes of denial: George to deny his actual feelings; Johnny to deny his isolation, to fill the void which surrounds him.

The narrative question which drives act II of *Shoot the Moon*, the longest portion of the film, is how each partner will cope with the separation. At the outset, the assumption (on the part of the audience as well as George and Faith) is that Faith will fare the worse. George has another relationship, another readied domestic situation to step into; in addition, he was the one who seemed to want out of the marriage to begin with. Initially Faith does indeed have difficulties, slipping into an immobilising depression. But while she continues to have ups and downs, she also is able to put her life back together, step by step. George, in contrast, contains and denies what he feels and ultimately must face up to an escalating series of frustrations: the continued refusal of his daughter, Sherry, to see or talk to him; his growing jealousy over Frank (Peter Weller), the man Faith becomes involved with; his realisation that his family can and will go on without



him, triggered by incidents such as Faith's decision to rearrange the dining room, and most of all, by the new tennis court Faith has hired Frank to build.

It seems like morbid understatement to describe Johnny's dilemma as a problem with intimacy. Yet some kind of connection with others which would minimise his isolation and rage is apparently what he desires, especially from Louise. Johnny's problem, however, is that his only means of getting through to others is to anger them or to hurt them.

We learn, sporadically, that Louise and Johnny were involved with each other in Manchester, that Louise although terribly homesick will not go back due to Johnny, and that Johnny ended their year-long relationship. Louise: 'Thought you said you never wanted to see me again'. Johnny: 'I don't, so will you fuck off and go back upstairs'.

When Johnny shows up, Louise seems wary of him, seemingly determined not to let him 'get' to her, despite Johnny's relentless baiting. Johnny, in turn, seems bent on setting her off, on triggering some kind of response towards him. When Johnny replies only with smart-ass comments and verbal abuse to Louise's attempts to talk with him, out of his sight she rips up and throws away the postcard she had sent him, the means by which Johnny has found her. After Louise, her roommate, Sophie, and Johnny spend some time talking together in the living room, Louise asks Johnny if he wants to see her room, an invitation for him to spend the night with her. Johnny follows her upstairs but does not enter the room, merely making a sarcastic remark from the doorway before returning to the living room, and Sophie, with whom he then has sex while Louise sits upstairs in the dark, awake and aware of what is going on.

The next evening at home, Johnny follows Louise around the flat as she ignores him, and at the same time as a love-sick, clinging Sophie follows Johnny. While Sophie begs Johnny for his attention, Louise seems impervious to him, steadfastly and silently watching TV while Johnny tries various means by which to

get a response from her, including standing in front of the TV, turning it off, taking her cigarette from her and smoking it, and kissing her. Frustration at his failure to anger her, upset her or otherwise affect her is what apparently propels Johnny out of the flat and into his journey on the streets of London.

When Johnny returns after two days, a beaten and broken figure, it appears as though he and Louise will reconcile -- or at least, that Louise (and the audience) believe this possible. She has finally let down her guard and given into his presence, expressing her desire that the two move back to Manchester together. But of course Johnny is unable to follow through on his part of the commitment. Following various moments of the two holding each other and exchanging looks of affection, Louise leaves for work to give notice. Johnny first attempts to seduce Louise's other roommate, Sandra (Claire Skinner), and then steals the money Jeremy left behind in the flat, before he hobbles away on his own.

There is no question that the central characters in both *Shoot the Moon* and *Naked* err drastically and that both men are seriously flawed. We see this from the outset, in Johnny's opening rape of a woman and George's extramarital affair. It is precisely the error of these characters' ways that both films deliberately explore. More than that, the core concern for both narratives is to examine *how* and *why* these two men err so deeply.

In attempting to deal with their problems, each character resorts to violence aimed at the women most immediately surrounding him. Frustrated by Faith's growing intimacy with Frank, and Sherry's continued refusal to forgive him for his affair and departure, George returns to the family home at night with a birthday gift Sherry has previously refused to accept. When Sherry again refuses to see him, George, in a chilling sequence, breaks into the locked house by smashing a window and drags Faith to the porch, barricading her outside ('How do you like being locked out of your own house?'). He then goes after Sherry, spanking her

repeatedly and brutally. When a crying Sherry finally manages to break away, George, now presumably realising what he has done, pleads with her to talk to him: 'Honey. Please, honey. Forgive me'. At this point Faith, succeeding in getting back into the house, rushes to comfort Sherry and order George out. Although George's actions have been shocking in their intrusiveness and violence, the scene also closes with some visual sympathy extended him. There is a high wide shot of George exiting the house, his family huddled together on the stairs, he alone in the frame, as if we are asked to view him as indeed shut out from his family and home.

George's restoration within the family is as narratively dependent on reconciliation with Sherry as it is on his relationship with Faith. It is Sherry who first recognises his betrayal via the affair and who is the least willing or able to forgive him. The possibility for father-daughter reconciliation occurs in the aftermath of a fight between Sherry and her mother. Sherry, having recently found her parents sleeping together, is angered at Faith's continued intimacy with Frank. She shouts at her mother: 'You fucked my father last week. You're fucking Frank this week. Who're you going to fuck next week?' Faith's response is to slap her across the face, recalling George's corporal punishment. When Frank attempts to intervene, Sherry adamantly insists, 'You're not my father', her first tacit acknowledgment of who is. Sherry then runs away to her father's (and Sandy's) home.

In this instance, and this instance alone, Faith is the less understanding of the two parents. During the subsequent conversation between father and daughter, when Sherry speaks to him with a similar defiant rebellion (born of confusion), George's immediate response is to get angry and walk away from her, leaving her to sit alone on the dock. However, he stops himself, overcomes his anger, and instead, returns to talk with and comfort Sherry. This is the lesson necessary for George to acquire Sherry's forgiveness, his own redemption, and

the possibility of a 'place' in the family: to reign in, to manage his anger. In doing so, by behaving like a 'proper' father, he enables Sherry to let go of her adult persona, allowing her, for the first time since her parents' separation, to act like or to *be* a kid. In exchange, Sherry prompts George to admit he still loves Faith, taking the initial step in acknowledging his genuine feelings.

Johnny's resort to violence takes the form of appalling verbal cruelty (aimed at virtually everyone), as well as physical assaults against women, from the rape he commits in an alleyway at the opening of the film to two acts of 'rough' sex with Sophie. In addition, sexual violence is conveyed via the character of Jeremy (later in the film identifying himself as Sebastian, their landlord), who, in multiple scenes intercut with the primary story action, abuses and rapes women, culminating in his rape of Sophie. Until his arrival at Sophie's and Louise's flat late in the film, Jeremy's connection to the primary story is unclear in a causal or plot sense. This encourages assigning a metaphorical function to his character, reading his place in the story by analogy. And indeed, Jeremy and Johnny are linked by their cruelty to and abject mistreatment of women. Such a metaphorical connection allows two possible modes of linkage: we either compare *or* contrast the characters. In fact, a correlation of comparison or contrast is what links Johnny to all the characters he encounters on his two day journey, especially the security guard (Peter Wight).

Seemingly opposites initially -- Johnny is jobless, Brian, the guard employed; Johnny is brash, Brian timid; Johnny is cynically despairing, Brian naively optimistic; and so on -- over the course of their lengthy sequence the two increasingly reveal their commonalties. Both are connected by their love of reading, their philosophical conversations, and especially, by their isolation, Brian's exemplified by his gainful employment guarding empty space and his feelings for a woman he knows only voyeuristically, through window panes and across buildings. Indeed, Johnny is connected to all the people he encounters in

this urban underclass by the analogy of isolation. Most of them, except the security guard, share in common a difficulty communicating. In one form or another they fail to articulate either their thoughts or their feelings, from the Scottish couple, Archie (Ewen Bremner) and Maggie (Susan Vidler) whose accents make them almost incomprehensible (for American viewers at any rate) and who spend their entire screen time shouting in search of each other, to the woman Brian watches (Deborah Maclaren) who is drunk and seems largely unable to speak except for non sequiturs and guttural noises, to the waitress (Gina McKee) who gets upset and insists Johnny leave her apartment when he attempts to converse with her on a more personal level. While this is untrue of Brian who expresses himself well, he seldom has the opportunity to do so as he is rarely in the company of another human being, thus explaining his eagerness to spend time with Johnny. It is through Brian and the other isolated, inarticulate characters Johnny encounters that we begin to realise Johnny's propensity to talk is his means of keeping in abeyance his own isolation.

In contrast, Johnny and Jeremy, linked initially by their violent misogyny, grow increasingly differentiated as the story progresses. By the time Johnny completes his London odyssey, we have been asked to understand and feel pity for his world view. That is, we know why his perspective is as it is, where it derives from, why with his life experiences he is so brutal, violent and frustrated. Johnny's behavior comes to make sense -- although not to earn vindication -- given the social conditions we witness. The narrative, however, never permits Jeremy's character a similar depth of perspective. There is no 'other' or 'beyond' to Jeremy; he remains one-dimensionally despicable, divided from Johnny beginning to end by class, money and status.

The progressive divergence between the characters of Johnny and Jeremy is evident in their respective encounters with Sophie, culminating in Jeremy's arrival at the flat and his brutal sexual encounter with her. Jeremy's rape of

Sophie can too easily be read, comparatively, as 'much worse' than Johnny's previous acts of rough sex with her. Here the narrative arguably solicits us to draw distinctions between Jeremy's brutal treatment of Sophie and Johnny's earlier encounters with her because Jeremy's act is more brutal, hurtful and, unlike Johnny's, nonconsensual.<sup>50</sup>

Such a reading is further emphasised, perhaps overdetermined, by the cutting between action: at the same time Jeremy is raping Sophie, Johnny is enjoying some of his most tranquil moments at the unnamed waitress' flat. Jeremy arrives at Louise's and Sophie's, introduces himself as the landlord and physically threatens Sophie. Cut to: Johnny waiting for the waitress at the end of her shift to walk home with her. Back to: an extended sequence culminating in Jeremy raping Sophie. Back to: Johnny at the waitress' flat, having a bath, then sitting in the warm, cosy living room with her.

When the waitress unexpectedly throws Johnny out of the apartment, unlike Jeremy, he leaves. He does not hit her or rape her as we might expect or fear -- and as is threatened for a moment when he forcefully backs her up against the wall. Instead, he spews words at her in an effort to induce guilt for his, to him needless, homelessness for the night and her mean-spiritedness in throwing him out.

It would be much harder to read a contrast between Johnny and Jeremy if, for instance, Jeremy's rape of Sophie were intercut with images of Johnny having forced or rough sex with the waitress, although this is at least as plausible a narrative development as the action shown. Stated conversely, such intercutting would be more likely to force a comparison rather than a contrast between the two characters. Further, Johnny's unexpected shift in behaviour, *not* physically hurting the woman or resorting to simply taking what he wants but rather articulating the circumstances of his existence as homeless, marks the moment at which Johnny

begins to be the victim, not the aggressor. For from here, we move into the third act with its *possibility* of redemption.

Both *Naked* and *Shoot the Moon* employ the common narrative convention of telling their stories as enacted upon the multiple women in the main characters' lives -- wives, daughters, girlfriends, lovers. Within this structure, Sandy and Sophie are the 'expendable' characters, eliminating themselves from the narrative. Sandy by telling George: 'You're my friend, George. I like you. I love you. And if you don't come through, I'll find somebody else,' and so avoiding the narrative moral dilemma of dual commitments and emotional entanglements on George's part. As a character, Sophie, the more sympathetic (because developed) of the two, is akin to a mixture of the story functions Sandy and Sherry encompass in *Shoot the Moon*. Sophie also proves both sexually and narratively expendable, the former in how she seemingly functions as everyone's sexual victim. Sophie removes herself narratively when, believing Johnny and Louise will reunite, she packs her suitcase and, distraught, abandons the flat, and the story.

Depicting the repercussions of George and Johnny's behaviour (to themselves and others) in act I, and laying out the specifics of the problem in act II -- Johnny's social circumstances; George's uncontrolled anger and unacknowledged feelings -- enables act III, the possibility of redemption, to occur.

Shortly after their separation and near the beginning of act II, George returns to the family home, in the company of a police officer at the suggestion of his lawyer, to collect his books. As the ex-couple pack books and talk, George says to Faith, 'We need to be grown up about this.' The statement, referring to the acceptance of their separation and his new live-in relationship, seems to annoy Faith.

Much later, when George brings Sherry home after she has run away and the two have made peace, he steps into a party-in-progress celebrating the completion of the tennis court. George makes polite conversation with Frank,

complimenting the court, and Frank, acting as host of the household, offers George a drink. Next, Faith invites George and Sandy to come over sometime and play tennis with her and Frank, saying, 'We have to be grown up about it. Don't you want that?' Echoing George's earlier words to her, Faith refers to the two couples socialising together as an acceptance of the fact that the original husband and wife are now in other relationships.

In response, instead of returning quietly to his new home, George gets into his car and uses it as a battering ram to destroy the tennis court, smashing into various structures, including guests' cars, until the newly-constructed tennis area is in shambles. This is certainly an effort on George's part to reclaim *his* home, *his* life -- away from Frank, Faith's independence, his daughters' distance, and so on. But the narrative also seems to be suggesting that being 'grown up' may not be the answer. In denying his feelings of frustration, hurt, jealousy, he has been dishonest -- to himself, and to his wife and daughters. Admitting his feelings and acting in concert with them enables him to 'properly' take up his role of husband and father.

In response to George's destruction of the tennis courts, Frank grabs George and beats him, brutally and repeatedly, long after George is down on the ground and unable to protect himself. In narrative terms, Frank has the right to be angry at what George has done to the tennis court, to his hard work. The problem is Frank's beating of George is so harsh and so prolonged that the punishment exceeds the crime, that is, George hurt *property* but did not hurt any *person*. Further, Frank goes after George for the wrong reasons, appearing to seek revenge for the destruction of his *work*, not to protect Faith and the family. If George has erred once again, we are meant to understand that at least he has done so out of love, out of an attempt to reclaim his family. In contrast to Frank who is just getting even. In the end, Frank -- like Jeremy -- turns out to be as angry and even more violent than George. And for the wrong reasons.



During the beating, Faith and the girls, seeking to protect George, shout at Frank to stop. When he eventually does so, the daughters, including Sherry, rush over to embrace their battered and immobile father. Faith, on her part, refuses to respond to Frank and so he leaves. Instead, she walks over to where George lies on the ground and looks down at him with sympathy. George extends his hand towards her, in a gesture which asks her to place her own hand in his. The scene, and film, conclude here on a freeze frame of George's arm extended towards her. Faith does not respond in kind to George's gesture, but neither does she close down (as she did with Frank), leaving available the *possibility* the two might yet reconcile. More to the point, the final image of a beaten George, embraced by his daughters and in supplication to Faith, signals forgiveness of him. Not as a vindication of what he has done, but as a sign that they (and we?) understand what he has gone through. The beating serves to bring George to his knees, to rid him of his arrogance; to chasten *and* to punish him, the twin steps necessary for his potential rehabilitation.

By the time Johnny follows the person affixing posters (Darren Tunstall), we understand that his incessant, annoying chatter aimed at the taciturn poster man is Johnny's means of warding off his sense of isolation -- talk to fill the night void. He rambles on frantically, making jokes but little sense, till suddenly the poster person hits and kicks Johnny, then drives off, leaving him on the ground. Johnny gets up and makes his way down the street, into an alley, where he is suddenly surrounded and beaten terribly by a group of young men, motivated simply by having happened upon him. This act of violence seems both excessive and purposeless, even in a film punctuated by staccato outbursts of arbitrary violence. From this point on, Johnny is rendered, not the perpetrator, but the victim of violence and social circumstances.

Somehow Johnny manages to stagger back to Louise and Sophie's flat to fall, literally, on their doorstep, a battered, bleeding mess. His appearance evokes

immediate concern and sympathy from Louise and Sophie. Tears in their eyes, they attempt to help him as best they can. Now, under their roof at the same time, they must deal with the evil Jeremy *and* the wounded Johnny.

At the commotion, having been asleep in the flat, Jeremy gets up to taunt Johnny and the women. Johnny, huddled on the floor nearly unconscious and incoherent, is powerless to protect himself or the women. Indeed, he must rely on them to protect him (it is Louise who eventually manages to get Jeremy out). Johnny's illusory power is made evident in the image of his broken and bleeding body on the ground, towered over by the threatening Jeremy, clad only in underwear (as he has been throughout his stay in the flat -- a brazen emphasis of his comfort in, his ownership of, the situation: the flat and its occupants).

Johnny's brutal and emasculating beating is intended, like George's, to 'settle the score' for the injustices he has previously committed. Getting mercilessly pummeled brings Johnny to his knees, to the same position as the women in the narrative, no longer the threat but the victim. And in case we miss this point, when Sophie asks Johnny where he has been, he replies, 'Down the via dolorosa'. As Vincent Canby notes, 'Johnny's being sarcastic, but the movie isn't.'<sup>51</sup>

In addition, it is Johnny's severe beating which prompts Louise to relent, to take the risk of opening herself up to Johnny once again. It is Johnny's beating which prompts her to suggest they reunite as a couple and leave for Manchester together, which persuades her to ask for, and receive, a 'cuddle' from him. She has let down her guard, built from experience, doing the two things she had earlier refused to consider: trusting Johnny and returning to Manchester.

As she weighs her options, and subsequently begins to count on Johnny to go through with their plans, Louise, and the audience, are torn between her best interests (not Johnny) and the realisation of her, and our, feelings for him: wishing they would reunite, fearing Johnny's ability to go through with it; hoping he will

agree and so provide a 'happy' ending, hoping for her long-term sake he will say no. But fear wins out over hope in this narrative universe.

Johnny takes the money and abandons Louise, staying true to the character he is and the world in which he exists. *Naked* holds on to at great length, and concludes with, the final image of a hobbling Johnny, the literal representation of the walking wounded, as he struggles to escape.

*Naked* is a fierce and risky film, especially in the characters and social conditions it portrays, but in narrative terms it, like *Shoot the Moon*, can be read as a plea for forgiveness on the part of the men who have erred, from the women they have hurt and demeaned. Such a conclusion would depend on how one reads Johnny's final act and the film's final image. Are we meant to read Johnny to be *like* Jeremy, and so Louise and Sophie are better off without him? Or do we feel sympathy for him as he limps off to the bleak circumstances of his life, unable to receive the affection Louise extends? To what degree are we relieved at his departure because the women have escaped his clutches? To what degree are we saddened by the desperation of his departure and his diminished existence? The latter, sympathy for Johnny, appears to be the stronger of the two interpretations, or certainly an at least equally plausible reading.<sup>52</sup> In Linda Seger's terms he fails to receive love either as a healing force or as a reward.

Neither *Naked* or *Shoot the Moon* offer a definitive redemption for their central characters. In the case of *Shoot the Moon* only the *possibility* of redemption is held out, along with George's extended hand. Redemption in the narrative terms of *Shoot the Moon* and *Naked* is posited as forgiveness. But forgiveness can be reached not only by the repentant acts of characters, but also by a deeper *understanding* of them on the part of other characters and the audience. Both narratives do resolve with a deeper understanding of the male characters' conditions of existence, an understanding which accumulates through weightiness of details, resulting at some point, in a shift in the balance of

sentiment in *favour* of the characters, from blame and anger to forgiveness. Striking narrative equivalences exist between *Naked* and *Shoot the Moon* in the trajectories of the two main characters' stories, and along a barometer of redemption based on whether, and to what degree, we can sympathise and forgive, although the flaws in *Shoot the Moon* are presented as personal, psychological weaknesses in keeping with an individualist world view, while the fault in *Naked* lies in the surrounding social environment.

This is not to collapse *Naked* and *Shoot the Moon* as somehow both 'mainstream' or 'independent'. Their differences remain vivid. But it is to attempt to conceive of their distinctions and equivalences in *narrative* terms, in addition to form (alternative vs. Hollywood), setting ('mean streets' of London vs. suburbs of San Francisco), subject matter (urban underclass vs. middle class), and so on. That is, what might we mean *narratively* by 'independent' or 'alternative'?

Mike Leigh is right, in response to criticisms of *Naked* as misogynist, to argue that portraying a misogynist character does not then necessarily make the film misogynist,<sup>53</sup> just as, for instance, depicting a rape is not in itself sexually exploitative. Indeed, it is a meaningless argument outside the processes of narrative signification. But similarly, the selection of subject matter (depicting an underclass rather than the middle class), or the selection of an anti-hero as central character, does not then necessarily, from a narratological perspective, make that film 'alternative'.

For instance, there appears to be a tendency in Leigh's films for male characters to control the narrative -- for men to incite and drive it forward, while the women are more likely to be affected by it. In *Secrets and Lies* (1996, October), Maurice's (Timothy Spall) character has a disproportionate presence for a narrative which, at its core, explores various aspects of motherhood (Cynthia, Monica) and daughterhood (Hortense, Roxanne). Maurice is the 'good soul' stuck, as he puts it, in the middle between the three women he loves -- his sister, wife

and niece, all of whom happen to be excessively emotional. He is also the person who organises the family reunion, guides everyone through the ensuing confrontation, pronounces on its meanings, and engineers the ultimate resolution.

*Career Girls* (1997, October) depicts two fascinating women characters but lacks apparent narrative purpose, prompting reviewers to refer to it as a 'slight' or 'minor' film.<sup>54</sup> Again, it is a less central character, Ricky (Mark Benton), who is responsible for the film's ultimate series of events. Annie (Lynda Steadman) and Hannah (Katrin Cartlidge), the two college roommates reuniting for a weekend six years later, are both depicted as unhappy and unfulfilled. They seem to formulate all roads to their longed for 'true happiness' through men, but alas, Hannah is 'too strong' for a relationship, Annie 'too weak', as they acknowledge during a dinner conversation not far from the end of the film. Neither the narrative nor the characters themselves ever seem to imagine any other potential sources of happiness or success for the women: not in the ways they have changed over the past six years, not in their careers (despite the film's title), and not in their friendship with each other.

The narrative system of three act structure and the ideological construct of redemption and forgiveness frequently operate in concert. The familiarity and prevalence of this narrative schema, embraced by Hollywood, makes adherence to its conventions difficult to resist, whether consciously or otherwise. Initiated by establishing the flaws or dilemma for a character, then delineating what the causes of those flaws are, it proves conceptually difficult, as a third stage within this paradigm, *not* to focus on whether the character realises or fails to realise his/her flaws, is redeemed or fails to be redeemed. The cultural omnipresence of this system which links, rather than separates, *Naked* narratologically to *Shoot the Moon*, can be found in other seemingly unlikely independent films.

In *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996, Miramax), for instance, it surfaces as a 'third act problem'. For most of its time, the narrative is unique: the story of a

quintet of friends, rather than a single character, connected by class, friendship and heroin. Further, their mode of existence centered around heroin use is explored not in order to condemn it but to show, along with its dangers, the pleasures it provides, both as a drug and as an antidote to the miseries and empty 'meanings' of the larger, 'legitimate' society which surrounds them.

The drug use, while not depicted as attractive -- there are too many disgusting and miserable consequences (the filthy toilet, withdrawal, an infant's death, imprisonment, and so on) -- is made *comprehensible*, especially given the futile social options otherwise available. One of the pivotal factors making the group's way of life sympathetic is the camaraderie between its members. They form their own subculture, connected by common interests, companionship and loyalty.

Then, as we approach the end of the film, the narrative veers, becoming increasingly focused on a plot-event -- a drug deal -- and on a single figure, Renton (Ewan McGregor), as a potentially redeemable main character. Although Renton has been the voice-over narrator throughout the film, from here it becomes increasingly *his* story alone.

How Renton's potential redemption is achieved is significant: he must cheat and betray his friends by stealing, entirely for himself, the money they have made together from the drug deal. In the context of the narrative, his is an act of escape, of survival, a redemptive feat in which Renton opts for, 'going straight and choosing life'.

There is no doubt that this resolution is intended to be ironic. Renton's choice for 'life' is described as, 'the job, the family, the fucking big television, the washing machine...', and an endless litany of consumer goods and societal obligations. Simultaneously, however, as a smiling Renton steps into the hope-filled light of day, with passport and money in hand, the conclusion plays as straight-forwardly redemptive, as Renton's chance for a 'future'.

But treated in other ways narratively, Renton's betrayal of his friends could have played as an act lower and more debased than anything any member of the group has ever done for drugs. For Renton's betrayal to be potentially redemptive it must first be made acceptable, both morally and emotionally, to the audience, and in order for that to occur, the betrayal must be narratively justified. This is undertaken through multiple strategies.

First, the story becomes increasingly Renton's *against* his friends, rather than the previous unity of the group against the larger social order. Instead of the film's earlier depiction of familiarity and camaraderie, we see the intrusiveness and filthy habits of Renton's friends as they descend on his London flat. The antagonism between the friends, as though now enemies, becomes increasingly the narrative focus.

Second, the narrative demeans and vilifies the friends in comparison to Renton. The most notable instance of this is Begbie's (Robert Carlyle) extremely brutal, senseless beating of a man in a pub, in the process of which he also stabs Spud (Ewen Bremner) and threatens Renton. This is yet another instance of making an anti-hero (or morally questionable lead) forgivable by making another character's behaviour (Jeremy, Frank) significantly worse. The other character in *Trainspotting* who undergoes a negative transformation is Sick Boy (Johnny Lee Miller), eliminated as friend and object of betrayal because of his new career prostituting schoolgirls and pushing drugs, and because he admits that, given the opportunity, he would steal the money from Renton and the others.

The exception to this negative character revision is Spud. He remains a sympathetic character, and loyal in his friendship to Renton, even to the extent of not betraying him to Begbie and Sick Boy when he sees Renton leaving with the money (including his own). So the third narrative tactic, employed in Spud's case, is for Renton to leave Spud's share of the money behind for him, as if to reassure us that he, Renton, is at heart a good guy, still worthy of our identification and any

chances for redemption that come his way. And although Renton's intention is clear at the moment he leaves the money for Spud, the film seeks to make it emphatic by a shot of Spud opening the locker and finding the money Renton has left him; indeed, this is the *final* shot of the film.

The narrative works to justify Renton's betrayals in order to make viable his potential redemption. This strikingly independent narrative reverts to the influences of normative realist cinema in its hopeful, 'uplifting' outcome. Such linkages between the thematics of redemption and three act structure serve to emphasise that the meanings created by narrative as representation, as structure, and as form/style, that is between representational and cultural/historical discourses, are inextricably interwoven.

There is, of course, no single kind of independent narrative; quite the contrary, a potentially infinite number is imaginable. (Chapter Five examines two examples of independent narratives; one, *Orlando*, is more resolutely alternative while the other, *The Piano*, pursues a hybrid model of narrativity). But independent narratives are intended to be, in some measure(s), a departure from mainstream narrativity or normative realist film. This statement is made with the additional understanding that every text is capable of conveying a multiple number of narratives or potential narrative meanings, subject to various interpreters, and subject also to changing historical and cultural circumstances. To analyse a narrative, then, is to pick one or so of these narrative trajectories, without exhausting the text's narrative meanings or excluding the possibility of other readings.

For instance, a comparative analysis of *Naked* and *Shoot the Moon* along an axis of gender relations and masculine behaviour finds striking equivalences between the two films. Yet, while the material texts, the representational discourses, obviously remain the same, an examination based upon the cultural discourse of class might well cause us to stress the two texts' strong



dissimilarities. George and Faith's large, idyllically rural home, as well as the existence of privilege contained within, goes virtually unsignalled in *Shoot the Moon*, a matter of indifference or invisibility. This contrasts harshly with the reduced circumstances, squalor or homelessness of the lives depicted in *Naked*. The latter film is staunchly and self-consciously set in the world of an urban underclass.

*Shoot the Moon* draws stereotypical class distinctions, principally through the character of Frank, who is used to *narratively* defend George (by beating him up). Frank is a building contractor who displays less sophisticated, less educated behavior than the middle/upper-middle class Dunlaps. When Faith explains that she wants a gazebo behind the tennis court, Frank does not know what she is referring to.

Faith: I was thinking about having a little gazebo.

You know, like you see at Wimbledon.

Frank: A what?....

Faith: We'd have this tennis summer house, like the Japanese, where the children can have ice tea and chicken sandwiches.

Frank: Japanese?

Later, during an awkward, pre-intimate encounter between the two, Faith makes nervous jokes that Frank does not understand. And against the narrative device of *Naked's* homelessness which motivates Johnny's movements and actions, there is the emblem of the tennis court itself which Faith contracts Frank to build and which motivates her and George's actions. The court costs \$12,000 and although Faith does not have the money at the moment, due to her separation, she is confident she will have it eventually.

Frank's depiction as less sophisticated and less educated 'pays off' when he becomes little more than a working class 'thug', resorting to brute force in his savage beating of George. By doing so he also neatly excises himself from the story, that is, as unworthy of Faith's affections. In contrast, Johnny's final beating

in *Naked* engenders sympathy, stripping him of any feigned power he believes he has or pretends to have in the world, the opposite of Jeremy whose class and financial dealings bring him real power within the terms of that film. Jeremy leaves the flat intact, no mark upon him, dressed again in his upscale suit and driving his expensive car. Jeremy, unlike Johnny, remains unharmed, unchastened and unpunished by the experiences depicted.

Within a matrix of gender relations and the representation of masculinity, Johnny and George are linked by their humbling beatings, Jeremy and Frank by their brutality. But within a narrative configuration based upon the cultural framework of class, Johnny is more fittingly linked with Frank, and Jeremy with George. Further, while Johnny and George are linked or made parallel by their gender roles, and serve similar narrative functions within that concept, they represent entirely opposing positions or narrative outcomes when class is the determining framework of analysis. In the latter instance, Johnny is shown to be socially powerless while Frank is 'genuinely' brutal; Jeremy remains the figure of evil but George is deserving of forgiveness and Faith -- love as a healing force and a reward. When contextualised by class, the two narratives signify differently; they no longer share striking similarities. This indicates that a narrative's meanings are shifting and relational, dependent upon the framing historical and contextual discourses (class, gender, and so on) through which a text is read.

Literary theorists have been more successful than those working in film in addressing the totalising reductionism of narratology based on a singular structure or few structures. Under the influence of poststructuralism and cultural studies, literary narratology is working to add sociocultural, historical, and ideological/hegemonic processes towards the creation of a 'cultural semiotics'. For instance, in *Hermeneutic Desire and Critical Rewriting: Narrative Interpretation in the Wake of Poststructuralism*, Marcel Cornis-Pope writes

Recent narratology has advanced from questions of

formal poetics and an immanent analysis of narrative articulations, to an evaluation of the sociocultural investments that inform the production and reception of narratives.<sup>55</sup>

Such a cultural semiotics comprises rhetorical (formal, aesthetic), narrative, and cultural/historical processes together -- in their simultaneity and interplay. It attempts to account for the rhetorical *and* referential aspects of narrativity. A narratology of cultural semiotics is concerned not only with representational aspects and processes (generic, structural, stylistic, syntactic) but equally with reading 'as a process informed by cultural interests, interpretive conventions and changing historical conditions.'<sup>56</sup>

Out of similar concerns, film theorists such as Robert Stam have argued the usefulness of the work of literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, especially his concept of heteroglossia. Stam describes heteroglossia as

a notion of competing languages and discourses applying equally to 'text' and 'context'. The role of the artistic text, within a Bakhtinian perspective, is not to represent real life 'existents' but to stage the conflicts, the coincidences and competitions of languages and discourses, inherent in heteroglossia.<sup>57</sup>

This concept, then, attempts to account for simultaneously competing and complementary discourses connected to a given text (for instance, gender versus class paradigms in *Naked*), as well as trying to encompass the simultaneity of both representational (rhetorical, formal) and sociocultural discourses, whether competing or complementary.

A discursive approach which emphasises the diversity of discourses in operation on any cultural product at any historical moment attempts to mediate the dichotomous oppositions of form versus content or aesthetics versus ideology. Independent film strives to construct itself as a hybrid, borrowing from and owing allegiance to both Hollywood and avant-garde practices. A potentially rich means of conceptualising independent film, then, is as an undertaking which modulates

such oppositional framings. In turn, a principal means of tracking such modulation is through an understanding of narrativity as a complex, multiply-layered, and pluralistic discourse.

The next chapter considers two models of independent narrative. One, *Orlando*, develops a more consistently avant-garde narrative form; the other, *The Piano*, pursues the more hybrid course between alternative and normative realist narrative practices. Both of these are compared to the narrativity of three act structure, as exemplified by *The Accused*, in order to analyse what each narrative discourse offers or achieves, as well as what its restrictions are. This examination of models of independent narrative can be viewed, too, as a beginning in the conceptualisation of some of the shapes that independent narrativity might take. Chapter Five also layers in the critical, additional strata of interpretive discourses and what their impact might be in the production of artefactual and cultural meanings.

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- <sup>1</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, London: Free Association Books, 1991, p. 74.
- <sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault from *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, cited in *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, Madan Sarup, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, p. 84.
- <sup>3</sup> Donna Haraway, 72.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 73.
- <sup>5</sup> Carolyn Steedman, 'Culture, Cultural Studies, and the Historians', *Cultural Studies*, Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (eds), New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 613.
- <sup>6</sup> Susan J. Hekman, *Moral Voices, Moral Selves: Carol Gilligan and Feminist Moral Theory*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, p. 137.
- <sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault from *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, cited in *Narrative as Communication*, Didier Coste, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 53.
- <sup>8</sup> Edward Branigan argues that it is necessary to distinguish 'narrative' and 'nonnarrative' from 'fiction' and 'nonfiction'. Accordingly, he identifies four categories of narrative: narrative fiction, such as the novel; narrative nonfiction, such as history; nonnarrative fiction, for instance many kinds of poetry; and nonnarrative nonfiction such as the essay format. Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 1.
- <sup>9</sup> See the discussion on this in Chapter Two under Identity Cinema.
- <sup>10</sup> For example, John Pierson views Sayles as more occupied with literary concerns than visual style, and as such not much of a 'catalyst' or 'creative spark' for young filmmakers. John Pierson, *Spike, Mike, Slackers & Dykes: A Guided Tour Across A Decade of American Independent Cinema*, New York: Hyperion, pp. 18-19.
- <sup>11</sup> Mariane Macdonald, 'Profile', *The London Independent*, 22 May 1996, p. 17.
- <sup>12</sup> Rita Kempley, 'Naked: London Britches Falling Down', *Washington Post*, 28 January 1994, p. C1, and Desson Howe, 'Naked: Baring the Soul', *Washington Post*, 28 January 1994, WW, p. 38.
- <sup>13</sup> Kenneth Turan, 'Mike Leigh's Raw, Naked Truth', *Los Angeles Times*, 16 December 1993, p. F1.
- <sup>14</sup> Georgia Brown, 'Swept Away', *Village Voice*, 4 June 1996, p. 64.
- <sup>15</sup> Marianne Macdonald, *The London Independent*, p. 17.
- <sup>16</sup> Kenneth Turan, *Los Angeles Times*, p. F1.
- <sup>17</sup> David Gritten, 'For Director Mike Leigh, Life's Not Always Sweet', *Los Angeles Times*, 23 December 1993, p. F14.
- <sup>18</sup> Patricia Holland, *The Television Handbook*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 117.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 118.
- <sup>20</sup> Linda Seger, *Making A Good Script Great*, 2nd edition, Hollywood: Samuel French, 1994, p. 141.
- <sup>21</sup> Paul Lucey, *Story Sense: Writing Story and Script for Feature Films and Television*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1996, p. 85.

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- <sup>22</sup> David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p. xi.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii. That there are 'virtually no theoretical studies of the representational dimension of film narrative' seems a rather questionable statement given the amount of work in representation and ideology within film studies. Perhaps Bordwell refers to a lack of a *systematised* theoretical framework.
- <sup>25</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 106. De Lauretis' work, for instance Chapter 5, 'Desire in Narrative' of *Alice Doesn't*, serves as an example of the work on narrative as representation that Bordwell overlooks.
- <sup>26</sup> *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (eds), Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971, p. 274.
- <sup>27</sup> Sarah Kozloff, 'Narrative Theory and Television', in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism*, Robert C. Allen (ed.), 2nd edition, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992, p. 68.
- <sup>28</sup> David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p. 49.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 344.
- <sup>33</sup> Although 'discourse' in this usage seems comparable to Bordwell's application of 'narration'. For a more detailed explanation of the differences between *fabula/syuzhet* and *histoire/discours* see Robert Burgoyne, 'Film-narratology', in *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Post-structuralism and Beyond*, Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 107.
- <sup>34</sup> Didier Coste, p. 4.
- <sup>35</sup> Edward Branigan, p. 73.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- <sup>38</sup> Robert Stam, 'The Origins of Semiotics', in *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics*, p. 16.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- <sup>40</sup> Robert Burgoyne, p. 70.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 74-74.
- <sup>44</sup> Sheila Johnston, 'Film Narrative and the Structuralist Controversy', in *The Cinema Book*, Pam Cook (ed.), London: British Film Institute, 1987, p. 234.
- <sup>45</sup> Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, C. Britton, A. Williams, B. Brewster and A. Guzzetti (trans), Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982, pp. 32-33.
- <sup>46</sup> Sheila Johnston, *The Cinema Book*, p. 230.

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- <sup>47</sup> Andrew Sarris, 'Whatever Happened to Forever', *Village Voice*, 20-26 January 1982, p. 43; T. McCarthy, 'Falls Short of Target', *Variety*, 20 January 1982, p. 20.
- <sup>48</sup> Pauline Kael, *New Yorker*, 18 January 1982, p. 104; Richard Schickel, 'Love, Rage and the Quotidian', *Time*, 1 February 1982, p. 79.
- <sup>49</sup> Ephraim Katz, *The Film Encyclopedia*, 2nd edition, New York: Harper Collins, 1994, p. 537.
- <sup>50</sup> This is not to say there is no difference between consensual and nonconsensual sex; obviously there is. Rather, it is to point out that the narrative squeezes the viewer into a position of judgement based on, 'It's not as bad as...!'
- <sup>51</sup> Vincent Canby, *The New York Times*, 15 October 1993, p. C3.
- <sup>52</sup> For instance, 'But the film also suggests that there is something humanly valuable that could have been salvaged in Johnny; and Leigh, without sentimentalizing him, leaves the audience at the end with a profound feeling of loss.' Leonard Quart, *Film Quarterly*, vol. 47, no. 3 (Spring 1994), p. 45.
- <sup>53</sup> For instance, in Desson Howe, 'It's the Movie of the Decade. No No, It's Just a Decadent Movie', *The Washington Post*, 30 January 1994, p. G1.
- <sup>54</sup> Steven Rea, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 13 August 1997, p. D4.
- <sup>55</sup> Marcel Cornis-Pope, *Hermeneutic Desire and Critical Rewriting: Narrative Interpretation in the Wake of Poststructuralism*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992, p. 12.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.
- <sup>57</sup> Robert Stam, 'From Realism to Intertextuality', in *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics*, p. 197.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### PSYCHIC CLEAVAGE: READING THE ART VERSUS THE POLITICS IN INDEPENDENT FILM

Has Ada ever spoken to you?...I heard her voice.  
Here in my head....She said, I'm afraid of my will,  
of what it might do. It's so strange and strong.  
Stewart to Baines, *The Piano*

Yet this Red Riding Hood falls head over heels in  
love with the wolf, who turns out to be not a sheep  
in wolf's clothing, but a recklessly romantic Prince  
with dirty fingernails.

Vincent Canby, *The New York Times*

*The Piano* seduces and excites audiences with its  
uncritical portrayal of sexism and misogyny.  
bell hooks, *Z Magazine*

The voice Stewart (Sam Neill) hears in his head is Ada's (Holly Hunter) 'mind's voice' which the audience hears twice: in voice-over narration at the opening and closing of *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993, Miramax). The otherwise mute Ada describes her mind's voice to nine year old Flora (Anna Paquin) while attempting to explain the disappearance of the child's father. The scene is subtitled for the audience as mother communicates with daughter in sign language. Ada tells Flora that she did not need to speak with him (he remains unnamed) as she could, instead, lay her thoughts in his mind, 'like they were a sheet'. But that they were never married because he got frightened and stopped listening.



The 'fairy tale'<sup>1</sup> Vincent Canby describes is a film 'so good, so tough, so moving and, especially, so original'<sup>2</sup> -- similar high praise repeated by many other reviewers of *The Piano*.

hooks' indictment of the film as sexist and misogynist appears in an article in which she contrasts widespread criticism of gangsta rap to praise for *The Piano*.<sup>3</sup> hooks argues that young, African American men are blamed as individuals for sexist, misogynist and violent lyrics while no attempt is made to identify and critique the cultural context in which gangsta rap exists. It is the surrounding cultural context, the 'larger structures of domination',<sup>4</sup> which socialises individual behaviour and, indeed, is necessary for the continuation of those dominant systems. 'It is much easier to attack gangsta rap than to confront the culture that produces that need.'<sup>5</sup> The cultural context must change in order for, in the instance of gangsta rap, young black men to be socialised differently. At the same time, hooks contends that the similar omission of a cultural and historical context in *The Piano* results in a sexist portrayal of women which reinforces patriarchy and, in its depiction of the Maori, racism. 'Violence against land, natives, and women in this film...is portrayed uncritically, as though it is natural, the inevitable climax of conflicting passions.'<sup>6</sup> However, in stark contrast to gangsta rap, *The Piano* is applauded for doing what it does because it falls within the boundaries of high culture.

These three excerpts mark helpful parameters for an examination of the reception of the 1993 film, written and directed by Jane Campion. While wholeheartedly agreeing with hooks' assessment of the widespread omission of social, political, economic and psychic aspects in the analyses of cultural products dealing with gender, race and many other issues, I would argue that her choice of *The Piano* is a poor example precisely because it is one of the rare filmic instances in which female sexuality and identity are expressed in cultural and ideological terms. Her indictment of *The Piano* as misogynist may reside more

squarely with the film's reception than in aspects of the narrative text itself. It is necessary to layer into the processes of meaning production the effects of interpretive, reception, and audience discourses. In the instance of this analysis, the primary interpretations assessed are those of reviewers' of *The Piano* and how their readings have impact on the stabilisation of that text's meanings. (Chapter Two also discussed conflicting agendas and contested readings attributable to varying interpretive stances vis-à-vis *Daughters of the Dust*). Widely accepted versions of a film's meanings are not the only way a work may be interpreted; reviewers' reception of a text should not be elided with the text itself, omitting alternative and/or multiple readings as, I believe, hooks does. Rather than *The Piano* being excused in ways that gangsta rap is not, largely through its classification as high art, the film's reception actually mirrors the same cultural omissions hooks identifies. By praising it as high art, reviewers refuse to recognise the cultural and historical dynamics represented in the film. In other words, condemnation of gangsta rap without contextualisation and high art praise for *The Piano* may have parallel detrimental effects in marginalising alternative cultural positions and function in similar ways in the continuation of dominant, and oppressive, ideological discourses.

hooks' contention that *The Piano's* designation as an 'art' film shields it from ideological scrutiny derives, in part, from reviewers' responses to the film. Her article quotes Roger Ebert: 'One of the most enchanting, startlingly original, erotic love stories ever filmed!'<sup>7</sup>. Ebert's sentiments, and some of his choice of words, are repeated from review to review: erotic,<sup>8</sup> passionate or sensual,<sup>9</sup> and most frequently of all, romantic.<sup>10</sup> These defining frames of reference are then recycled as the film's own claims through its print ads. Miramax, the U.S. distributor, selected an image of a smiling Holly Hunter, her eyes shut, as Harvey Keitel standing behind her, kisses her cheek. The ads follow the standard practice of accompanying the image with reviewers' quotes. Varying with each

Ada has no say in her piano being left on the beach, no say in its sale to Baines, or in the requirement that she give him piano lessons. Her very presence in 19th century New Zealand is the result of economic and legal constraints imposed upon her as a woman, her father having arranged for her marriage to this unknown man. The implication exists that he has chosen such a remote marriage because of her having 'erred' in the past, embodied by her illegitimate daughter, the previous sexual transgression making her unsuitable for a less distant, more desirable arrangement.

All of the acts of violence or constraint imposed upon Ada are tied to sexuality in some way, whether through the 'transgression' of her previous sexual experience, Baines' desire for her, or Stewart's possessive rage in response to her affair. If there are no repercussions for Stewart, there certainly are for Ada; she suffers the consequences of other people's desires enacted upon her. In addition, she is consistently punished for her own existence as both a woman and a sexual being, seemingly impossibly contradictory categories. This can be seen no more clearly than in the central metaphor of the film -- her piano.

That the piano represents Ada's sexuality is made clear from the deep pleasure which transports her when she plays, ecstatically transforming her face and loosening her normally rigid body. It is also made evident via the ferocious desire with which she fights for the instrument she must have. It is the depth of her desire and the transformation it creates which Baines recognises when he leads mother and daughter back to the abandoned piano, watching carefully as Ada plays her music while Flora plays on the beach.

Simultaneously, however, the piano also represents the repression of Ada's sexuality and the sublimation of her sexual desires into her music. Images of the repression of women's sexuality recur in the film, from the layers of hoops, skirts and underclothing which render Ada's body hidden and inaccessible, to the dark and airless house into which she is barricaded to prevent her from seeing Baines.

specific market, a local film critic is quoted, along with additional non-regional citations. For instance, one version of the ad in the Los Angeles Times reads, in bold print: "A wildly beautiful love story!", Peter Travers, Rolling Stone; "Breathtaking... exhilarating...a triumph!", Vincent Canby, The New York Times; "Passionate and romantic!", Kenneth Turan, Los Angeles Times.<sup>11</sup> A comparable version in the New York Times includes: "Exhilarating!", Vincent Canby, The New York Times; "A Masterpiece! A tidal wave of sensuality!", Jami Bernard, New York Daily News; "A riveting, erotic film!", David Ansen, Newsweek.<sup>12</sup> In the Philadelphia Inquirer, Carrie Rickey's 'A recklessly romantic, sensual and passionate film!' is accompanied by the same Roger Ebert quote cited in hooks' article.<sup>13</sup>

Much less frequently cited in reviews are the disturbing aspects of the film's love story, and only rarely are links made between *The Piano's* elements of violence or degradation and its eroticism, a link made explicitly and repeatedly within the narrative itself. George Baines' (Harvey Keitel) arrangement with Ada to barter the return of her piano for sexual favours, one black key at a time, is prostitution. Although no money changes hands in this business transaction, Baines has identified something equivalently crucial to Ada's survival. Ada's recognition of the transaction's nature is implicit in her lack of sexual response to Baines, remaining motionless when he touches her, until the point the deal is cancelled. Stewart, Ada's husband, nearly rapes her twice, the second time while she is still unconscious after he has chopped off her finger with an axe. This mutilation is Stewart's response to Ada's affair with Baines, accompanied by threats to repeat the action in future if she sees him again.<sup>14</sup> Stewart has the apparent legal right, as Ada's husband, to enact this punishment; no criminal repercussions occur. He also has the apparent right to physically barricade Ada in the house as a means of preventing her from seeing Baines -- nailing shut all windows and doors from the outside.

The contrast between Ada and Baines during his piano lessons is striking. He is able to display his desires, along with his body, for instance suddenly appearing naked, while she must conceal her desire and simultaneously police or withstand his. He has the ability to speak his desire, to ask for what he wants in progressive steps, from touching her arm to lying naked beside her, while her sexuality is silenced. The numerous instances of playfulness and physical affection between Ada and Flora indicate Ada's ability to be tender. Hers is not an individual failing of coldness, but the collision of her sexuality with external forms of repression.

The sublimation of Ada's sexuality into her music, the piano embodying her body, occurs because Ada, better than anyone, understands that -- within the context in which she lives -- sexual desire, both her own and others', is a dangerous force for which she will be punished. Indeed, the unleashing of her sexual desires leads directly to her permanent physical mutilation at Stewart's hand.

But unlike the classic cinematic depiction of women's sexuality as transgression meriting only punishment, Ada's sexuality is a force of power and ecstasy: the erotic, passionate, and sensual that critics describe. The fault lies, precisely, in the cultural context surrounding Ada. In this narrative perspective it is Stewart who errs for his desire to 'own' her as he desires to own land; for his complete inability to understand that which he wishes to possess, whether Ada or the Maori's sacred burial ground. It is Baines who comes to realise he has erred in attempting to have her by buying her, 'The arrangement is making you a whore and me wretched. I want you to care for me but you can't.' From this narrative perspective it is Ada who does not err: for her capacity to feel what she feels despite the pervasive tactics of oppression which surround her; for the strong and delightful girl who is her 'illegitimate' daughter.

In its complexity, the representation of women's sexuality in *The Piano* is unusual. The intensity of Ada's desires are inseparable from the threat of violence

to body and soul. It is the film's encompassing portrait of the power of desire coupled with the potential for punishment which makes its representation of women's sexuality so compelling and, arguably, recognisable to many women's lived experiences.

While the piano symbolises Ada's sexuality, its desire and repression, it has also become her voice. Ada has been mute from the age of six, we learn during her opening voice-over, the same age, 'five or six', Stewart later tells Baines she began playing the piano.<sup>15</sup> We also learn from Ada's narration that her silence does not originate from a disability or illness but is the result of her own volition.

Ada's muteness recalls the feminist narrative thematic of silence in films such as Marlene Gorris' *A Question of Silence* (1981) in which three women, strangers to each other, beat and murder a man in a dress shop one day, a man they do not know. The women refuse to speak in their own defense. They resist all demands to explain their motivations because under the dominion of patriarchy they cannot do so in any way which would make sense in terms of legal, psychiatric and other discourses. Prevailing concepts of sanity, reason, and so on, would only serve to indict them in a world in which women have no language or voice of their own, and so, the women opt for the resistance of silence.

Ada's muteness has similar qualities of passive resistance. In the cinematic depiction of a world in which the individual cannot single-handedly overcome oppressive social structures, all that is left to Ada is a retreat into the resistance of silence. In Ada's case, because of the force of her will, her withdrawal is not the silence or timidity of defeat. Ada's muteness and her will are inseparable. Describing her decision to stop speaking through sheer force of will in the opening narration, Ada explains, 'My father says it is a dark talent and the day I take it into my head to stop breathing will be my last.' And during the film's closing voice-over, after her near-drowning, she continues, 'My will has chosen life. Still, it has had me spooked and many others besides.' In classic realist or

normative realist traditions, Ada's willfulness would be cause for narrative punishment. Here, it is her will which enables her to survive (her drowning, her marriage), and it is her will which renders her silence a resistance. Together, Ada's sexuality, in its expression and repression, her silence, and her will -- 'so strange and strong' as her mind's voice tells Stewart -- all comprise Ada's character and the force of her circumstances.

If, as I am arguing, the links between desire and violence, oppression and resistance, are so prevalent in *The Piano* how, then, does one account for reviewers omitting it? Indeed, praising *The Piano* as a sensual, sexually-charged love story without specifying its disturbing elements of violence, degradation, intimidation, legally and economically mandated dependency, and so on, leaves that reading's viewers with an alarmingly perverse 'romance' in which Ada is swept off her feet by a man who attempts to buy her body and affections (in an arrangement not dissimilar to the marriage deal cut between her father and Stewart) and which Ada apparently likes. Or at any rate, if she initially balks, her resistance is broken down by this 'recklessly romantic Prince with dirty fingernails.' In this reading, taken up by a wide spectrum of popular reviewers, as well as in the distributor's promotional campaign, the film becomes a traditional love story between three individuals: Ada the woman, Baines the good lover, Stewart the bad lover, thus reverting to hegemonic cultural notions of romance, and an equally familiar exemplification of the romance genre. To see *The Piano* as simply 'enchanting' or 'charming' is to negate the context of patriarchal structures, the cultural/historical discourses, which embed the individual characters. Without reference to acts depicted in the film such as rape, prostitution and spousal abuse, reviewers fail to link sexuality and the treatment of women with patriarchal discourses, and therefore have to -- or choose to -- opt, instead, for the ever reliable 'wrong man' theory in which Baines supplants the hopeless Stewart and a gender equilibrium is successfully reimposed.

While Ada and Baines are romantically united in the film and this is indeed an erotic love story, the significance of their relationship makes little sense -- except in the deeply disturbing terms of violence and possession as pleasure, the misogyny that hooks identifies -- without reference to surrounding, depicted hegemonic relations. The omission of the dark elements of the film in many reviews was noted by *some* reviewers. In *Ms. Magazine*,<sup>16</sup> Kathi Maio, while calling it brilliant, noted that *The Piano* was winning praise from mostly male critics who were labelling it as 'feminist'. Maio writes that, in contrast, a number of women commentators were disturbed by the 'grand passion' between Ada and Baines because it is based on a 'sexual shakedown', Baines' extortionist arrangement of bargaining piano keys for physical intimacies with Ada. Ultimately, Maio argues that the film is a feminist story because Ada negotiates with Baines directly unlike the marriage deal between two men; because Baines is capable of questioning his position in relation to Ada and comes to realise that 'love cannot be coerced'; because Ada chooses who she will love. 'In similar stories, only madness or death offers comfort to the woeful, willful heroine. But Ada refuses to become the mad woman in the attic or the tragic loser washed out to sea.' In this argument, the film is successful *despite* the foundation of the central coupling in a sexual shakedown. In contrast, it is possible to argue that the film is compelling *because* of the source of the romantic relationship; its origination in a sexual/financial transaction, made possible by an imbalance of power, links the individual stories to larger cultural discourses.

Although both are colonisers, what separates Baines from Stewart is his potential to recognise that which eludes Stewart: the distinctions between possession and passion, ownership and love. What links Baines to Stewart, and to every other character in the film, is that he is not immune to nor can he live outside the bounds of ideology, that he, like all the characters, are discursively constructed beings. Baines eventually cancels the deal and returns the piano,



having come to realise what he wants from Ada is that which he cannot coerce -- the reciprocity of his feelings for her. However, in the process his greater economic and social power is made clear because he has the means to obtain the piano from Stewart while Ada does not and because he can, and does, force lessons from her.

Ada's initial attitude towards Baines, informed by class, is further indication of every character's lack of immunity from hegemonic discourses. When Stewart first tells Ada about the lessons she must give, her response is, 'He's an oaf. He can't read. He's ignorant.' Ada initially disdains Baines for his illiteracy, personal hygiene and living conditions in contrast to Stewart's more acceptable 'landed gentry' surroundings and comportment: Stewart combing his hair, for instance, prior to greeting Ada versus the close-ups of Baines' dirty fingernails.

Unlike mainstream cinema's narrative of individualism in which single entities 'fight the system' and prevail over hegemonic structures, no character in *The Piano* lives beyond the jurisdiction of ideological forces. Indeed, no world beyond hegemonic cultural/historical discourses exists in the diegesis of the film. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than with Flora, a character who sympathetically engages us and whose youthfulness might suggest a measure of innocence. Yet despite Flora's powerful will, mirroring Ada's own, despite the strength of her imagination which fabricates the colourful tales she tells, despite her adamant assertions to the contrary, Flora too falls prey to patriarchy. Early on, as mother and daughter are alone and stranded on the beach, awaiting Stewart's arrival, Flora vows, 'I'm not going to call him Papa. I'm not going to call him anything. I'm not even going to look at him.' But by the time Stewart barricades Ada in the house (immediately following his first attempted rape of her in the woods, interrupted only by Flora's arrival), Flora has relented and blames her mother for the imprisonment, 'You shouldn't have gone up there [to Baines], should you. I don't like it, nor does Papa.'

It is Flora who betrays her mother by becoming, after all, the good daughter. As Carolyn Steedman notes, '[t]he essence of being a good child is taking on the perspective of those who are more powerful than you.'<sup>17</sup> Ada tells Flora to take a piano key in which she has burnt the words, 'Dear George you have my heart Ada McGrath', to Baines saying it belongs to him. Instead, Flora responds to the rule of the father, taking the key to Stewart and explaining, 'Mother wanted me to give this to Mr. Baines. I thought maybe it wasn't the proper thing to do.' The receipt of the engraved piano key results in the already-frenzied Stewart chopping off Ada's finger with an axe and sending that to Baines instead -- via an hysterical Flora, cruel reward for the child's dutifulness to him.

Although every character is informed by and shares complicity in hegemonic social relations, and although those power relations prevail throughout the diegesis, for reviewers, particularly men, it may be more comfortable to see the film as a 'grand passion' in Maio's words, the more familiar struggle between hero and miscreant, right and wrong man, than as an indictment of gendered power relations. It may be more palatable to believe that *some* individuals, like Baines (and perhaps themselves), comprehend and act upon what wrong men, like Stewart, fail to 'get'. This could account for the film's widespread interpretation as a high art romance, leaving the text's references to and resonances of patriarchal cultural discourses obscured or obliterated. While such a reading may represent the *desired* interpretation for many reviewers, it is also necessary to account for the aspects of this particular narrative which allow such a reading to become the reviewer-preferred one. As David Morley points out

It is central to the argument that all meanings do not exist 'equally' in the message: it has been structured in dominance, although its meaning can never be totally fixed or 'closed'.<sup>18</sup>

While there has been much debate about the extent to which meanings are structured within the text ('structured in dominance'), rather than the result of

interpretive acts, following Morley's argument, the encoding process manages, guides or enables potential readings to some significant degree. In the case of *The Piano* this occurs in complex ways, particularly in the overlap and competition between differing aesthetic and narrative representational discourses.

A striking aspect of *The Piano* is its strategy of combining mainstream and alternative modes of storytelling. In the accessibility of its storyline, a largely non-fragmented diegetic space predicated upon psychological identification with central characters, and the decision to cast recognisable Hollywood actors, *The Piano* reflects normative realist cinematic practices. In its visual appearance -- both mise-en-scène and camera work -- and in certain other narrative choices, for instance the thematic motif of silence coinciding with a central concern of the feminist avant-garde, the film is an extension of alternative traditions. This strategy of combination creates a hybrid narrative form that is one of the hallmarks of independent film, and which serves to open up certain narrative possibilities.

In its accessibility, and so potential for more widespread popularity, *The Piano* sidesteps some of the difficulties of a more 'purely' but still successful art house film such as *Orlando* (Sally Potter, 1993, Sony Classics) which received reviews praising its visual splendor but questioning the 'slightness' of its content.<sup>19</sup> This perceived slightness, however, can be attributed as easily to *Orlando's* unfamiliar narrative strategies than to any lesser ambitions on the film's part.

On the other hand, as an embodiment of alternative practice, *The Piano* avoids some of what have been argued are the possibly inherent pitfalls of dominant cinema. For instance, experimental formal elements assist in keeping the audience aligned with Ada's story, understanding events from her perspective, to a remarkable degree for a film in which the main character is mute. Camera, score and mise-en-scène (its palette, for instance) supplant the convention of narrative 'intermediary', a character who explains the purported central character's circumstances (as we will see momentarily with *The Accused*) -- disability or

victimisation apparently precluding them from doing so on their own behalf. In the process, the intermediary arguably takes over the narrative because it is he or she who undertakes the dramatic journey, coming to see the world or her/himself differently through contact with the 'other'.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, although Baines returns the piano to Ada, his behaviour does not take over as central narrative concern becoming the story of his redemption through her love,<sup>21</sup> or his struggle to avenge her mistreatment, as is too often the case in depictions of heterosexual romance. Rather than a struggle between the right and wrong men attempting to 'protect' or possess her, the story remains Ada's: she escapes from Stewart through the strength of her mind's voice; she saves herself from drowning -- neither are Baines' doing.

Further, and crucially, alternative narrative strategies help keep the story embedded in the discourses of patriarchy rather than reverting to the individual who fights -- and triumphs over -- the system. This is evidenced in our ability to perceive Stewart's actions to be as pitiable as they are loathsome, he too being a product of the belief systems and hegemonic discourses which engulf him. This textual relationship to Stewart occurs instead of opting for the singularly obsessive, and often inexplicably, motivated villain, relied upon by some Hollywood narratives (if behaviour is a function of individual choice how does one then account for villainy?). As was discussed earlier, no one in this film exists beyond or outside of patriarchy, just as in *Orlando* no diegetic world is posited outside of categorisation by gender. Filmmakers such as Potter or Campion choose alternative narrative modes precisely because it frees them from the confines of normative realism's equation of cultural categories and socio-political problems with individualism and free will, and in turn, with the narrative representational codes of three act structure.

Examinations of *Orlando* and *The Accused* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1988, Paramount) can help provide insight into *The Piano's* hybrid processes of

signification. The subject matter of all three films concerns gendered discourses of power. In content or political concerns the three films can be regarded as taking comparable positions in the representation of gender relations. At the same time, however, the films exist on a continuum of narrative practice from *The Accused* as most closely the product of Hollywood's search for mass audiences and humanistic messages (normative realism) to *Orlando's* refusal of a coherent diegetic space and classical modes of character identification (linking it to avant-grade practices). The following analyses pinpoint some of the ways the narrative choices made by each film affects the cultural discourses mobilised. How do the specific narrative discourses employed enable and promote, or conversely, obscure or limit the representation of the politics of gendered power relations?

*The Accused* is a film which attempts to tackle difficult issues around rape and, in some aspects, succeeds. It also sparked public discussion on the subject of rape beyond the bounds of the text.<sup>22</sup> The film, based on a highly-publicised actual event, tells the story of Sarah Tobias (Jodie Foster) who is gang-raped in a bar while a number of spectators cheer and goad the three rapists on. Kathryn Murphy (Kelly McGillis) is Sarah's court-appointed attorney who plea bargains the case against the rapists, comes to realise she was wrong to have done so, and subsequently brings the cheering onlookers to trial.

*The Accused* purposefully takes on issues concerning the legal system's (mis)treatment of rape victims. This is evident in the film's title with its subtext of ambiguity. Who is the accused in this instance? The men who raped and those who goaded the rapists on? Or Sarah whose alcohol consumption, previous drug-related arrest, sexual life, and so on, render her a bad witness and this a poor case? We see this narrative concern in the early scenes which focus on the legal business of collecting evidence. Sarah is photographed, probed and questioned - - no one is intentionally cruel, but the process itself dehumanising. The film critiques what occurs to the individual in the process of trying to make a case.

This critique is largely formulated through the issue of class and the relationship between Sarah and Kathryn. Distinctions between Sarah as working class and Kathryn as middle class are drawn in numerous ways including dress, behaviour, language, education, living conditions (trailer versus modern apartment), and professions (waitress versus lawyer). Sarah accuses Kathryn of wanting to plea-bargain her case because Kathryn perceives her as a 'low-class bimbo', verified by Kathryn who argues vociferously to her boss not to go to trial because she has 'no case' largely based on who Sarah is.

Distinctions between the two main characters, once established, are utilised to argue out the value of different discourses, different kinds of experience. On Kathryn's side, it is a legal discourse; on Sarah's part, a personal discourse, for instance, in the competing claims between the needs of the individual who has been raped versus the requirements of legal process and evidence. A number of ways are depicted in which Sarah, on a personal level, suffers repercussions from the rape (cutting off her long hair, a symbol of women's sexuality; her isolation and lack of support; the self-destructive accident in which she twice rams into the truck of one of the taunting men).

The narrative ostensibly positions Kathryn as wrong on both the class and experiential levels. It is Kathryn who realises she has made a mistake in plea bargaining, motivated by her own and others' perceptions of Sarah's 'character', and that she has erred for having made the decision without consulting her client, thus robbing Sarah of her voice. When Sarah is in the hospital after the car accident, she tells Kathryn, 'He figures I'm a piece of shit. Everybody figures I'm a piece of shit. Why not? You told them that. I never got to tell nobody nothing. You did all my talking for me.' In an interview, Jodie Foster elaborates on this aspect of Sarah's character, '[a]ll that matters to Sarah is that she tell her story....If she tells her story, then it happened, and that means she's human.'<sup>23</sup> It is this realisation which prompts Kathryn to so adamantly take on the criminal solicitation

case, too late to try the rapists but able yet to prosecute those who goaded. And in addition, it represents a last chance to give Sarah a voice, by providing her an opportunity to testify, as she so deeply desires, about her experiences from her own perspective.

In other words, it is Kathryn who learns from Sarah; it is Kathryn who changes. At the level of the cultural discourses set in motion by plot and character, the film validates Sarah's discourses, both class and experiential, or at least argues they should be valued equally to Kathryn's.

However, at the level of cultural discourses invoked by setting and genre -- as a courtroom drama -- the legal discourse increasingly takes over screen time, story focus, and Sarah's discourse of personal experience. In the last weighty portion of the film, Kathryn's language, not Sarah's, dominates the story and establishes the frame of reference by which we judge dramatic events. In the film's increasing shift to courtroom drama, to weight placed on the outcome of the verdict and legal satisfaction, the moral and dramatic victories occur in Kathryn's terms. Sarah's experience is increasingly engulfed by the trial itself, by the outcome of the legal, not the personal process. At the end of the film we are left with a sense that the repercussions of the rape itself have been overcome, that in the legal victory, Sarah's psychological and emotional difficulties are also resolved. Certainly they are absent from the final moments of the film, in the beaming and legally victorious Sarah in the courtroom and on the courthouse steps.

The narrative of *The Accused* does contradictory things simultaneously on the levels of plot and character versus genre, and in the cultural discourses that are summoned by these competing narrative elements. In story terms of plot and character, Sarah's class and experiential distinctions are validated. In terms of legal discourse, in the increasing shift to courtroom drama, Kathryn's class and experiential distinctions take precedence. In this sense, Sarah loses control of the

story. The authority of experience gives way to the greater authority of the law; the personal shifts to the judicial; the dramatic outcome is dependent on the ability to argue and prove a case versus the psychological steps of dealing with the rape. The ability to argue and prove the case *becomes* the way of dealing with the rape.

Further, Sarah loses control of the story in the visual (formal) representation of the rape itself. As Carol Clover points out,<sup>24</sup> it is the testimony of initially reluctant witness Ken Joyce (Bernie Coulson) which permits the visual presentation of the rape. Although Sarah too testifies, Ken's version, his words, his point of view control the camera. This is when we, the audience, *see* the rape, when it is made filmically 'real' for us. Even the defense, in their summation, make it clear that they and Sarah would have lost the case were it not for Ken's testimony. So, he also makes the rape 'real' for the jury. In controlling the camera in the representation of the rape, Ken -- not Sarah -- validates the reality of the rape. While the film's narrative pays lip service to Sarah's opportunity to speak for herself, its formal discourses, once again, reduce her to voicelessness. In this instance, the representational discourses of narrativity and aesthetics operate in opposition.

If viewers are not familiar with the highly-publicised case upon which the film is based, the text makes clear, early on and throughout, that at the core of this story is a brutal gang-rape in a bar at which onlookers watched and cheered rather than intervening. Indeed, the opening scene of the film portrays Sarah running out of the bar immediately after having been raped. This initial sequence alerts the audience to the existence of a visual record of the events of that night. We are positioned, at this stage, on the exterior watching Sarah exiting from the door of the bar into the street. We have yet to be shown the interior, the visual record of what transpired on the other side of that door.

We are given signs to expect the enactment of the rape although it does not actually occur until late in the film. Its presentation is postponed, prolonged,



deferred. And when it does arrive, it is played out in lengthy, vivid visual and audio detail. But the question is why? What is its dramatic necessity at this point or at all? We have long believed Sarah's version of events, long sympathetically identified with her character. Emotional affiliation rests with Sarah and against the men on trial whom we want to see convicted (the text's equation to the reinstatement of justice) -- all without having seen the gang-rape.

In the three act structure of normative realist cinema, the third act encompasses the climax and resolution of the film. The climax is the dramatic high point, the moment of culminating action, conflict, excitement. The representation of the rape is promised, but withheld. In doing so, the narrative and sexual climaxes of *The Accused* coincide, heightening the impact of both.

We are left with the often-debated quandary, so frequently attributed to normative realist practices, of whether plot and character maintain a dominant authority, allowing the film to examine a genuinely important social issue. Or conversely, the extent to which other aspects of representational discourse (for instance, in the sequencing, duration and mise-en-scène of the rape) subsume the social to a pretext which is portrayed merely in order to allow the representation of a pleasurable act of sexual violence. In other words, is the depiction of the rape, and of Sarah's entire story, exploitative or disturbingly graphic but ultimately necessary? At issue is how certain narrative and aesthetic elements work together (or fail to) so that particular ideological constructs remain narratively dominant, and so, in representational terms, culturally hegemonic.

As has often been noted, the narrative techniques and modes of representation of normative realism, with their emphasis on plot and character, are deeply embedded in the ideology of humanism. Originating with the Enlightenment, humanism is described by Jürgen Habermas as 'the belief, inspired by modern science, in the infinite progress of knowledge and in the infinite advance toward social and moral betterment.'<sup>25</sup> Humanism valorises the

human subject as the centre of knowledge and action. It posits a notion of Self or subjectivity derived from and driven by the individual. The pervasively replicated humanist myth of individuals fighting, and triumphing over, the system mistakenly construes individuals and ideological discourses as separable. Whether the narrative structures of normative realism are ineffectual in their ability to interconnect social beings with dominating structures, or whether normative ideologies are rendered more effective by their seeming invisibility, the narrative practices of normative realism, as *The Accused* indicates, fail to make surrounding hegemonic forces apparent, much less the central subject of the film.

If we turn to *Orlando* we can see how, in contrast, this film's adoption of alternative narrative techniques works to maintain the power of hegemonic discursive formations, not the individual, at centre stage. *Orlando* follows the never-aging title character over 400 years, initially as a young man, one day awakening to find herself transformed into a woman. One of the principal themes explored is the sex/gender system, that is, gender distinctions as culturally, not biologically, determined. As such, the text explores gender as a fundamental organising principle of experience. The film elaborates its ideas on gender as in the first instance, culturally imposed, and in the second instance, varying across time, through two approaches. On the one hand, there are the differences in treatment towards Orlando when she is a woman as opposed to when she is a man, such as the loss of her land, her more restrictive and cumbersome dress, and so on. On the other hand, there are depictions of gender traits as part of historical fashion, not inherent aspects of personality. This latter is bookended by the opening and closing voice-overs. In 1600, 'There can be no doubt about his sex, despite the feminine appearance that every man of the time aspires to.' And in the present day, 'She -- for there can be no doubt about her sex...with the slightly androgynous appearance that many females of the time aspire to.' In order to convey this dual concept of gender as culturally imposed as well as

varying across time, elements of mise-en-scène serve a multiple purpose. Wardrobe, for instance, becomes more restrictive and cumbersome once Orlando is transformed into a woman. On the other hand, it is already excessively resplendent in her days as a man, prompting awareness of contrasts with modern concepts of masculine and feminine appearance.

Although the film tackles issues surrounding gender, an initially curious aspect is the casual, almost cursory manner in which the moment of biological transformation is portrayed. Orlando, played by Tilda Swinton, simply wakes up one day to find she is now a woman. The character does not seem particularly disturbed by this, emphasised by her words, 'Same person. No difference at all, just a different sex.' There is no build-up of tension or suspense, no striking camera work, little that calls attention to the transformation. This can be contrasted to the moment of revelation in *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992, Miramax) in which the entire first half of the film builds to the dramatic impact of both Fergus, the main character's, shock and the audience's shock. In *The Crying Game* the moment is heightened by distinct use of camera: a tilt down which settles on the body part, the male genitalia, previously concealed from us. In contrast, Orlando stands reflected in a mirror in wide shot, a full frontal view including her face, simply visualising what, in a sense, we have known all along.

Known all along because of performance and visual presentation, again in contrast to *The Crying Game*. In the latter film much care is taken to conceal Dil's (Jaye Davidson) biological identity -- indeed, much of the film's success hinges on this. In *Orlando*, we are aware that Swinton is a woman playing a man in the first portion of the film. Little attempt is made to alter her voice or mannerisms; neither Swinton's appearance nor her behaviour are strikingly different before and after the transformation. However, because the subject of the film is gender, and in particular its effects on women, Orlando's identity as female is given precedence, both as an actor and as a character.

If Orlando's change of biological sex is minimised formally, in terms of camera, mise-en-scène and performance, the intent is to emphasise the extent to which gender is not embedded in the body or in the person, but imposed upon that body and person by outside forces. Therefore Orlando, the physical being and character, stays relatively consistent while it is the world beyond her -- its demands, expectations and perceptions -- which alter as a result of biological difference.

And indeed, land is bestowed upon Orlando when she is a man but legally taken away from her when a woman. Same land, same person. Yet everything is different. In order to achieve this, the film takes focus away from character and forces our attention to the surface. Instead of character development, we find an emphasis on the visual. The locus of audience interaction with text is pushed from identification with the psychic and emotional state of the character to appearance, manner, costuming, and so on. *Orlando* relies on the representational effects of spectacle, posing and performance, rather than on character development, naturalistic acting or psychological identification.

Here we can see how alternative modes of representation and narrativity can be utilised to circumvent some of the deficiencies of hegemonic cinema's normative realism. It is *Orlando's* careful undermining of the prominence of plot, diegetic space and character identification which shifts focus from Orlando the individual to surrounding, larger cultural and ideological discourses.

Although events occur in the film (the change of sex, relationships, and so on) they do not transpire in a cause-and-effect manner in which each event, hinged to the last, moves the dramatic action forward. Instead, the visuals are the structuring principle. We journey through the story via an accumulation of visual impressions or tableaux encompassing different eras and under the subjects Death, Love, Poetry, Politics, Society, Sex and Birth. While these represent a reverse causality of life, from death to birth, they do so in a metaphorical rather

than literal or plot sense. Diegetic fidelity is disrupted by the central character's recurring gazes and address directly to camera; disjunctions in narrative continuity are created by, for instance, entering a maze in one century, leaving it in another.

Characters are not drawn in terms of the complex, psychological portraits of normative realism. Orlando is not a character with well-defined personality traits. We know her largely as conforming to broad categories of man and woman across time. The tools to identify with her character are withheld because in this narrative view the individual does not have ultimate impact on either the world-at-large or over her own life. In this depiction, the surrounding culture constructs the individual. And so, there is a quality of acceptance on Orlando's part when she is faced with losing her house and land. She reads the legal document delivered to her, does not like it, but signs it anyway. In another film, one could easily imagine this as the central series of events, the dramatic struggle, in which the character takes on the legal establishment, fights for her rights, and wins or loses. In another film such as *The Accused*.

Moving away from the principal narrative conventions of normative realism permits a film such as *Orlando* to break from a reinstatement of dominant cultural/historical discourses and, instead, shift towards a critique of their replication. However, it should be noted, as Judith Mayne observes, '[I]f, consequently, there is no such thing as an inherently radical technique, then there is no such thing as an inherently conservative one.'<sup>26</sup> Attributes of mise-en-scène, for instance, do not bear the capacity to critique in and of themselves but rather in how they are given significance in the context of their use and in contradistinction to existing conventions of a dominant cinema. The meanings of formal techniques are dependent, in other words, on the narrative operations of their positioning, functions and uses.

*Orlando* and *The Piano* both serve as models for independent narrativity, the former by developing avant-garde attributes into a more narrative form; the

latter by taking a more hybrid approach between alternative and normative realist discourses. In terms of alternative similarities, for instance, Ada's muteness serves to de-emphasise normative modes of identification with character. The audience has limited access to Ada's thoughts directly, certainly those that normally would occur through dialogue, nor is there an intermediary character who interprets her. We search for clues to her emotional and psychic state elsewhere -- in her relationship with her music, in the film's strikingly moody camera work, in elements of *mise-en-scène* such as wardrobe. Indeed, costuming is as vital, and vocal, an element of storytelling in *The Piano* as it is in *Orlando*, in for instance, the hooped dresses and petticoats that encumber Ada as she tramps through the mud, that conceal her body and repress her sexuality, and that engulf her beneath the sea as she almost drowns.

In general, as reviewer Carrie Rickey writes of *The Piano*, '[t]he exposition is principally visual.'<sup>27</sup> There is a kind of looseness in the film's cause-and-effect structure, in the sequencing of scenes, for instance. As frequently as event, framing and composition are used to elaborate story progression, such as in the repeated, striking two-shots of mother and daughter side-by-side, looking eerily similar in their poses, hats and expressions, reminding us of the construction and transmission of cultural structures from generation to generation. Pictorial displays drive the story, from the high wide shot of the piano abandoned on the beach, denoting Ada's loss, to the image which begins on Ada's hand behind her back, travels up to her braided hair, and from there moves to the startlingly similar undergrowth of the New Zealand bush. In finding visual links between human appearance and place, we recognise the tangled circumstances in which she is caught. And as in *Orlando*, rhythm and movement are established through the reliance on appearance and gaze of main character in close-up. Although the diegesis is never ruptured, as in *Orlando*'s direct addresses to the camera, the piercing quality of Ada's returned look is constantly reiterated.

Ada's formidable will, taking the form of passive resistance, compares to Orlando's acquiescence instead of a call to legal and dramatic *action* in response to the loss of her land. One cannot fight while barricaded in the master's house; no ability to speak exists when the only language available is the master's. Such elements, in keeping with avant-garde traditions, help the films maintain, centrally in our field of vision, both the individuals affected and the cultural discourses from which they emerge and by which they are bound.

Simultaneously, *The Piano* weaves its narrative out of plot, character development, naturalistic acting, a coherent diegesis, and other normative realist representational codes. Such a merging of elements from two legacies, so often seen as oppositional, provide the audience with familiar pleasures of the text *and* keep discursive formations and power relations foregrounded. In contrast to, amongst others, the feminist avant-garde of the 1970s and early 1980s, more recent film theory and independent practice have come to recognise elements of normative realist narrativity as both formidable and, indeed, pleasurable.

By being inclusive of the pleasures of familiar modes of storytelling, a film such as *The Piano* increases its potential to receive more extensive distribution and promotion. In garnering wide-reaching distribution, the possibility for greater audience address is created, a significant consideration for socially or politically motivated filmmakers, and a difficulty never satisfactorily resolved by the political avant-garde.

I have argued that one of the achievements of *The Piano* is its merging of mainstream with avant-garde aesthetic and narrative legacies. In doing so, while also maintaining a popular audience address, discourses of individualism are prevented from subsuming those of patriarchy. However, the problem remains precisely the strong tendency on the part of many reviewers to read the film as a story of individualism: a right versus wrong man romance, and so, to obliterate the cultural/historical discourses of patriarchy. The foundation for this reading

rests in the attributes of normative realism which, as *The Accused* shows us, return too easily, some would argue inexorably, to the cult of individualism and free will. Simultaneously and seemingly contradictorily, the emphasis on non-normative representational codes -- the look of the camera and mise-en-scène standing in for more familiar forms of character identification -- allow this film to be more easily interpreted as an 'art' film.

At any given moment, *The Piano* stakes out the territory of one tradition, alternative or normative realist, but then must depart from these assumptions and codes in order to claim the ground of a differing narrative heritage. This creates gaps in its potential meanings or readings. In its hybrid strategy of combination, applicable to other independent films, the process of narrative signification is opened to slippage. A striking instance of this can be seen in the final portion of *The Piano* comprised, in a sense, of three closing sequences: Ada's near-drowning and last minute, self-willed resurrection from 'the cold grave, under the deep deep sea';<sup>28</sup> the epilogue describing Ada's, Flora's and Baines' new life as a family in Nelson; and the final shot of the film, a long take showing Ada caught beneath the sea, not escaping, not setting her foot free from the rope which ties her to her sunken piano, instead, motionless too long to survive as the camera slowly pulls further and further back.

My reading of this penultimate shot of the film is as metaphor, that although Ada survives we are left with a visualisation of the deadly serious stakes at risk for her, for women, in that she *almost* drowned, that her will *almost* succumbed. Its purpose is to remind us that the cultural imperatives of patriarchy do take prisoners, despite Ada's own narrow escape. This could be considered an accurate, or certainly reasonable, way to interpret an experimental visual. In contrast, it has been suggested to me that the entire epilogue of Ada and Baines in their new life together is a 'flash forward' which takes place in Ada's imagination in the moments just prior to her drowning.<sup>29</sup> This reading, too, is dependent on



the final long take of Ada motionless beneath the sea, a shot held too long to allow hope for survival. But in this instance, in order to understand the epilogue as a 'flash forward' occurring only in Ada's imagination, the closing image in which Ada fails to resurface is read as realism, as a literal, rather than metaphorical, visual record. This reading, also, is a reasonable assumption in the context of dominant cinema's realist practices. Both interpretations -- metaphor or flash forward -- are textually plausible readings.<sup>30</sup>

All readings remain potentially ambiguous, as David Morley points out; they are non-fixed or open within a certain range. That is, not all meanings are possible, but no single reading exhausts all potential meanings either. However, *The Piano's* strategy of hybridity further erodes the codes, assumptions, and boundaries of particular narrative traditions or trajectories as determinants of meaning. Whether one understands the final portion of the film as shaped by the symbolic of an alternative filmic tradition or the specificity of normative realism is not simply a question of preference but a fundamental distinction in the processes of narrativity between normative realist and alternative cinema.

If a viewer accepts the final image literally, the film's closure plumbs the depths of bleakness. For Ada, as for other women within patriarchy's fold (that is, all women in this diegetic perspective), no way out exists. Despite Ada's will, she has no effective resistance to the configurations and restraints of patriarchy except through death. On the other hand, a reading of the close which foregrounds the final shot as metaphorical, and therefore the flash forward/epilogue sequence as literal, veers dangerously close to Hollywood's happy endings predicated on myths of individualism. Despite the clink, clink, clink of Ada's newly-crafted metal finger on the piano keys as she plays -- the haunting audio reminder of the costs to body and spirit -- the individual can triumph over injustice, and in her new life with Baines, reach a gender equilibrium within the construct of the family romance.

One may conjecture that Campion's discomfort with the limitations of either formula for closure prompted the multiple resolution in a kind of hedging her bets against the bleakness of one and the suddenly too well-lit, easy resolution of the other.<sup>31</sup> More critical to the discussion here, is the way the film's closure(s) indicates how a viewer might manoeuvre through narrative processes of differing representational practices, and the varying cultural discourses invoked, opting for a certain interpretation at any given moment.

Interweaving experimental aesthetic and narrative elements with those of normative realist cinema are precisely what makes interpretations of *The Piano* so given to slippage, and further, what makes the film exemplary of certain tendencies in contemporary independent film. Exemplary because of its hybridity, for instance, as in independent film's efforts to mediate binary oppositions such as form/content, art/politics, and Hollywood/avant-garde. Without the incorporation of non-normative elements, the narrative could not veer so adeptly from the individual's struggles to a critique of the historical structures which surround and construct us. It is not restricted to certain readings in the same ways as is the narrative of *The Accused*. Yet, it is this same incorporation of alternative practices and codes in *The Piano* which makes it possible to *refuse* the broadening of the scope of discussion from the individual to larger oppressive discourses.<sup>32</sup> Certain re/viewers opt instead to obliterate the cultural 'big picture', obscuring it behind the film's experimental aspects: its visual uniqueness and departure from traditional narrative modes. Concealing it, in other words, under the rubric of 'art'. That which leads Roger Ebert to describe *The Piano* as 'startlingly original', Vincent Canby to call it 'so original', and Jami Bernard to hail it as 'A masterpiece!', also permits Canby to continue as follows. 'This is filmmaking of such original effect that to ask Ms. Campion about her experiences as a woman director seems beside the point. She is a woman, a fact that shapes her own experiences; but it doesn't have anything to do with her artistic powers.'<sup>33</sup>

Contrary to hooks' contention that *The Piano* is excused because of its label as high art, crucial portions of the film's potential meanings are erased through its classification as such. Art films are designated as a separate category in which viewers (as well as in many instances, their makers) are not held to account in similar ways as they are for social issue films. It is almost inconceivable, for instance, for a reviewer to omit the repercussions of rape or Sarah's silencing in *The Accused*, and dwell on it instead as a female buddy film. Yet *The Piano* is widely discussed in the popular press as an erotic romance without its many instances of violence and degradation meriting so much as mention. In this conceptualisation, formal elements such as the 'look' of the film can be enjoyed for their artistic qualities without having to link them back to the narrative's processes of meaning production. One can 'appreciate' Ada's and Baines' travails without questioning one's own place in the depicted structures of dominance. Canby is able to state that Campion's existence as a woman has nothing to do with her artistic powers because he, along with the majority of mainstream reviewers, rely on humanist notions of art. Here, humanist modernism constructs the works it claims for its own as *above and beyond* social categories or cultural constructs such as gender, in favour of universal truth claims. And in doing so, it continues the submergence of voices such as Ada's.

Following bell hooks' line of argument, if gangsta rap is condemned by condemnation, *The Piano*, then, is condemned by high (art) praise. hooks interprets the film as the majority of reviewers do, and on the basis of that same reading, she criticises, as misogynist, the film they praise. And within the perimeters of the reviewer-preferred reading, hooks' argument makes sense. However, too much is at stake in the act and politics of reading to surrender to others' interpretations so easily, or to give away, without resistance, the possibility of alternate readings, as hooks does in this instance.

Speaking of the work of researchers, and I think by implication this argument can be extended to all readers, Ien Ang argues that the purpose of research is not 'the search for (objective, scientific) knowledge', but

the construction of interpretations, of certain ways of understanding the world, always historically located, subjective, and relative....[I]nterpretation is more often than not problematized as a methodological rather than a political matter, defined in terms of careful inference making rather than in terms of discursive constructions of reality.<sup>34</sup>

Interpretation's methodological rather than political framing can be seen, for instance, in efforts to 'get at' what the filmmaker 'is really trying to say', as if that can become openly and readily apparent if only one follows the correct analytical procedures.

Ang continues by saying that what is at stake here is, precisely, 'a politics of interpretation.'<sup>35</sup> In shifting conceptual frames from objective knowledge to constructed knowledge, certain questions are immediately problematized: whose construction(s) prevail and why? Which, or whose, interpretations are admissible for consideration, discussion and negotiation? In this formula, interpretation becomes a discursive construction of knowledge.

This is not to overinvest in the influence of mainstream film critics. While they may serve as indicators of how films can, and perhaps are, being read, they clearly do not speak for all viewers. However, their public role may help forge culturally negotiated interpretations of any given text; they may participate in the consolidation process of what come to be widely accepted readings. Certainly the movie industry perceives the influence of reviewers to be important, indicated, for instance, in the widespread incorporation of quotes from critical reviews in the body of a film's own promotional material. The use of quotations is meant to appeal to the 'objectivity' and 'expertise' signified by critical practice.

Speaking of the intra-industry influence of film reviewers, Martin Scorsese notes

I kind of depend on the critics. They make it possible for certain people at certain studios at a given time to give me money for the next picture. That's the key thing.<sup>36</sup>

The influence of reviewers may be even greater for the independent industry which, with some high-profile exceptions such as Miramax, relies on positive national and local reviews in place of large advertising and promotional budgets. For instance, a Zeitgeist distributed film, *Vermont Is For Lovers* (John O'Brien, 1993), never played in New York, the most important independent market in the U.S., as well as homebase for the distribution company, because of a negative review by Vincent Canby in the *New York Times* after the film was screened at a festival in the city. According to Zeitgeist co-founder Emily Russo, 'That made it impossible to open here effectively.'<sup>37</sup> Similarly, one can refer back to producer's representative John Pierson's explanation in Chapter Three of the significant extra work put into the New York release of *Slacker* (Richard Linklater, 1991, Orion Classics) in order to overcome a poor review in the *New York Times*, also by Canby.

Whatever the degree to which mainstream reviewers influence positive or negative audience responses to a film or help shape specific readings of a film's narrative, their critical practice can stand as emblematic of common, dominant reading practices. That is to say, critical activity can indicate something about the contemporary processes and politics of hermeneutics. As Meaghan Morris notes

In the heterogeneity of a postindustrial culture, reviewers of film are not arbiters of taste, or judges, or even representative consumers, but mercenaries in the stabilizing force of the Thought Police. We do not decree what should be thought about any particular *film*, but we do help to patrol the limits of what is safely *or* adventurously thinkable as *cinema* at any given time.<sup>38</sup>

The permissible boundaries of film reviewing -- what can be said about a film and how -- can tell us something of the way cinema may be culturally constructed at any historical moment.

The point in this analysis of *The Piano* is not to suggest that independent film as a category of cinematic signification is unable to traverse the legacies of both mainstream and avant-garde, failing to surmount the density of one, or the danger of pre-packaged ideology in the other. Quite the contrary, the notion of hybridity as a property of independent film is one of independent cinema's defining, and most promising, traits. It is to suggest, however, that interpretation is both an act of representation and a political act: an act of representation in the sense of a determining moment in the production of meanings, and political in the specifics of, and struggle for control over, those meanings. Films made by women or expressing women's experiences are insufficient without the corollary recognition, in the realm of reception, of what they seek to do, and how they strive to do it. The struggle to represent unheard voices and marginalised lives cannot occur solely at the level of production or be placed upon the shoulders of filmmakers, but must exist equally in the critical activities of reviewers and viewers.

Not only do acts of interpretation help construct their own object, 'producing' the text in the process of decoding it, as noted by literary theorist Marcel Cornis-Pope, but specific readings can be imposed at the expense of other interpretations which are thus dislodged.<sup>39</sup> This matches the concept of reviewers' function as paradigm thought police, described by Meaghan Morris. Its opposite in Morris' terms, is the act of 'political reviewing', and I would add political viewing, which 'is a matter of changing what can be *said* about film.'<sup>40</sup> Or as Edward Said notes, in his consideration of the debates around canonical texts and cultural literacy, too much emphasis has been placed on what *should* be read, rather than on *how* it should be read.<sup>41</sup>

A film's meanings are solidified, among other sites, in the discussion surrounding its reception, for instance, in the press, in popular opinion such as word-of-mouth, and other forms of negotiated opinion. Along with representational, institutional, and cultural/historical discourses, reception should be a recognised site of struggle with equivalent discursive implications in the maintenance or modification of existing power structures. The act of interpretation should not be surrendered without resistance; the existence of alternative readings should not be dislodged so easily.

To return for a final time to *The Piano*, to look at its text-within-a-text performance of the Bluebeard 'fairy tale', and to the Westerners who bring such dramatic enactments to their colonial outposts. Both populations of viewers, colonising and indigenous, perform interpretations of the play within the film. The stage is set with the blood-soaked heads of Bluebeard's ex-wives poking through holes in the curtain, as Bluebeard, in shadow play, is about to behead another wife. Shouting, 'Coward!', some of the Maori men storm the stage. The Europeans' response is condescending tolerance of Maori 'naiveté' for their inability to distinguish reality from representation. But of course, and not without irony, the Maori are prescient. For the performance, in which Bluebeard is to behead his wife but is halted by Maori intervention, foreshadows Stewart taking an axe to Ada's finger. Further it is the Maori who are depicted as understanding that representation and reality are inseparably integrated. The play within the film stands in for its external frame -- the film itself. Bluebeard's assumption of ownership over his wives is mirrored in Stewart's, Ada's father's and Baines' sense of prerogative over her. Both populations, European and Maori, carry out an act of interpretation of the same performance and, in the end, it is the Westerners who are shown to be naive for their conviction that one can neatly distinguish fact from fiction, reality from representation, and objective knowledge from discursive construct. It is the Westerners who, in error, see narrative representation as

harmless entertainment, just as reviewers of the external frame, the film *The Piano*, see it as a harmless romance.



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- <sup>1</sup> Vincent Canby, 'Forceful Lessons Of Love And Cinematic Language', *New York Times*, 16 October 1993, Section 1, p. 18.
- <sup>2</sup> Vincent Canby, 'Early Cannes Favorite: A Post-Freudian Romance', *New York Times*, 18 May 1993, p. C13.
- <sup>3</sup> bell hooks, 'Sexism and Misogyny: Who Takes the Rap?', *Z Magazine*, vol. 7, no. 2 (February 1994), pp. 26-29. Citation used in heading, p.28.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- <sup>7</sup> Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*, cited in bell hooks, p. 27.
- <sup>8</sup> Hal Hinson, 'The Piano: Symphony of a Troubled Heart', *Washington Post*, 19 November 1993, p. D6; Joan Juliet Buck, 'Strange Melodies', *Vogue*, December 1993, p. 127; Vincent Canby, 'Forceful Lessons of Love', Section 1, p. 18 and 'A Post-Freudian Romance', p. C15; Peter Travers, 'Sex and *The Piano*', *Rolling Stone*, 9 December 1993, p. 76; Carrie Rickey, 'Holly Hunter: Without Words', *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 14 November 1993, p. E1.
- <sup>9</sup> Hal Hinson, p. D6; Kenneth Turan, 'The Piano Plays an Intoxicating Tune', *Los Angeles Times* 19 November, 1993, p. F16; Vincent Canby, 'Forceful Lessons of Love', Section 1, p. 18; Peter Travers, *Rolling Stone*, p. 76; Jami Bernard, 'The Piano Fine-tunes a Sensual Awakening', *New York Daily News*, in the *Centre Daily Times*, 7 January 1994, p. 6C.
- <sup>10</sup> Mary Cantwell, 'Jane Campion's Lunatic Women', *New York Times Magazine*, 19 September 1993, p. 51; Carrie Rickey, 'A Mute Woman Struggles For Voice In *The Piano*', *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 19 November 1993, p. W3; Hal Hinson, *Washington Post*, p. D6; Kenneth Turan, *Los Angeles Times*, p. F1; Joan Juliet Buck, *Vogue*, p. 127; Vincent Canby, 'Forceful Lessons of Love', Section 1, p. 13 and 'Jane Campion Stirs Romance With Mystery', *New York Times*, 30 May 1993, Section II, p. 17; Richard Corliss, 'Wuthering Eighty-Eights', *Time*, 22 November 1993, p. 80.
- <sup>11</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, 26 November 1993, p. F2.
- <sup>12</sup> *New York Times*, 10 December 1993, p. C12.
- <sup>13</sup> *Philadelphia Inquirer* 25 March 1994, p. W7.
- <sup>14</sup> Handing Flora Ada's severed finger, he instructs her, 'You give this to Baines. Tell him if he ever tries to see her again, I'll take off another and another and another.'
- <sup>15</sup> That Ada's muteness is countermanded by her music, further links the piano to the expression/repression of her sexuality and emotions. For instance, 'One is tempted to speculate that the different kinds of drama have their corresponding sense deprivations: for tragedy, blindness, since tragedy is about insight and illumination; for comedy, deafness, since comedy is concerned with problems in communication, misunderstandings and their consequences; and for melodrama, muteness, since melodrama is about expression.' Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, cited in Tania Modleski, 'Time and Desire in the Woman's Film', *Film Theory and Criticism*, Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy (eds), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 538.

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<sup>16</sup> Kathi Maio, 'The Key to *The Piano*', *Ms. Magazine*, vol. iv, no. 5 (March/April 1994), p. 84.

<sup>17</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape For a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*, London: Virago Press, 1986, p. 44.

<sup>18</sup> David Morley cited in Len Masterman, *Teaching The Media*, London: Routledge, 1994 [1985], pp. 218-219.

<sup>19</sup> Suzi Feay, 'Woolf Whistles', *Time Out*, 10-17 March 1993, p. 18. Also, describing it as an 'epistemological costume drama', 'Potter's movie...seems light, also didactic, fare with striking tableaux,' Georgia Brown, 'My Brilliant Careers', *Village Voice*, 15 June 1993, p. 51. *Orlando* did well at the box office, especially by art film standards, in both Britain and the United States. However, a distinction can be seen in how the two films, both foreign for American audiences, fared at the 1994 Academy Awards. *The Piano* received 8 nominations: Best Picture, Best Actress, Best Supporting Actress, Director, Original Screenplay, Cinematography, Costume Design and Editing. It won 3 Oscars for Best Screenplay (Jane Campion), Best Actress (Holly Hunter) and Best Supporting Actress (Anna Paquin). *Orlando* received a nomination only for Costume Design.

<sup>20</sup> Examples of intermediaries include Anne Sullivan (Anne Bancroft) for Helen Keller (Patty Duke) in *The Miracle Worker* (Arthur Penn, 1962, United Artists), the Liam Neeson and Natasha Richardson characters in *Nell* (Michael Apted, 1994, Twentieth Century Fox), Tom Cruise's Charlie Babbitt, for brother Raymond (Dustin Hoffman) in *Rainman* (Barry Levinson, 1988, MGM/UA), Joe Miller (Denzel Washington) as legal and narrative representative for Andy Beckett (Tom Hanks) in *Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, 1993, TriStar), as well as Kelly McGillis' character in *The Accused*.

<sup>21</sup> Although some reviewers chose to see it this way. For instance, the 'sensual awakening' in the headline of Jami Bernard's review in the *New York Daily News*, cited earlier -- 'The Piano Fine-tunes a Sensual Awakening' -- belongs to Baines, not Ada.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Corliss, "'Bad" Women and Brutal Men: A Hit Movie Reopens the Debate on Rape in the '80s', *Time*, 21 November 1988, p. 127.

<sup>23</sup> Jodie Foster cited in Sonia Taitz, 'Jodie Foster: Tough Hero', *New York Times*, 16 October 1988, section 2, p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> Carol Clover, 'High and Low: The Transformation of the Rape-revenge Movie', *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader*, Pam Cook and Philip Dodd (eds) London: Scarlet Press, 1994, p. 83.

<sup>25</sup> Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity -- An Incomplete Project', in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays On Postmodern Culture*, Hal Foster (ed.), Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983, p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> Judith Mayne, 'Paradoxes of Spectatorship', in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, Linda Williams (ed.) New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995, p.172.

<sup>27</sup> Rickey, 'A Mute Woman Struggles For Voice In *The Piano*', p. W3.

<sup>28</sup> From the Thomas Hood (1799-1845) poem used in the final voice-over to close the film.

<sup>29</sup> This was initially suggested to me by a viewer seeking clarification of whether this interpretation was the intended one.

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<sup>30</sup> Voice-over accompanying the final shot can also be interpreted in keeping with either visual version: 'At night I think of my piano in its ocean grave. And sometimes of myself floating above it. Down there everything is so still and silent that it lulls me to sleep. It is a weird lullaby, and so it is. It is mine. "There is a silence where hath been no sound./There is a silence where no sound may be./In the cold grave, under the deep deep sea".'

<sup>31</sup> Another imaginable resolution would be Ada leaving only in the company of her daughter. But Campion has staked out for herself the terrain of heterosexual relationships -- the belief that men and women can live together, including as lovers and partners, despite the cultural obstacles -- and so resolves the film within those confines.

<sup>32</sup> What the problem might be is deemed, in a number of instances, to remain a 'mystery', while often simultaneously falling back on individual failings as explanation. For instance, 'Yet on some deeper level they remain mysterious, as if Campion had insisted that the characters remain half-hidden in shadow....She [Ada] suffers, but the source of her pain is mysterious and undiagnosed. Judging from Campion's previous films, her primary affliction is femininity itself....[H]er women are haunted creatures at the mercy of their emotions.' Hal Hinson, '*Washington Post*, p. D6.

<sup>33</sup> Vincent Canby, 'Jane Campion Stirs Romance With Mystery', Section 2, p. 17.

<sup>34</sup> Ien Ang, 'Wanted: Audiences. On the Politics of Empirical Audience Studies', in *Remote Control: Television, Audience, and Cultural Power*, Ellen Seiter, Hans Borchers, Gabriele Kreutzner, and Eva-Maria Warth (eds), London: Routledge, 1989, p. 105.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Lynn Hirschberg, 'Two Directors', interview with Martin Scorsese and Woody Allen, *New York Times Magazine*, 16 November 1997, p. 94.

<sup>37</sup> Emily Russo cited in Mary Glucksman, 'The More Things Change, *Filmmaker*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Winter 1995), p. 28.

<sup>38</sup> Meaghan Morris, *The Pirate's Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism*, London: Verso, 1988, p. 111.

<sup>39</sup> Marcel Cornis-Pope, *Hermeneutic Desire and Critical Rewriting: Narrative Interpretation in the Wake of Poststructuralism*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992, p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> Meaghan Morris, p. 121.

<sup>41</sup> Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Random House, 1993, p. 328.

## CHAPTER SIX

### INDEPENDENT AUTEURISM: FROM MODERN EXISTENTIALISM TO POSTMODERNISM AS NOSTALGIA

Tarantino is Scorsese with quote marks around him.  
Paul Schrader<sup>1</sup>

'Words are like onions,' she said. 'The more skins  
you peel off, the more meanings you encounter.'  
Fatima Mernissi<sup>2</sup>

Of the films examined in any detail in this study, *Pulp Fiction* (1994, Miramax) fits least well into operative notions of independent film, yet it is also perhaps the single film (and Quentin Tarantino the single filmmaker) which has come to most exemplify independent film in the 1990s. *Pulp Fiction* cost \$8.5 million to make and featured an enviable list of known actors (John Travolta, Samuel L. Jackson, Uma Thurman, Bruce Willis, Harvey Keitel, Tim Roth) who vied to be in the film despite the relatively low pay offered. The film was distributed by Miramax but, in addition, it was also entirely financed by them -- after being optioned to and turned down by TriStar, a major studio. The financing and distribution package meant the production did not have to go through the usual trials of patchwork funding, to be picked up for distribution (if fortunate) only upon completion. And by this point, Tarantino was hardly a newcomer or unknown. *Pulp Fiction* was his second writing/directing effort (after *Reservoir Dogs*, 1992, Miramax) and his fourth produced feature screenplay (*True*

*Romance*, Tony Scott, 1993, Warner Bros; *Natural Born Killers*, Oliver Stone, 1994, Warner Bros) all of which had attracted widespread attention to him.

On the other hand, it can be argued that *Pulp Fiction* departs from a normative Hollywood paradigm in significant ways. The film was celebrated for its postmodern qualities, one of which was the fact, as noted in the introduction to the published screenplay, that it 'brilliantly finessed the divide between art-house cachet and commercial viability.'<sup>3</sup> But this continues to beg the question. Why can it be considered independent *because* it brings to bear commercial viability (as do Hollywood films)?<sup>4</sup> And how precisely does it manage to stay on the 'art-house cachet' side of the independent line?

We can begin to explore these questions through a comparison of the respective receptions of *Pulp Fiction* and the studio-made *Natural Born Killers* in two differing national contexts, Britain and the United States, particularly around the issue of violence, raised explicitly by both texts. *Natural Born Killers*, the story of two young lovers, Mickey and Mallory (Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis), who go on a cross-country killing spree which terminates with 52 people dying and the couple turned into celebrities by media attention, was directed by Oliver Stone, based on a screenplay by Quentin Tarantino. That Tarantino wrote the original screenplay was a widely reported fact, in part because of the writer's subsequent efforts to distance himself from the film. He declined a screenwriting credit (that went to David Veloz, Richard Rutowski and Oliver Stone), settling instead for the separate and lesser credit of 'Story By'.

There is some evidence that Tarantino's objections were as much in response to *Natural Born Killers* being made at all as they were to any specific changes Stone made to the script or to the ultimate film he created. The rights to the *Natural Born Killers* screenplay had a complex, contested history well before they became Stone's, and Tarantino seems to have made several previous attempts to keep the script from going into production. At any rate, Tarantino was

upset when word reached him that the script was being rewritten by Stone, although he had not yet read any of the specific changes.<sup>5</sup> Further, at the time Tarantino distanced himself from the completed film, and for sometime afterwards, he had not actually seen it.<sup>6</sup>

Why Tarantino was resistant to *Natural Born Killers* being made is unclear. He himself has said he did not want to direct it.

I wrote them all [*Reservoir Dogs*, *True Romance*, *Natural Born Killers*] to be my first film and then I *made* my first film, so I didn't want to do them anymore. The next film I directed, I wanted to be my *second* film and your second film is different from your first. And, more importantly, it's like the time had passed as far as what I wanted to do. It's like an old girlfriend, it has a shelf life.<sup>7</sup> [square parentheses in original].

Further, there is a range of opinion on how greatly Tarantino's screenplay and Veloz/Rutowski/Stone's version vary, from 'very different'<sup>8</sup> in the assessment of *Natural Born Killers* producer Jane Hamsher to Gavin Smith's estimate in *Sight and Sound* that 'roughly 80 per cent of his [Tarantino's] script survives intact.'<sup>9</sup> But the point here is that while the produced film is definitely the result of Stone's (and others') work, it also remains embedded in Tarantino's conceptual, visual and narrative concerns, and his name continues to be linked to it in public perception.

Smith, in *Sight and Sound*, also points out that when *Natural Born Killers* opened in the States in August 1994, 'The anticipated firestorm of moral outrage in the U.S. media never materialized.... Though critics were divided between those who praised the film's audacity and those who dismissed it as irresponsible cynicism.'<sup>10</sup> The film did in fact receive mixed reviews -- rarely lukewarm, but rather conflicting, either praising or criticising it. However, the contentiousness was largely *not* over the issue of the film's depiction of violence. Both positive and negative reviews (for instance, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *New Yorker Magazine*, respectively) found the film's violence not excessively difficult to take,

generally on the grounds that it was either purposefully satirical or simply cartoonish. Such critical response to the film seems to have prompted the *Los Angeles Times*, for one, to publish, in its editorial pages, negative views of the film based on its graphic use of violence, written by 'ordinary' readers/citizens to counteract *Los Angeles Times's* film critic Kenneth Turan's very positive, and unoffended, review.<sup>11</sup>

For the most part, critical discussion was based not on *Natural Born Killers's* use of violence but on whether the film worked as a narrative, whether it was successful or not in satirising a media-saturated society. J. Hoberman's internally contradictory review in the *Village Voice* is indicative; he argues that *Natural Born Killers* will 'leave you impressed but unconvinced, torn between admiration and disgust, a desire to praise audacious filmmaking and the urge to laugh at rampaging idiocy.'<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, *Natural Born Killers's* impending release in Britain sparked controversy precisely over the film's depictions of violence. Originally scheduled for November 1994, the film's theatrical release was postponed until February 1995, while the British Board of Film Classification considered whether it would even classify the film, a prerequisite to it being shown at all (ultimately it received an 18 certificate -- for viewers 18 and older, similar to the Motion Picture Association of America's NC-17 rating). During its threat of censorship, the film's depictions of violence were hotly and publicly debated, with many critics, in contrast to the U.S., finding it distasteful.

Even reviewers in the U.K. who were *against* the film's censorship regarded it with wariness. For instance, Alexander Walker in the *Evening Standard* stated that, 'It is right, of course, that we approach such a film with caution, even suspicion,' at the same time that he argued *for* its classification. Employing sarcasm, '*Natural Born Killers* mirrors the toxic convulsions in America. We don't want that here, do we? Right: ban it,'<sup>13</sup> he attributes the film's near-censorship to

a negative perception of American society, and a British desire to resist its damaging influences.

Logically, the varying responses of the British and American press towards *Natural Born Killers* might be explained by differing national contexts, and the respective place of violence, or relative lack of it, in each society. Reviewers in the U.S., a more violent society, tend not to critique *Natural Born Killers*' violence while reviewers in the U.K., a less violent society, do. The problem is that this same pattern does not hold true for the reception of *Pulp Fiction*. While *Pulp Fiction* and *Reservoir Dogs* were much talked about in terms of their violence, they did not receive a similar negative critical response in Britain. The films were unequivocal critical successes in both national contexts, and the tolerance towards these films' depictions of violence was considerably more lenient than was the case with *Natural Born Killers*.

*Reservoir Dogs* opened in the U.K. in January 1993 and was still playing theatrically when *Pulp Fiction* had its U.K. release in October 1994. *Reservoir Dogs*' unusually lengthy theatrical run was due to the fact that the film had become a cult favourite, coupled with the British Board of Film Classification's refusal to classify it for video release (which did not occur until June 1995), thereby keeping the popular film in theatres.

Tarantino's critical acceptance in Britain is signalled by such events as his being asked to select nineteen of 'his all-time favourite movies' for screening by the National Film Theatre in London during January 1995.<sup>14</sup> He is described in the NFT's programme not in controversial terms but rather as 'the most commercially successful, critically lauded and sought-after new young director in America.'<sup>15</sup>

On *Pulp Fiction*'s depictions of violence most reviewers were, in contrast to *Natural Born Killers*, quite unperturbed. For instance, the British edition of *Esquire*, in a review titled 'Pulp Fiction is Predictably Violent -- and Predictably



Wonderful', wrote, 'Even his trademark explosive violence -- which wrenches the guts and fills column inches in the outraged mid-market tabloids -- is highly stylized, never gratuitous and barked at solely on the grounds of its realism.'<sup>16</sup>

Julie Burchill, in *The London Sunday Times* commented

Tarantino is the ultimate straight-talker; his films are tight, elegant and sparse, completely character-driven, his justification of his films' violence the last word in unpretentiousness -- 'My films are violent because I've always thought that violence in films is cool'....While his [Stone's] excuses for the high body counts of his films are worthy of the lowest supermarket tabloid reporter: to *educate*, to tell us the *awful truth*.<sup>17</sup>

Burchill seems to have reversed conventional wisdom: tabloids presumably titillate while 'proper' newspapers are supposed to inform. But her argument rests on the foundation that Tarantino's violence is justified and Stone's is not because the former, unlike the latter, has no intended moral or message. Similarly, from the other side of the Atlantic, 'Unlike Tarantino, Stone is obsessed with generating significance.'<sup>18</sup>

Debates about the place of violence in film are generally formulated around a few key problematics: whether the violence is 'realistic' or not, for instance. The *Esquire* review attempts to have it both ways, calling *Pulp Fiction's* violence both 'highly stylized' and 'realism'. Another common, polarising argument is whether the violence is or is not gratuitous. *Esquire* is definitive on this point, citing *Pulp Fiction's* violence as 'never gratuitous'. Significantly, though, arguments for *Pulp Fiction's* non-gratuitous use of violence are built upon it having, unlike *Natural Born Killers*, no moral, point or lesson. This is the exact *inverse* of traditional arguments about filmic depictions of violence in which they are considered gratuitous precisely if they do not have a morally or narratively redemptive purpose. Indeed, those reviewers who find the film's brand of graphic violence

unacceptable use the very same arguments to condemn it as those who acclaim it.

In one of the few entirely negative critiques of *Pulp Fiction*, Fintan O'Toole, writing in *The London Guardian*,<sup>19</sup> calls Tarantino's style 'sadism' and argues that his power

lies in the bold way he has dispensed with the excuses for violence on screen and gone straight for the thing itself. He does not go through the motions of constructing a pseudo-moral plot in which violence is enclosed within a struggle between good and evil. Nor does he try to use film violence as an image of a violent society in the hope of exposing the true nature of the world we live in. He just, in his own words, 'does violence'. ....Unlike Scorsese's *Goodfellas*, *Pulp Fiction* does all it can to exclude a social context for the violence of its gangsters.

O'Toole condemns the film on the same basis that others praise it. Nor is this perspective limited to the popular press. Henry Giroux, for instance, writing in the *Harvard Educational Review*, calls 'the new hyper-real avant-garde violent films,' of which *Pulp Fiction* is a preeminent example, 'an expression of the erosion of civil society.'<sup>20</sup> He elaborates: 'Tarantino's view of violence represents more than bad politics; it also breeds a dead-end cynicism. His films are filled with characters who have flimsy histories, are going nowhere, and live out their lives without any sense of morality or justice.'<sup>21</sup>

Why, then, in many quarters is Stone's use of violence seen as more contemptible than Tarantino's?<sup>22</sup> Certainly, *Natural Born Killers* is as stylised and calls attention to itself as much as *Pulp Fiction* does: that is, it is clear violence is the 'subject' of Stone's film. The patchwork of film stocks and rapid cutting are meant to continually remind the viewer that the film is a media *construction*. The eroticisation of violence (Mickey and Mallory, Scagnetti, the media) is *supposed* to simultaneously compel and repulse us. And *Natural Born Killers* is much more

self-conscious in its use of violence than the majority of Hollywood action, horror or crime films in which violence is prevalent and the avenging of violent deeds is made heroic. In most mainstream texts, violent acts are rendered 'invisible' or their affects neutralised while *Natural Born Killers*, in contrast, describes a world in which everything and everyone is brutal and brutalised. Given this, why is it more difficult to extend the kinds of defense granted *Pulp Fiction*, for instance, in the words of a nineteen year old female fan from Manchester, "The violence is realistic and gritty, it's done with a bit of panache. It has never been portrayed like this in films before"....Stallone and Arnie have killed dozens of people, she says, but nobody kicks up a fuss about their films.<sup>123</sup> Indeed, the ordinariness and invisibility of the 'body counts' in most action films (including those of *Pulp Fiction's* Bruce Willis) is a frequent argument used to praise *Pulp Fiction's* violent depictions -- precisely because they are 'made visible', meant to be registered and acknowledged.

The difficulty for *Natural Born Killers*, condemned for its depictions of violence even while self-consciously attempting to call attention to violence, is that despite Stone's efforts to the contrary it retains the signifying practices of a humanist text. Its very attempts to denounce violence place it firmly within a modernist framework. It is one thing to call attention to violence as Tarantino does; another to critique it as Stone goes on to do. *Pulp Fiction* exists as an immersion in popular culture. *Natural Born Killers* also attempts to critique; therein lies its modernist foundation. Stone's problem is that he has attempted to create a hybrid, and in the process, achieved neither sufficiently: a modernist morality tale or a story grounded in postmodern nonhumanism.

In Chapter Two I briefly outlined the aesthetic realms of the modern and the postmodern, delineating aspects of their significance as systems of communication and expression. Here, I refer to these movements in their larger contexts, in which they represent 'periodizing concepts'<sup>24</sup> correlating

aesthetic/expressive properties with social, economic, political, and ideological features. This is often rather awkwardly expressed by the use of the terms 'modernism' or 'postmodernism' to signify the traditionally more narrow sense of 'culture' -- the arts and other forms of knowledge exemplified by education, social etiquette, class, and so on -- while 'modernity' and 'postmodernity' represent the more inclusive, recent sense of 'culture' as, in Raymond Williams' phrase, a whole way of life. So, for instance, 'modernism [is part of] the culture of modernity' and 'postmodernism is the culture of postmodernity.'<sup>25</sup>

In this more encompassing sense, modernity, the humanist project originating with the Enlightenment, is the belief in reason, progress, science, universal principles of justice and morality, and other 'grand narratives' which structure or make sense of 'reality' in such a way that the autonomous individual subject is at its center, functioning as the source of all agency. Postmodernity is the still unfolding structuring of 'reality' which locates 'any universal or normative postulation of rational unanimity [as]...hostile to the challenges of otherness and difference.'<sup>26</sup> In a postmodern configuration, the autonomous individual is replaced by a non-fixed, multiply-identified subject who exists in a world of pluralism, heterogeneity, and cultural diversity instead of a world in which universally valid knowledge, principles or master narratives are supposedly equally applicable to all human beings.

Modernism, the aesthetic movements beginning in the late 19th century and continuing to the 1960s, is part of modernity in the ways that it emphasises 'the aim of finding an inner truth beyond surface appearances'<sup>27</sup> and in its belief, as with modernity, in 'a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality, which can be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world and to forge its own unique, unmistakable style.'<sup>28</sup> In modernism, the unique subject is represented by the artistic genius, the creator, the auteur.

Modernity's stress on the autonomous humanist subject as the agent who can impose reason, order, and progress on existence is met and matched by modernism's stress on 'unlimited self-realization, the demand for authentic self-experience and the subjectivism of a hyperstimulated sensitivity'.<sup>29</sup> That is, the ability of the artist to 'see' and 'feel' things that the rest of us cannot.

Indeed, the two senses of culture -- modernism and modernity -- are inseparable because while they may point to differing cultural structures they are united by shared structuring principles. This is exemplified in Fintan O'Toole's scathing review of Tarantino's work, cited earlier, because '[u]nlike Scorsese's *Goodfellas*, *Pulp Fiction* does all it can to exclude a social context for the violence of its gangsters.' Or as Leela Gandhi points out, 'humanism has always functioned as an "aesthetico-moral" ideology',<sup>30</sup> for instance, as with the narrative of redemption (see Chapter Four). In arguing the failure of *Natural Born Killers'* morally redemptive efforts versus *Pulp Fiction's* refreshing 'unpretentiousness' in its lack of a 'message', reviewers are framing modern/postmodern arguments around changing concepts of the individual and the world s/he occupies. In addition to formal and stylistic characteristics, it is this which renders *Pulp Fiction* a postmodern text.

A primary interest in postmodernism as representational practice is the degree to which it is able to depict multiply-identified subjects in a multicultural and constantly shifting world. At stake are the ways in which postmodernism, as representational and cultural production, can promote or accommodate rather than be 'hostile to the challenges of otherness and difference.' Postmodernism provides a potential field for thinking through what it means to live in heterogeneity, while simultaneously keeping in play the diversity of multiple perspectives, values, life-styles, and concerns, in contrast, in principle, to modernism's narrativities of norms, absolutes, and universals.

*Pulp Fiction's* exception in its refusal to tell a humanist-type morality tale may be the prominent story line of redemption concerning Jules (Samuel Jackson) who, by film's end, undergoes a conversion which causes him to retire as hitman. Moving from shouting biblical passages in which he doles out the vengeance of the Lord, Jules comes to realise that he is, instead, 'the tyranny of evil men' and now wants to become a 'shepherd'. Within the context of the film it is difficult to know if Jules' redemption is meant to be taken seriously or, rather, greeted as another instance of high absurdity, similar to the other events we witness. Commentators who want to argue in favor of the film but are uneasy about its apparent amorality, tend to seize on Jules' redemption as indicator of the film's essential moral purpose, for instance, 'What lifts *Pulp Fiction* up from merry nihilism, in-jokes and postmodernist narrative strategies is the performance of Samuel L. Jackson, whose Scripture-spouting hitman, Jules, is the only human in *Pulp Fiction* who evinces any moral conscience....Jackson's performance holds out the possibility of redemption, of human growth, and lends this frantically funny burlesque its few moments of human character.'<sup>31</sup> Other commentators, however, point to Jules' redemption as simply more of the morally arbitrary same: 'He goes about his killing business with religious fervor, spouting Ezekiel at his terrified victims as if to justify his acts. And what changes his mind about his work? Not a crisis of conscience but a realisation of his own mortality. More self-preservation: the philosophical new Jules is as hard and cold as the old one.'<sup>32</sup>

Paul Schrader, screenwriter of Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976, Columbia) and *Raging Bull* (1980, United Artists), as well as writer/director of such films as *American Gigolo* (1980, Paramount), *Light Sleeper* (1991, Live), and *Affliction* (1998, Lions Gate), accounts for the modernist to postmodernist inversion of narrative morality, in which commentators defend *Pulp Fiction* *because* it has no overt moral intent, as a transition from existential heroes to ironic heroes.

For all of this century, which is the history of movies, films have more or less worked on the existential hero because he [sic] was ideal for movies. He defined himself, he was self-starting, whether he was a hero or whether he was an anti-hero, whether he was the westerner or whether he was the rogue cop. What we have now is what strikes me as the ironic hero. And that is, everything in the ironic hero's life has quotations around it. He's quote unquote the protagonist who quote unquote loves someone or quote unquote kills someone. In the end it really doesn't make that much difference. Tarantino is Scorsese with quote marks around him.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, in commentary after commentary, Tarantino is continually compared to Scorsese, *Reservoir Dogs* his debut equivalent to *Mean Streets* (1973, Warner Bros). And Tarantino himself cites *Taxi Driver* as one of his three favourite films (along with *Blow Out*, Brian De Palma, 1981, Orion, and *Rio Bravo*, Howard Hawks, 1958, Warner Bros). Schrader continues, 'What *Pulp Fiction* has done is move the serious movie protagonist into a territory that is very new and very uncertain....And what I'm saying is that it's the first post-existential art movie.'<sup>34</sup> By existential hero, Schrader means the individual who operates within a rule (or misrule) governed universe -- modernity -- and who must make moral decisions based upon that 'reality'. Scorsese's stories are emblematic of a world of good and evil, even, or especially, when his main characters are anti-heroes.

For instance, Pam Cook describes *Cape Fear* (Martin Scorsese, 1991, Universal/MCA) as a 'violent rape movie in which women apparently collude in their own punishment at the hands of a rapist. Yet, for the most part critics, even when shocked by the film's brutality, prefer to discuss it in formal and/or moral terms -- as 'cinema' or as a treatise on good and evil.'<sup>35</sup> Cook's point is that the prism of modernist auteurism provides a protective shield in which 'cinema' and the 'formal' equate with an art cinema and a director-as-auteur beyond reproach or

accountability. And further, that the 'moral' of modernist auteurism refers only to universalising themes such as the abstraction of good and evil, and not the particular, localised morality of specific power relations in specific circumstances.

Although it appears accurate to describe *Pulp Fiction*, in comparison to Scorsese's work, as a postmodern text, it is also important to recognise it as a very *narrow* conception of what postmodernism might be, just as Scorsese represents only a very narrow series of possibilities of a modernist world view. This is evidenced in Schrader's assumption, above, born out by the film texts, that only 'he' might be the hero -- the solitary, 'traditional' (i.e. white, heterosexual) male.

It is also apparent in the dominance of the gangster and crime genres for both Hollywood auteurism (Scorsese, Coppola, De Palma) and for independent film. What has variously been called art shock, violent chic and art house designer violence is the single most prevalent, one could well say overrepresented, genre in independent film, including: *Blood Simple* (Coen Brothers, 1984, Circle); *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (John McNaughton, 1990, Greycat); *La Femme Nikita* (Luc Besson, 1990, Goldwyn); *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (Matty Rich, 1991, Goldwyn); *Love Crimes* (Lizzie Borden, 1991, Miramax); *The Bad Lieutenant* (Abel Ferrara, 1992, Aries); *One False Move* (Carl Franklin, 1992, IRS); *Man Bites Dog* (Remy Belvaux, Andre Bonzel and Benot Peolvoorde, 1992, Roxie); *Laws of Gravity* (Nick Gomez, 1992, RKO); *Gun Crazy* (Tamra Davis, 1993, First Look); *Killing Zoe* (Roger Avary, 1994, October); *Red Rock West* (John Dahl, 1994, Roxie); *The Last Seduction* (John Dahl, 1994, October); *Heavenly Creatures* (Peter Jackson, 1994, Miramax); *Things To Do In Denver When You're Dead* (Gary Felder, 1995, Miramax); *Little Odessa* (James Gray, 1995, Fine Line); *Albino Alligator* (Kevin Spacey, 1996, Miramax); *From Dusk To Dawn* (Robert Rodriguez, 1996, Miramax); *Kiss or Kill* (Bill Bennett, 1996, October); *Copland* (James Mangold, 1997, Miramax); *Jackie Brown* (Quentin



Tarantino, 1997, Miramax); *Rounders* (John Dahl, 1998, Miramax); *Suicide Kings* (Peter O'Fallon, 1998, Artisan); *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (Guy Ritchie, 1999, Gramercy).<sup>36</sup> So while there is a modern/postmodern transition causing Tarantino and Scorsese to tell their stories *differently*, ironically versus existentially as Shrader observes, they continue to tell much the *same* stories.

Certainly one of the reasons Tarantino's work is viewed as postmodern is due to its extensive use of pop culture appropriation and referentiality. Indicative are the celebrated openings of both *Pulp Fiction* and *Reservoir Dogs* with their consumer and pop culture references: what a Big Mac is called in France; theorising the meaning of the lyrics to Madonna's 'Like A Virgin'. Such appropriation has been largely praised for its humour and cleverness, 'This is the kind of stuff most of us actually do spend much of our time talking about, and it puts us on a level of understanding with the characters....[I]t is to Tarantino's credit that he has managed to work modern, junk and retro culture into his script with such ease.'<sup>37</sup> Some appropriations, however, have caused controversy over their degree of homage versus plagiarism.

The short, black wig worn by Uma Thurman as Mia Wallace in *Pulp Fiction* is seen as borrowed from Anna Karina, lead in a number of Jean-Luc Godard films, and so perceived as an homage to that director. The biblical passage, Ezekiel 25:17, so pivotal to Jules' character, came from a kung fu film and was spoken by a black character, which Tarantino freely admits, 'The guy reading it was a black guy and he was reading it like..."the path of the righteous myannnnn", and I looked it up in the Bible and it was so great.'<sup>38</sup>

Viewed as more disturbing are the similarities between *Reservoir Dogs* and *City On Fire*, a 1989 Hong Kong film directed by Ringo Lan. In *Quentin Tarantino: The Cinema of Cool*, a largely favourable view as the title suggests, author Jeff Dawson summarises a segment of *City On Fire*:

a gang of code-named robbers (Brother Jo, Brother

Chow, Brother Fu and Brother Nam) leg it after a bungled diamond heist. The heist has been bungled because one of them, a psychopath, started shooting. The cops were lying in wait, tipped off by Brother Chow, an undercover cop. In the getting away, Brother Chow is 'minded' by the older Brother Fu who sickens Chow by emptying a pair of barettas through the wind-screen of a police car. Chow shoots an innocent bystander and gets wounded himself. Fu carries him to the rendezvous, a disused warehouse. Fearing that they were set up, the boss (Big Song) is called. Big Song accuses Chow of being a cop and pulls his gun on him. Fu protests Chow's innocence and pulls his gun, too. A four-way stand-off ensues.<sup>39</sup>

Tarantino's response is, again, strikingly upfront: 'I love *City On Fire* and I have the poster for it framed in my house. It's a great movie. I steal from every movie. I steal from every single movie ever made. I love it....Great artists *steal*, they don't do *homages*.'<sup>40</sup>

On the one hand, the controversy within forms of appropriation over 'homage' versus 'theft' can be understood as the reworking, in process, of modernist concepts of 'originality' and the enormous emphasis placed by modernism on the value of the new and unknown.<sup>41</sup> 'The paradox is that Tarantino takes these stale ingredients and makes them fresh which, I suppose, is the paradox of postmodernism.'<sup>42</sup> And even more generously, 'The miracle of Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* is how, being composed of secondhand, debased parts, it succeeds in gleaming like something new....When it works we call it postmodernism; when it doesn't, it's vampirism.'<sup>43</sup>

On the other hand, significant issues are at stake over credit and credibility in the transition to a cultural production of appropriation. In Tarantino's favor, the editor of *UK Premiere*, Matt Mueller, argues

Nothing's really original in terms of what he's doing but it's *how* he does it, how he puts it together. The way he combines all these elements is what makes it so unique. It's like Elvis or Buddy Holly, when they created rock and roll. They took black music that had been around for years and years and made it

accessible for a popular audience. He's doing for movies what they did for music.<sup>44</sup>

But this argument evades a crucial issue based on the 'availability' of black music. As African-American jazz saxophonist Archie Shepp put it, 'You own the music and we make it.'<sup>45</sup> In some quarters, cultural production as appropriation is not so new.

Postmodern appropriation seems to work best when it is acknowledged, or better yet, hailed. The difficulties surrounding concepts of appropriation within a postmodern paradigm when unacknowledged become evident in Tarantino's dealings with friend and writing collaborator Roger Avary. The stories for *True Romance* and *Natural Born Killers* originated in a script by Avary, *The Open Road*. Tarantino rewrote the script which became the foundation for both *True Romance* and *Natural Born Killers* (the latter began as a story within a story in the *True Romance* frame, as a fictionalised version of the couple's exploits that the Clarence character writes during their cross-country run).<sup>46</sup> As partners, they attempted to get *True Romance* produced, but after three years without success, Tarantino sold the script to Tony Scott. Avary receives no credit despite the origin of the story, collaborative rewrites or the fact that director Scott hired him to rewrite *True Romance's* ending.<sup>47</sup>

The development situation for *Pulp Fiction* becomes even more blurred. Credit for the film reads: Written and Directed by Quentin Tarantino; Stories By Quentin Tarantino and Roger Avary. The original idea for *Pulp Fiction* as three distinct crime stories began as a collaboration between Tarantino and Avary. Tarantino came up with the stories for segment one: Vincent and Jules, and segment three: a bank heist gone wrong -- subsequently rewritten as the separate, feature-length *Reservoir Dogs*. Avary contributed segment two, about a boxer who refuses to throw a fight. He also subsequently rewrote that into a feature-length screenplay titled *Pandemonium Reigns*.

In Avary's account

When Quentin had done *Reservoir Dogs*, he called me up and said, 'Roger, they're offering me all these different projects, but the one thing I gotta do is *Pulp Fiction*.' And I said, 'Great, go to it.' So we went back and we got *Pandemonium Reigns* and we squashed it back down and it became *The Gold Watch*. We took a scene that I had written for *True Romance* and that had been written out of the script (about someone's head being blown off inside a car) and things that Quentin had written for other movies and we just kind of rushed everything together. We got together in Amsterdam and mostly the middle story is mine.<sup>48</sup>

By which Avary means that he wrote the majority of *The Gold Watch*, concerning the boxer Butch (Bruce Willis) and Marsellus Wallace (Ving Rhames), as well as initially coming up with the idea.

According to Dawson, 'Until Avary, too, received an Oscar for his troubles, there had been some doubt as to the extent of his contribution to the overall picture, with a swell of media opinion suggesting that Avary had almost been duped out of his share of the credit.'<sup>49</sup> The decision to award screenwriting Oscars to both was made by the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, in Avary's case based on the 'Stories By' credit.

Avary, because he needed the money, sold his rights in *Pulp Fiction* to Tarantino for Writers Guild minimum and the 'story by' credit. Avary, in fact, responds with equanimity to these events, 'Any decision that I made, I made under counsel, with attorneys and with agents. It was ultimately my decision and made of clear mind and body and I certainly, especially at this point, don't regret anything I've done. Even before I got the Oscar, I didn't regret what happened because the certain sacrifices that I made enabled me to get *Killing Zoe* made.'<sup>50</sup>

Tarantino's version is that

'Roger wrote a script that I wanted to use, so I bought it from him,' Tarantino told the *Los Angeles Times*, rather matter-of-factly. 'Then I came up with all the other ideas and characters and so I adapted his screenplay the way you would adapt a book. But

having said that, I don't want Roger getting credit for monologues. /write the monologues.<sup>51</sup>

Tarantino seems to be referring specifically to the monologue delivered by Christopher Walken which explains the history and importance of the watch for Willis' Butch, passed down from soldier to soldier and father to son. But here, in the case of his collaboration with Avary, Tarantino is much less inclined to embrace or even admit to 'stealing' as artistic practice as he did with *City On Fire*.

Interestingly, the most contentious question of authorship between the two occurs over Tarantino's cameo role in *Sleep With Me* (Rory Kelly, 1994, UA/MGM) in which, at a party, he argues the homoerotic aspects of *Top Gun* (Tony Scott, 1986, Paramount). 'I came up with my own speech. It was a theory me and a friend worked out. *Top Gun* as a gay-theme movie,' he explains in the *New York Times*<sup>52</sup>. And in *The Cinema of Cool*, 'Roger came up with the original theory about it and then the two of us proceeded to perfect it. Like a comedy team, kept expanding on it.'<sup>53</sup>

The normally reticent Avary sharply disagrees, 'That was a routine I came up with. I spent hours trying to convince everybody that it's true....It annoyed me the way I found out about it more than anything. I was in a restaurant with Eric Stoltz [who is in both *Sleep With Me* and *Killing Zoe*] and I was telling him about it and he goes, "Oh my God, Quentin just improvised that".'<sup>54</sup>

Difficulties in distinguishing between kinds of borrowings mark a postmodern problematic. Part of the issue may not be the appropriation per se but its acknowledgment, for instance in the difference between Tarantino's open claim for *City On Fire* and Ezekiel 25:17 versus his denial of Avary's input. From Avary's point of view Tarantino is not always eager to hand out credit where credit is due.<sup>55</sup> The greater dilemma appears to arise with accountable rather than unaccountable appropriation, that is, situations in which accountability in the form of financial tangibles such as fees and shared writing credits are due. Both

Tarantino's work and postmodernism raise issues of what is, and what is not, appropriate appropriation.

Other widely recognised postmodern attributes in Tarantino's work include fragmentation and pastiche. Much has been made of *Pulp Fiction's* piecemeal structure, in which stories stop and restart and time is non-chronological, but this is hardly the first instance of non-linear narrative, a mainstay of avant-garde modernist film throughout its existence. However, the specific quality of *Pulp Fiction's* fragmentation may have frequently been overlooked because of Tarantino's own propensity to compare his films' structure to that of novels.<sup>56</sup> But how *Pulp Fiction's* structure departs from the non-linearity of art films, as Pat Dowell in *Cineaste* points out, 'should be familiar'.

Every day Americans are quite at home with stories that come to a rest, divided into segments to be interrupted by other stories and then resume. The interruptions are called commercials and increasingly they are commercials for other stories both on television and in the movies. Channel surfing also segments the stories we watch. In *Pulp Fiction* Tarantino starts episodes and lets them come to what feel like commercial breaks. The setup scene of Honeybunny and Pumpkin in the coffee shop planning their robbery is exactly like the tease that opens most television shows before the first commercial; audiences don't expect it in a movie and so don't frame it as such, but, after surfing in and out of other episodes, Tarantino eventually returns to it.<sup>57</sup>

Certainly returning to the same show after a suspension in time (usually a week) is another attribute of televisual fragmentation. It is not simply that *Pulp Fiction* is non-linear but that its fragmentation mimics some of the narrative dynamics of television. Or as Carrie Rickey puts it, *Pulp Fiction's* five stories 'dovetail like the subplots on a *Seinfeld* episode.'<sup>58</sup>

Tarantino's films are pastiche in terms of, for instance, their very conscious compilation of historical eras. Discussion of Madonna's lyrics establish *Reservoir Dogs* as set in the 1990s, but the music ('Stuck In The Middle With You') and

other references evoke the 1970s, while the black suits and ties of the cast recall 1950s film noir and gangster films.<sup>59</sup> Equally, the feeling of 'it looks like the 1950s, is set in the 1990s but acts like the 1970s'<sup>60</sup> is repeated in *Pulp Fiction* with its present-time references to McDonald's, Flock of Seagulls, and so on, its casting of 1970s dance icon John Travolta as Vincent Vega, and then setting him in a 1950s retro diner staffed by Buddy Holly and Marilyn Monroe look-alikes and Douglas Sirk-named menu items. Operating in a similar manner is Tarantino's awareness that Bruce Willis as Butch 'has the look of a 50s actor', comparing him to Aldo Ray.<sup>61</sup>

One of Tarantino's most heralded personal characteristics is his memory. Much has been written about his prodigious ability to retain cinematic details.<sup>62</sup> He seems to imbibe films and television, to recollect them whole. The press' most frequently reiterated Tarantino persona is as 'video store geek', due to his abilities of recollection and because he worked at a film aficionado's video rental store in Los Angeles, prior to making films. It was at this store, Video Archives, that he met Avary, another young man who prided himself on his encyclopedic knowledge of film. "When we first met we had a great competition," Avary recalls. "We hated each other. It was *Who knows more?* And he won. Quentin is a database."<sup>63</sup> And Tarantino takes care to set the record straight, 'People think I learned about movies because I worked there. But I worked there because I knew about movies.'<sup>64</sup>

However, his memory extends beyond a capacity for filmic data. "Quentin has a mind for dialogue," says Avary. "He can repeat a conversation you've had ten or fifteen years ago verbatim."<sup>65</sup> As with his *Top Gun* parody in *Sleep With Me*, a good deal of his dialogue originates as conversation, his own and others, which he retains and reformulates. Managing to draft *Reservoir Dogs* in three weeks, Tarantino explains, 'I wrote it real quick, but that's slightly deceptive simply because I had done some homework on it before, but dialogue's real easy for me

to write and since this movie is nearly *all* dialogue it's just getting guys talking to each other and then jotting it down.<sup>166</sup> Tarantino combines a strong ear for dialogue with a strong memory for it as well.

Pat Dowell writes that *Pulp Fiction* 'reproduces the everyday experience of living in a fragmented society, in which each of us must stitch together a coherent narrative out of the bombardment of information and drama that is our daily passage in a market culture.'<sup>167</sup> The significance of Tarantino's skills of retention is precisely his ability to remember, select and condense information in this era of ceaseless visual and aural input. His specific kind of appropriation and referentiality seeks to celebrate or at least to graciously live with the abundance or excess of information surrounding us all. As Amanda Lipman points out, 'For if we are not supposed to empathise with the characters themselves, we cannot help recognizing the junk culture world they inhabit.'<sup>168</sup> The artifacts in this world may not be 'junk' per se -- the information age conveys a lot of useful, valuable material -- but it has the feel of 'junk' in that it is overwhelming, in that it is so difficult to know how to compartmentalise or make sense of it. And this is something Tarantino's texts offer, they help make sense of it all. Rather than empathising with single, conflicted characters as we do with an existentialist text, we connect with the surrounding context, the world Tarantino's characters inhabit. The transition in Tarantino's film is from an individuated, psychological imaginary to a *cultural imaginary*, based on commonality of mediated experience, that is, dependent on shared cultural habitation and memory.

How such a cultural imaginary functions in *Pulp Fiction* can be explored via the presence of John Travolta, both in his casting and in the treatment of his persona within the film. Playing Vincent Vega caused the surprising revival of Travolta's career which had, twenty years previously, seemed unstoppable, but had languished in the last decade with such films as the *Look Who's Talking* series (*Look Who's Talking*, Amy Heckerling, 1989; *Look Who's Talking Too*, Amy



Heckerling, 1991; *Look Who's Talking Now*, Tom Ropelewski, 1992; all Columbia/Tristar). As Martin Amis describes meeting Travolta, 'For me, it was like stepping into a Warhol poster -- a Mao, an Elvis. It was like bumping into Jim Morrison, or Jimi Hendrix. You feel that John Travolta is so iconic that he ought to be dead. And he isn't: not anymore.'<sup>69</sup> Travolta's resurrection in *Pulp Fiction* captured an iconic place he holds in popular culture as well as seeming to retrieve something from the historical past. His presence appropriated double qualities of 'place' in popular culture: elevation and time. For example, Bruce Willis, too, is an iconic cultural figure in his persona as action hero, but he's never 'gone missing'. He's been a consistent presence since the success of *Die Hard* in 1988 (John McTiernan, Twentieth Century Fox). Travolta reached similar heights of popularity as Willis, or exceeded them, but in addition, his presence in *Pulp Fiction* also conveys the sense of *history*, of the popular past retrieved and saved. The casting choice of Travolta is, in itself, a recoument for popular memory, an act of documenting popular history.

Tarantino was a fan of Travolta's from his 1970s films and especially from his performance in *Blow Out*, one of Tarantino's favourites. As Julie Burchill points out, 'Tarantino's specialty is not in *discovering* great new actors, but in giving a second chance to disgraced or neglected ones' in the same way that 'television commercials no longer commission new jingles, but instead use classic pop songs for that instant hit of nostalgia.'<sup>70</sup> It is that 'hit of nostalgia' to which Tarantino is so attuned. A collector of film and television series lunch boxes, figurines and board games, during his 'audition' encounter with Travolta, Tarantino had him play the games from both *Welcome Back, Kotter* (the 1970s television series in which Travolta played Vinnie Barbarino) and *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978, Paramount).<sup>71</sup> Travolta won both rounds which Tarantino attempts to explain away: 'I was thrown off my game on *Welcome Back, Kotter* because I normally play Barbarino.'<sup>72</sup>

Many commentators focus on *Pulp Fiction's* first segment, 'Vincent Vega & Marsellus Wallace's Wife', which begins with Vincent and Jules' early morning hit and ends with Mia Wallace's near overdose, as the film's most successful. They often find Vincent's character to be the lead, or link, across the various stories,<sup>73</sup> and dwell specifically on the dance sequence. For instance, Gavin Smith describes it as 'Mia and Vincent pairing for a cool, beyond-chic twist on the restaurant's dance floor,' and *Mademoiselle's* take is, 'It's hard not to smile when Travolta -- 20 pounds overweight, stringy hair hanging down to his shoulders -- gets up to do the twist with Thurman in a sweet lampoon of his Brooklyn dance-kicking moves.'<sup>74</sup> Travolta's effectiveness in the film rests not only on the fact of his being cast, but equally, on how his persona is treated. While Willis' presence in *Pulp Fiction* plays on the action figure, and Samuel Jackson as Jules is a play on the blaxploitation hero, neither character quite pinpoints the moment of play and persona to the same degree of success as Travolta does when he dances.

It is a more effective send up precisely because he does and does not repeat his past persona. From Amis again:

The rebirth had to be a revamp, a kind of travesty. Accordingly, the physically graceful but emotionally gawky American calf -- Tony/Danny/Bud -- was obliged to reappear as a corrupt and jowelly ruin. This is why the dance scene with Uma Thurman is so central. It is a post-modern *coup de théâtre*. The audience colludes. Every movie goer knows what Travolta can do on a dance floor. Watching his drugged gyrations is like watching the aged Picasso drawing a stickman.<sup>75</sup>

While Amis describes a tone of regret to this scene because of the changes in Travolta over time, it can also be read as a moment of hope for those in the audience who grew up with Travolta and are of his generation. Despite the years and the paunch, one can still remain in the game. In an interview with Travolta, Steven Rea calls the dance sequence 'a sublime set-piece'. 'Slowly, the stoned,

stony-faced Vincent gets into the groove, doing that grinding-out-the-cigarette move as Chuck Berry rocks the speakers.<sup>176</sup> Travolta responds that the scene was an opportunity for him because he was able to do novelty dances and because he is fond of dancing in character. 'I got to be in character...[and] do dances that Vincent and I would have grown up with, do it high -- you know, within the character -- and look the way I did with that gut and that whole thing.' As for the audience, 'they either see what I see, or they go on a memory trip of whatever they want to remember -- *Grease*, *Saturday Night Fever*, *Urban Cowboy*. But everybody wins. It's so satisfying.'<sup>177</sup> It is the similarities *and* differences between the 70s and 90s Travolta personas, all in play at this moment on the dance floor, that gives the sequence its affect and poignancy.

Further, it is not solely that Travolta dances, but *how* he dances. Burchill suggests, 'The only possible improvement one could make to this section would be to have Thurman and Travolta dance, not to Chuck Berry, but to the Bee Gees, or even You're The One That I Want; though perhaps the fact that Tarantino resisted this is to his credit.'<sup>178</sup> Indeed, it is precisely the scene's minimalist quality that is so much a part of its affect. It is a moment, not of excess, but of discretion: 'You brace yourself for a big Travolta moment. Will he nip to the men's room and come back in a white suit and black shirt? Will he roll his hands and point at the glitter ball? No way; the two of them take to the floor and quietly twist, while the camera stands to one side, snatches a couple of closeups, then fades them out halfway through. It's a triumph of discretion, the only one in the movie.'<sup>179</sup>

Indeed, the sequence is surprisingly understated, lasting a minute and 45 seconds through the chorus and two verses of Chuck Berry's 'You Never Can Tell', before fading out at the beginning of the refrain to the chorus. The camera work is equally circumspect, composed of only four shots: wide shot with the two twisting which is held for a while, until Travolta does his up-on-his-toes move. Cut to a medium close shot which starts on Travolta then pans to and holds on

Thurman; the camera drifts back to Travolta as if it is going to settle on him, then immediately pans back to Thurman and holds on her as she does the Swim. Cut to a close-up of Travolta doing the Batman then pan to Thurman doing the same, which then widens to a medium shot of Travolta twisting, tilts down to his feet and keeps moving to Thurman's feet. Cut to a medium shot of Thurman which dollies right to include Travolta, holds on the two for a moment, then drifts back to a solo shot of Thurman as the scene fades out from there.

Initially puzzling, the camera stays on Thurman for as much or even more time than on Travolta. And it is Thurman who gets the solo number when the two return to the Wallace residence. But the camera choices make sense if one recalls that Thurman, a 90s star, appeals to the twenty-something audience of the film, while Travolta resonates for its forty-something viewers. The two dancing together is an intergenerational moment of viewing pleasure, a shared cultural meeting ground. For the forty-something viewers, the high point of 'Vincent Vega & Marsellus Wallace's Wife' is Travolta's resurrection as he dances. For the twenty-something audience, the story's high point is Thurman's resurrection with a hypodermic needle to her heart.

Further, the restrained quality of the dance sequence, its 'triumph of discretion', leaves us wanting more; we are not satisfied, certainly not satiated. It retains its moment or state of longing, the *desire* that is nostalgia. It is the *desire* to revisit a certain time or event that is so critical to the structure of feeling that is nostalgia, not the revisiting itself.

Although frequently described as such, Travolta's presence in the dance scene is not really a parody (while displaying it to excess would have made it so), but rather an immersion in a moment of popular memory. The affectionate mood of the scene, its 'sweet lampoon', lacks the critical distance necessary for satire or parody; its 'sweetness' conveys the engagement and the play involved in revisiting. The irony of the distant, circumspect camera is that it helps create the

opposite affect -- not the critical distance of satire and parody, but the pleasures and immediacy of immersion.

It is appropriate that this older, now overweight 70s icon dances to Chuck Berry in the 1950s aura of Jackrabbit Slim's with a 1990s movie star partner. The scene encapsulates, plays on and immerses itself in popular memory. As a site and citation of cultural recollection it is not only deeply nostalgic, but one could well add, *about* nostalgia. Because it is so deeply embedded in shared cultural memory, the discursive effect of *Pulp Fiction* is nostalgia, seemingly at odds with its striking 'contemporariness' -- but this is another paradox of certain manifestations of postmodernism. There is a running thread within postmodernism, so 'futuristic' in its outlook, that is deeply nostalgic.

For instance, Jean Baudrillard describes a new uncertainty of meaning, free floating and indeterminate. 'All the great humanist criteria of value, all the values of a civilisation of moral, aesthetic, and practical judgement, vanish in our system of images and signs.'<sup>80</sup> Despite his disclaimer that postmodernity is neither 'optimistic nor pessimistic', Baudrillard paints a bleak and nostalgic picture of what remains for the 'survivors' of modernity.

Suddenly there is a curve in the road, a turning point. Somewhere, the real scene has been lost, the scene where you had rules for the game and some solid stakes that everyone could rely on.<sup>81</sup>

One wonders, here, who is meant by 'everyone'. Just how inclusive were those rules and 'solid stakes that everyone could rely on'?

Similarly, Fredric Jameson describes postmodern culture as one which displays 'an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history.'<sup>82</sup> Jameson argues that postmodernism is ahistorical because 'it is incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current experiences,' remaining instead, 'condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about that

past, which itself remains forever out of reach.<sup>183</sup> The mediated, pastiche quality of the postmodern appears to delimit our ability to locate ourselves historically because, unlike modernity, *originality* and *authenticity* are no longer possible. Those modernist qualities are apparently a prerequisite for access to a 'real', and so, the historical. Instead, history is destined to be replaced in postmodernity by nostalgia *as* the future.

But it could be argued as easily, in opposition to Jameson's position, that the postmodern, by identifying work in terms of its diversity -- calling attention to its time, place, and voices of origin -- *historicises*, precisely by removing cultural knowledges from the abstract realms of the universal, the absolute, and the eternal. As Leela Gandhi notes, a postcolonial/poststructuralist intervention focusses 'on "history" as the grand narrative through which Eurocentrism is "totalised" as the proper account of all humanity.'<sup>184</sup> If Jameson is right that one wave of postmodernism is about nostalgia, the stream that perhaps most concerns him, Baudrillard, and Tarantino, if they themselves are nostalgic for a vanishing series of 'rules' and 'solid stakes', their position does not represent all potential currents in postmodernity. A postmodern historicism might well be the representation of otherness and the accounting of difference and diversity.

For if *Pulp Fiction*, in its postmodern countenance, is deeply nostalgic, we must also ask what it is nostalgic *for*. Here we return to its modernist, auteurist roots, to the similar ground covered by both Scorsese and Tarantino. This brings us, once again, to Paul Shrader's contention that 'Tarantino is Scorsese with quote marks around him', and just how this is so.

As John Fried rightly observes in *Cineaste*, because *Pulp Fiction* refuses to conform to the contours of humanist moralism, with its sins and redemptions (as Stone attempts to do with *Natural Born Killers*), this does not, therefore, make the text *apolitical*. 'In fact, it is precisely the film's play on classic *film noir*, blaxploitation, and kung fu films, among other action genres, that leads one

directly to the core of its power politics: masculinity and the anxiety of the male hero.<sup>85</sup> Tarantino's texts dwell repeatedly on the codes of masculinity and the pleasures of male community, from the identical, trendy 'uniform' of black suit, white shirt and black tie signalling membership in a certain club, to the hip hit partnership of Vincent and Jules.

*Reservoir Dogs* abounds in references to masculinity: about being or failing to be a 'real man'. Lack of sufficient masculinity is often couched in terms of femininity, homosexuality or infancy. For instance, just before undercover cop Mr. Orange (Tim Roth) goes to meet with the other gang members to plan the diamond robbery, he pauses to look at himself in the mirror, saying, to bolster his courage, 'Don't pussy out on me now. They don't know. They don't know shit. You're not gonna get hurt. You're fucking Baretta. They believe every word cause you're supercool.' As he gets into the waiting car we watch from the point of view of a tailing police vehicle and listen to the comments of its offscreen occupants:

Cop V/O #1: There goes our boy.

Cop V/O #2: I swear, the guy has to have rocks in his head the size of Gibraltar to work undercover.

Cop V/O #1: Do you want one of these?

Cop V/O #2: Yeah, give me the bear claw.

Their exchange serves to contradict the comment about undercover work, revealing Mr. Orange not to be crazy but the 'real' cop. They might have the pastry; but he's got the testosterone.

When, after the robbery gone bad, Mr. Blonde (Michael Madsen) arrives at the warehouse, the designated meeting place, he finds Mr. White (Harvey Keitel) and Mr. Pink (Steve Buscemi) shouting at each other, guns drawn. Mr. Blonde calls a halt to their fighting by rendering them children, 'You kids shouldn't play so rough; somebody's gonna start crying.'

At the core of *Reservoir Dogs* is a love story of sorts, between Mr. Orange and Mr. White, two mismatched guys from opposite sides of the tracks (one cop,

one robber). The events of the film test their identities as professionals and as men. Indeed, the story is based on their identities as men coming into conflict with their self-constructions as professionals.

Although positioned on opposite sides of the law, the two adhere to strict, and similar, codes of behaviour based on notions of what it means to be a 'professional'. Mr. White, a seasoned pro, complains about Mr. Blonde who screws up the robbery when he begins shooting people, 'What you're supposed to do is act like a fucking professional. A psychopath isn't a professional. I can't work with a psychopath. You don't know what those sick assholes are gonna do next.' In Mr. White's world, as in that of the police, you shoot only in self-protection, to control the situation, and to accomplish the mission. Both sides are playing the same wargame in a world populated by three categories of people: cops, robbers, and 'real people' or civilians:

Mr. Pink: I tagged a couple of cops. Did you kill anybody?

Mr. White: A few cops.

Mr. Pink: No real people?

Mr. White: Just cops.

The two sides simply have a different version of who the 'bad guy' is. For the cops it is the robbers; for the robbers it is the informer in their midst.

Within these strictures of professionalism, a crucial value, because necessary to the success of the mission, is loyalty. We see this in Marvin (Kirk Baltz), the cop Mr. Blonde disfigures; despite being beaten and then tortured he does not reveal, although he knows, that Mr. Orange is the 'rat' in their midst, who set them up for the bungled robbery and can now identify them. But within the code of masculinity, loyalty is elevated *beyond* a component of professionalism to a transcending virtue in its own right. It is loyalty that comes closest to love in this world view.

Strictly speaking, Mr. Pink is the 'winner' of the story's events -- he survives with his life and escapes with the diamonds. But he is not the most honourable of



the characters; indeed, of the group who makes it to the warehouse he may be the least admirable or honourable -- motivated by codes of professionalism, yes, but not by loyalty. As he says to Mr. White, when he learns that White has told the wounded Mr. Orange his first name, Larry, and where he's from, 'You're acting like a first year fucking thief; I'm acting like a professional.' And Mr. Pink is correct. In opening up to Mr. Orange, in telling him his name and later protecting him at all costs, Mr. White acts out of sentiment, not professionalism. But we are meant to relate to Mr. White's character, not Mr. Pink's, because it is the former who takes the code of masculinity to its purest, highest levels, who lives for the ideals of the code itself, and no longer simply for the material gains reaped by adherence to the code. This is a very romantic view of masculinity in its willingness to place loyalty above all else, above and beyond professionalism, above even personal survival. And so fittingly, other aspects of the relationship between Mr. Orange and Mr. White are embedded in the discourse of romanticism.

The most overtly homoerotic relationship in the film is between Nice Guy Eddie (Chris Penn) and Mr. Blonde, a relationship based on (ultimately self-destructive) loyalty. But the most tender, loving -- and blindly loyal -- relationship is that between Mr. Orange and Mr. White. Immediately following the opening credits there is an abrupt cut to Mr. Orange wounded and bleeding in the back seat of a car, in the aftermath of the robbery gone wrong. We hold on him as he grasps the hand of an off-camera person who attempts to talk him through his fear and pain. The camera pans right, across their clasped hands, to reveal Mr. White in the front seat, driving. This is the first view we have of Mr. White in the scene -- as an extension of their entwined and clasped hands.

When they reach the warehouse, as Mr. White helps Mr. Orange inside he infantilises him by cooing, 'Who's a tough guy? Come on, who's a tough guy?' and 'We made it. We fucking make it. Look where we are', using the words and

intonations of baby talk. Once he is lying down, still bleeding profusely, Orange confesses to White that he is scared -- outside the bounds of usual masculine admissibility -- and asks White to hold him. White cradles him like a sick lover: Orange in the protected, traditionally female, diminished position in the lower portion of the frame of coupled embraces. At one moment, White whispers in Orange's ear -- we cannot hear what -- and Orange laughs, the gestures of a shared lovers' secret. White tells him, 'You go ahead and be scared. You've been brave enough for one day,' suggesting that the reprieve from the strict boundaries of permissible masculine behaviour helps unite the two.

Their relationship culminates at the end of the film when Joe (Lawrence Tierney) draws a gun on Mr. Orange, believing him to be the police informer. White draws his gun on Joe: 'Joe, you're making a terrible mistake. I'm not gonna let you make it.' Nice Guy Eddie, Joe's son, aims his gun at Mr. White. White: 'Joe, if you kill that man you die next. Repeat, if you kill that man you die next.' And indeed, they all shoot each other.

White has erred in trusting Orange, in allowing his feelings to supersede his code of professionalism. Orange has transgressed the code of his profession, too: by watching without acting when White shoots and kills two policemen through the windshield of their car (and continuing to care about White afterwards nonetheless); in being shot by a woman whose car they hijack, and killing her in response, although she's a civilian, a 'real person', who cannot be expected to know, be accountable to, or live by their codes.

And now, at the end of the film, Orange commits the ultimate transgression. A badly wounded White crawls over to Orange and embraces him, cradling him lovingly and protectively, although he too is shot. Orange embraces him in return and then *admits* he is a cop. Until this moment he has never blown his cover, not as he watched while fellow officers were killed, not in order to save himself in the immediate aftermath of the bungled robbery. But here, when he is *virtually* free

and clear, when the cops have arrived at the warehouse, signalling his rescue, he confesses to White. Not out of necessity, duress, or a sense of professionalism -- quite the contrary. Out of an act of loyalty to White, honesty in exchange for the other's trust in him, he tells White, 'I'm a cop, Larry. It's true, Larry, I'm a cop.' His hand cradling one side of Orange's face, his gun aimed directly at the other side, White, crying and moaning, says 'Sorry' as he shoots Orange and the cops shoot him. Both have sacrificed themselves out of loyalty to and love for the other.

The cumulative affect of the film's central relationship does not read as a comedy of errors, as a parody of this display of excessive masculinity. In its romanticism, there is something we are meant to view as supposedly tragically or ennoblingly heroic in this mutual self-sacrifice. This is the tale and the tone of two star-crossed lovers dying in each other's arms.

Within a similar paradigm of masculinity, the segment in which Vincent escorts Mia Wallace for the evening in *Pulp Fiction* is actually an interaction between Vincent and Marsellus. This is made evident in the segment's title: 'Vincent Vega & Marsellus Wallace's Wife,' not Vincent Vega & Mia Wallace. Here Mia is the extension of her husband, serving as the vehicle for interaction between the two men: the boss, the film's most powerful male; and the hero, the character for whom we feel (along with Jules) the greatest empathic connection. If we do not 'identify' with him in normative narrative terms, we at least journey through much of the story via Vincent's perspective.

What *Pulp Fiction* introduces beyond *Reservoir Dogs* are the links between masculine identity and power. The subtextual tension, including sexual, surrounding Vincent's 'date' with Mia is set up by the story of Marsellus' past behaviour towards underlings who have shown excessive affection towards his wife -- purportedly having a man thrown out of a fourth floor window for giving Mia a foot massage.

Vincent works for Marsellus; Marsellus calls the shots. And Mia makes Marsellus' power clear, and by transference her own, over the twist contest, for instance, when Vincent initially resists participating: 'I do believe Marsellus, my husband, your boss, told you to take me out and do whatever I wanted. Now, I want to dance. I want to win. I want that trophy.' The code of professionalism and honour among men/gangsters prohibits Vincent having sex with his boss' wife. But even more so, given Marsellus' track record and greater power over Vincent, self-preservation mitigates against doing so. And so Vincent stands in the bathroom, arguing with himself not to sleep with Mrs. Wallace, just at the moment that she is in the living room overdosing on his heroin. But the imbalance of power is remedied, at least symbolically, when Vincent drives a hypodermic needle straight into Mia's heart, the adrenaline the cure for her overdose, and does so with enough force and aggression (and excitement for the audience) to get back at her for having power over him, for Marsellus having power over him, and so not being able to fuck her in the first place.

The links between practices of masculinity and power are made even more apparent in the film's next segment, 'The Gold Watch'. That the watch itself is a symbol of masculinity is made clear in the recounting of its history by Captain Koons (Christopher Walken) in which, as John Fried notes, we are told 'how at the end of each war it passed from man to man, literally from ass to ass -- and how it is now Butch's turn to guard the grail of masculinity.'<sup>186</sup>

Although enemies, Marsellus out to kill Butch, when the two are captured by a pair of 'redneck' S/M homosexuals, Maynard and Zed (Duane Whitaker and Peter Greene), with intent to torture and sodomise, Butch turns back from his close escape in order to *rescue* Marsellus. He does so ostensibly out of honour and solidarity: the 'honour of thieves' and the solidarity between two men who, although enemies but like the cops and robbers in *Reservoir Dogs*, share similar

codes of behaviour within a common framework of existence. And Butch also turns back because the two men share the solidarity of heterosexuality.

The greatest threat to heterosexist masculinity is homosexuality, and it is this peril that the two must now jointly confront.<sup>87</sup> The incident causes them to bond as 'men', certainly, but not via their achievements; rather, through their humiliation in Marsellus' case and near-humiliation in Butch's instance.

However, this is also the moment when Butch can turn the tables of power and exact his retaliation on Marsellus. That is, exert the superiority of his own masculinity. Previously Marsellus had greater power over Butch (ordering him to throw a fight; having him hunted down when Butch does not). Now Butch gains the upper hand because it is Marsellus who has been sodomised and not Butch. Because Butch *knows* the disgrace that undermines Marsellus' masculinity. For it is Marsellus' masculinity that serves as his foundation of power and authority, the seat of his rule as boss. And indeed, the two strike a bargain. In exchange for Butch's 'vow of silence', Marsellus allows him to escape with his life, and with Marsellus' money.

Tarantino and Avarly, amongst others, celebrate what Scorsese celebrates - the 'legit' society of men whether on the right side of the law or not (usually not). As Amy Taubin argues about recent gay films, particularly the work of Greg Araki (*The Living End*, 1992) and Tom Kalin (*Swoon*, 1992), the new 'queer cinema has much more in common with male violence films (with Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* or Nick Gomez's *Laws of Gravity*, for example) that it does with any feminist cinema. Like Tarantino and Gomez, Araki and Kalin are also the sons of Scorsese, whose films define and critique masculinity through violence but also make Robert De Niro a homoerotic object of desire.<sup>88</sup> Such 'male violence films' share a continuous thread, a common emphasis, not disrupted by generation.

And while it might be argued that Tarantino parodies the excesses of masculine behaviour (everyone dying at the end of *Reservoir Dogs*; the high absurdity of Maynard and Zed; the Captain Koons/gold watch monologue), 'There is more going on here than a simple play on the artifice of masculinity. With each pathological twist and turn of its plot, the film reveals its preoccupation with the necessity to protect the boundaries of masculinity,'<sup>89</sup> just as Scorsese's films, in Taubin's words above, 'define and critique' it. In both instances, masculinity is being updated, modernised (or postmodernised) for contemporary usage.

Tarantino is right in acknowledging that the codes of masculinity used in Scorsese's modernist or existential texts no longer encapsulate the current moment as they once did, and so he updates them with, for instance, the quotidian, pop culture conversation of his gangsters. Or to be more accurate, that such existential heroes no longer exist as they were *believed to* in the modernist world and within the modernist text. However, Tarantino realises they can still be *longed for* or *fantasised* within a postmodern practice of nostalgia as the future.

So *Pulp Fiction* both mourns the loss of and celebrates the modernist male, and in so doing, attempts to update him. 'Although *Pulp Fiction* certainly revels in deconstructing codes of masculinity, a surfeit of macho images and rhetoric still permeate the film, gratifying spectators who long nostalgically for traditional heroes.'<sup>90</sup> For 'traditional' hero, read heterosexist, white male. The sweet sentiment of nostalgia shapes itself as a paean to the loss of the pleasures of male community: the good old days of wars, westerns and gangsters -- the guys.

The problem is that both these concepts of 'reality' represented by Scorsese and Tarantino -- modernist or postmodernist; existential or ironic -- are circumscribed. They are composed of an overemphasis on a male code of ethics, and on masculinity as generalisable identity. Masculine identity (white, heterosexual) becomes universally applicable, conveyed by the power of art. The presence of the auteur as cultural visionary and spokesperson elevates a

*particular* world view to the heights of universal truth, which then becomes the model and meaning for 'everyone'. While in fact, it is only a narrow paradigm of reality -- only one potential model out of a much larger spectrum of possibilities. But the rest of the spectrum is overlooked in that process of elevation to artistic genius in which the auteur becomes spokesperson for 'his' entire era. What is constructed within a very specific framework is then too easily interpreted as the entirety.

While Tarantino's work does indeed pinpoint or mark an important cultural shift, the transition from modern to postmodern representation, it does so only within the narrow, and exclusionary, framework of masculinity and the valorisation of auteurism. Within this frame, *some* world views, *some* experiences, *some* personal truths count, to be elevated to the universal. Such a convergence of auteurism and the dominance of masculine identity are then mistaken for the defining truths of, in the instance of Tarantino, what postmodern culture is or might be.

This becomes clear in the issues surrounding race raised by Tarantino's work. For of course there is another dynamic at work in the power plays between Vincent and Marsellus, and between Marsellus and Butch. In this world of masculine supremacy as it is fantasised, it is not surprising that the white man proves more powerful than the black man, in the face of the threat the black man poses, nor is it surprising who is 'actually' sodomised.

As much as his depictions of violence, Tarantino's representations of race have provoked controversy. Praised in some quarters for his prominent African-American characters -- Jules in *Pulp Fiction*, Pam Grier as *Jackie Brown* -- he is reviled elsewhere for his racist dialogue and racial epithets.

Tarantino's own position towards race seems, initially, both curious and contradictory. On the one hand, screenwriter L.M. Kit Carson's comment that *Reservoir Dogs* was a real 'white guy movie' was apparently extended, and

received, as a compliment.<sup>91</sup> And in *Pulp Fiction*, in the segment 'The Bonnie Situation', Tarantino, as the character Jimmy, gives *himself* some of the nastiest, racist language in the film. 'Several writers (J. Hoberman first, I think) have noted already that Tarantino has given himself a role in which he gets to throw the word "nigger" around, and, I might add, "*dead nigger*" at that. Strangely racist as that may seem, the personal appropriation for the director represents, I think, the wannabe posturing of a hip white guy.'<sup>92</sup> There is, as Dowell points out, too much 'wannabe'<sup>93</sup> in Jimmy's character and Tarantino's persona to write either off as motivated by stock 'white guy' racism. The character Jimmy is friends with Jules, and it turns out, in the briefest of shots, is married to a black woman. This makes it more difficult to know, as a consequence, how to accept his language usage. Does his friendship and marriage make him 'black' by extension and so use of the word 'nigger' is somehow okay? Or are we meant to read the text in such a way that his close relationships with African Americans make him 'alright' (that is, nonracist) *despite* his repeated use of the word? Equally puzzling is why Jules seems so fearful of Jimmy, the only character in the film who renders Jules nervous and whom he attempts to placate.

As for Tarantino, his work is too filled with the affects and details of black culture, too immersed in it, to write him off as simply prejudicially dismissive of this 'other'. Dowell suggests that '*Pulp Fiction* fancies itself postracist', that is, 'beyond tacky social problems like racism.'<sup>94</sup> But he may be closer to the mark in describing Tarantino's representations of race as 'the wannabe posturing of a hip white guy.'

Devon Jackson, writing in the *Village Voice*, describes himself as very similar to Tarantino (in race, age, background), except he is offended by the filmmaker's depictions of race which he attributes entirely to a 'wannabe' mentality, 'In his world, blacks are the epitome of cool; as are their language and style; hence, "nigga" is a cool word. Put all of the above into the character who is



white and that white person becomes ultracool.<sup>195</sup> Jackson calls Tarantino's vision of race a 'training manual on how to appropriate nigga culture -- its imagination, style, and form.'<sup>196</sup>

Tarantino's harshest critic on this issue is Spike Lee who argues very similar points about the former's representations of race. He complains about the excessive use of the word 'nigger' in *Jackie Brown*, *Pulp Fiction* and *Reservoir Dogs*, saying, 'I want Quentin to know that all African-Americans do not think that word is trendy or slick.' Lee adds, hitting on the 'wannabe' accusation, 'What does he want to be made -- an honorary black man?'<sup>197</sup> Apparently so, according to Tarantino's defense in response. 'I think as a writer, I have the right to create my characters, and I should be hindered only by my talent. I have a talent for writing black characters, because they are me. And I know the truth of me.'<sup>198</sup>

At stake, then, is not only the propriety of certain word usage, but Tarantino's claim that he has a talent for writing black characters because he is them. What is in contestation here is the *appropriation of identity*. It is not only the use of the word 'nigger', but *how* it is used and who gets to use it, especially in the instance of a white man 'posturing' as black. This can be likened to gay and lesbian reappropriations of the word -- and meanings -- of 'queer'. Who gets to use it, in what contexts, and with what significances? The issue becomes clearer when considering the different contexts of usage in various Tarantino films. Although used and disapproved of in *Reservoir Dogs*, the word 'nigger' did not spark the same controversy as did its use in *Pulp Fiction* and *Jackie Brown*. In *Reservoir Dogs* it can be read as spoken by a bunch of racist, sexist, homophobic white guys sitting around talking 'in character'. In *Pulp Fiction*, however, it is spoken across races by Jules to Vincent and by Jimmy to Jules, who accepts it without apparent reaction. Therefore, it appears to be giving tacit approval, on the part of blacks (represented by Jules), for white usage.

Appropriation or consumption of others' identities as postmodern practice is a legitimate threat. In this era of much ballyhooed 'border crossings', it is critical to consider which borders are being traversed, belonging to whom, traversed by whom, and on what bases. Fatima Mernissi's analogy at the head of this chapter of peeling an onion to get at multiple layers of truths, told to her by her grandmother, is a reminder that postmodernism did not 'invent' multiplicity of meanings nor relational knowledge.

Mernissi grew up in a harem in Fez, Morocco in the 1940s and 1950s. She describes a harem as a domestic unit of extended family which 'carried on the tradition of women's seclusion.' 'What defines it as a harem is not polygamy, but the men's desire to seclude their wives, and their wish to maintain an extended household rather than break into nuclear units.'<sup>99</sup> The front gate of the harem or household, guarded by a doorkeeper, is one of many *hudud* or Islamic sacred frontiers -- boundaries, borders or limits not to be crossed, in this instance, by women. *Hudud* might be geographically material as in the harem's front gate or a frontier 'in the mind of the powerful.'<sup>100</sup> But despite the restriction, 'women dreamed of trespassing all the time. The world beyond the gate was their obsession.'<sup>101</sup> For women to cross the frontier marked by the household gate was to 'trespass', to step into a world in which they were not invited or permitted -- the *Dreams of Trespass* of Mernissi's title -- moving into forbidden spaces and places.

In the current postmodern play with the concept of 'border crossings', it is of course a myth to assume that open borders exist for the less powerful. Those who advocate the fluid crossing of borders of identity, often fail to consider whether the frontiers they cite are reciprocal -- equally open to both sides. While the less powerful seem to well understand that their movement into a coloniser's territory is viewed as trespassing, culturally endowed postmodern 'border crossers' frequently forget that their own journeys into the identity formations of others may

not be welcomed as the free and open transversal they posit it to be. These are not dreams, but acts of trespass.

Mernissi's perspective mapped onto the territory *Pulp Fiction* carves out for itself serves as a reminder that the usurpation or appropriation of other cultural positions even when, perhaps especially when, self-consciously apprehended as a compliment -- wannabeism or homage -- does not equate to the creation of a heterogeneous, pluralistic society. At the turn from the 20th to the 21st century, fear of the loss of mastery over grand narratives such as masculinity is not, by far, the only possible conception of a postmodern world. For some, postmodernism may mark a nostalgia for a specific past; for others, however, history is only now being created in the contours of heterogeneous postmodern identities.

Postmodern narrativity -- in the complex sense of representational and cultural/historical discourses invoked in combination -- will continue to play a significant role in the make-up of independent film. What is left open to question, however, are the forms such a postmodern independent cinema might take. Will it remain largely an expression of the loss of and the longing for universal mastery (auteurist and masculine)? This may prove so if, as in *Pulp Fiction's* case, a postmodern narrative trajectory is based on the appropriation of other cultures. Or rather, how well might postmodern narrativity express a plurally identified society -- a world of otherness and difference? Such an alternative depends on the ability of independent film to participate in the construction of discursive structures which enable multiple identities to simultaneously and inclusively co-exist, that is, an independent cinema which puts into practice a more fully heterogeneous conceptualisation of representational and cultural production.

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- <sup>1</sup> Interview on *Moving Pictures*, aired 12 March 1995, BBC2.
- <sup>2</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1994, p. 61.
- <sup>3</sup> Manohla Dargis, 'Foreword', *Pulp Fiction: A Quentin Tarantino Screenplay*, New York: Hyperion, 1994, no page number given.
- <sup>4</sup> For instance, Gavin Smith in *Film Comment* argues that *Reservoir Dogs* will 'prove pivotal in the history of the American independent film, for legitimizing its relationship to Hollywood genre.' Gavin Smith, 'Quentin Tarantino', *Film Comment*, vol. 30, no. 4 (July 1994), p. 32.
- <sup>5</sup> Jane Hamsher, *Killer Instinct*, New York: Broadway Books, 1997, p. 138.
- <sup>6</sup> Jeff Dawson, *Quentin Tarantino: The Cinema of Cool*, New York: Applause, 1995, p. 122.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.
- <sup>8</sup> Jane Hamsher, p. 135.
- <sup>9</sup> Gavin Smith, 'Oliver Stone: Why Do I Have to Provoke?', *Sight and Sound*, December 1994, p. 9.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> Jeff Soffley, 'Stone's Method Only Shatters His Message', and Jennifer Myers, 'Young Viewers May Not Perceive the Satire', *Los Angeles Times*, 12 September 1994, p. F3; Kenneth Turan, 'Stone Removes the Gloves in *Killers*', *Los Angeles Times*, 26 August 1994, p. B8.
- <sup>12</sup> J. Hoberman, 'True Romance', *Village Voice*, 30 August 1994, p. 41.
- <sup>13</sup> Alexander Walker, 'Banning the Bloodshed Denies our Freedom', *Evening Standard*, 3 November 1994, p. 45.
- <sup>14</sup> The films were (in screening order): *Ride in the Whirlwind* (Monte Hellman, 1965), *Assault on Precinct 13* (John Carpenter, 1976), *One-Eyed Jacks* (Marlon Brando, 1961), *Casualties of War* (Brian De Palma, 1989), *Le Doulos* (Jean-Pierre Melville, 1962), *Magnificent Obsession* (Douglas Sirk, 1954), *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940), *Bande à part* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1964), *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976), *Blow Out* (Brian De Palma, 1981), *Rio Bravo* (Howard Hawks, 1958), *Pulp Fiction*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (Charles Barton, 1948), *Winchester 73* (Anthony Mann, 1950), *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (Sergio Leone, 1966), *The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982), *A Bout de souffle* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1960), *Breathless* (Jim McBride, 1983). Presumably the NFT had Tarantino select a programme of his favourites in lieu of being able to do a retrospective of the director's work.
- <sup>15</sup> 'Quentin Tarantino's Choice', National Film Theatre/British Film Institute, p. 4.
- <sup>16</sup> Greg Williams, *Esquire*, British edition, November 1994, p. 32.
- <sup>17</sup> Julie Burchill, 'Blood out of Stone', *The Sunday London Times*, 26 February 1995, Section 10, p. 7.
- <sup>18</sup> J. Hoberman, *Village Voice*, p. 41.
- <sup>19</sup> Fintan O'Toole, 'Bloody Minded', *The London Guardian*, 3 February 1995, pp. 16-17.
- <sup>20</sup> Henry A. Giroux, 'Pulp Fiction and the Culture of Violence', *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 65, no. 2 (Summer 1995), p. 306.

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- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 309.
- <sup>22</sup> Stone's version of the instructions he gave for the rewriting of the script is as follows: 'I want to expand the script for more of a social political commentary about the 90s, more about Mickey and Mallory [versus Wayne Gayle] and more about violence and aggression and the implications of violence in this century.' Jeff Dawson, p. 132.
- <sup>23</sup> Kate Alderson, 'After Quentin, The Rest is Pulp', *The London Times*, 30 January 1995, p. 13.
- <sup>24</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Hal Foster (ed.), Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983, pp. 112-113.
- <sup>25</sup> Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, p. 131.
- <sup>26</sup> Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 27.
- <sup>27</sup> Madan Sarup, p. 131.
- <sup>28</sup> Fredric Jameson, p. 114.
- <sup>29</sup> Madan Sarup, p. 144.
- <sup>30</sup> Leela Gandhi, p. 49.
- <sup>31</sup> Carrie Rickey, 'Tarantino Mashes Mirth, Mayhem Into a Postmodern Pulp', *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 14 October 1994, p. W3.
- <sup>32</sup> Amanda Lipman, 'Pulp Fiction', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 4, no. 11 (November 1994), p. 51. See also Pat Dowell in *Cineaste* who makes no distinction between Jules' conversion and other events in the film. 'Pulp Fiction's various protagonists succeed and fail on a relatively random basis that has little to do with their actions. Most of what they do doesn't make a difference in their destinies (since life is like a box of chocolates). A pothole or a trip to the bathroom at the wrong moment means life or death (more than once for Vincent Vega), or a kid's bad aim with a handgun becomes a miracle for Jules.' Pat Dowell, 'Pulp Friction: Two Shots at Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*', *Cineaste*, vol. 21, no. 3 (July 1995), p. 5.
- <sup>33</sup> Interview with Paul Shrader, *Moving Pictures*, aired BBC2, 12 March 1995.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>35</sup> Pam Cook, 'Cape Fear and Femininity as Destructive Power', in *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader*, Pam Cook and Philip Dodd (eds), London: Scarlet Press, 1994, p. 132.
- <sup>36</sup> Richard Corliss in *Time* argues that filmmakers like Tarantino, Tom Kalin, Stacy Cochran, Abel Ferrara and Hal Hartley, 'follow the lead of Joel and Ethan Coen's *Blood Simple* (1984), which targeted as its audience the cinema intelligentsia bored with both the languid pace of European festival films and the exhausted formulas of Hollywood. These movie-goers wanted a little kick with their chic. To their rescue ride the art-house outlaws.' Richard Corliss, 'Adding Kick To the Chic', *Time*, 16 November 1992, p. 95.
- <sup>37</sup> Amanda Lipman, *Sight and Sound*, p. 51.
- <sup>38</sup> Beverly Lowry, 'Criminals Rendered in 3 Parts, Poetically', *New York Times*, 11 September 1994, Section 2, p. 28.
- <sup>39</sup> Jeff Dawson, p. 90. On the similarities between *Reservoir Dogs* and *City On Fire* see also Pat Dowell, *Cineaste*, pp. 4-5.

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- <sup>40</sup> Jeff Dawson, p. 91.
- <sup>41</sup> Although as noted in Chapter Two, appropriation is also an attribute of modernism, for instance, in the work of T.S. Eliot or Cubist paintings.
- <sup>42</sup> Carrie Rickey, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, p. W3.
- <sup>43</sup> David Ansen, 'The Redemption of Pulp', *Newsweek*, 10 October 1994, p. 71.
- <sup>44</sup> Cited in Jeff Dawson, p. 89.
- <sup>45</sup> Cited in Frank Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution In Music*, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970, p. 12.
- <sup>46</sup> Jeff Dawson, p. 124; Jane Hamsher, p. 26.
- <sup>47</sup> Jeff Dawson, p. 107.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- <sup>52</sup> Beverly Lowry, *New York Times*, p. 27.
- <sup>53</sup> Jeff Dawson, p. 202.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>56</sup> Beverly Lowry, *New York Times*, p. 28; Jeff Dawson, pp. 68 & 141.
- <sup>57</sup> Pat Dowell, *Cineaste*, p. 4. *Pulp Fiction's* narrative fragmentation could also, arguably, be viewed as a 'cheat' in the Vincent story line. Tarantino takes the narrative risk of killing off one his main characters, yet provides the audience with the impression that he is alive and well, at film's end, as he leaves the diner with Jules.
- <sup>58</sup> Carrie Rickey, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, p. W3.
- <sup>59</sup> That the wardrobe had more to do with evoking a 50s filmic ambiance rather than invoking realism is expressed by *Reservoir Dogs'* crime consultant and cast member, Eddie Bunker, regarding the identifiability of the gang: 'I mean it was absurd. There were these guys going to pull this big robbery and they're sitting in a coffee shop all dressed alike.' Jeff Dawson, p. 79.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- <sup>61</sup> Manohla Dargis, 'Pulp Instincts', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 4, no. 5 (May 1994), p. 10.
- <sup>62</sup> For instance, *Vanity Fair* declaring that Tarantino arguably knows more 'about movies than any other person on the planet.' Lynn Hirschenberg, 'Tarantino Bravo', *Vanity Fair*, July 1994, p. 96.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>65</sup> Jeff Dawson, p. 35.
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- <sup>67</sup> Pat Dowell, *Cineaste*, p. 5.
- <sup>68</sup> Amanda Lipman, *Sight and Sound*, p. 51.
- <sup>69</sup> Martin Amis, 'Look Who's Smirking', *The London Sunday Times Magazine*, 26 February 1995, p. 17.
- <sup>70</sup> Julie Burchill, 'Shooting For The Hip', *The London Sunday Times*, 23 October 1995, p. 6.

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- <sup>71</sup> Lynn Hirschberg, *Vanity Fair*, p. 122; Peter Biskind, 'An Auteur Is Born', *Premiere*, November 1994, p. 97.
- <sup>72</sup> Peter Biskind, *Premiere*, p. 97.
- <sup>73</sup> For instance, Amanda Lipman, *Sight and Sound*, p. 51. It should be noted most mainstream press commentators are white; it is very possible black reviewers would lean more heavily towards Jules/Samuel Jackson as the lead or connecting character. The issue is further obscured by the fact that Miramax, in a bid not to have the actors cancel each other out, promoted Travolta for the Best Actor category of the Academy Awards, but Jackson as Best Supporting Actor (Pat Dowell, *Cineaste*, p. 5). Each received nominations as designated; neither ultimately won. Again, racial stereotypes (who is the lead and who the 'sidekick' in white/black partnerings) may well have factored into the way the actors/categories were split.
- <sup>74</sup> Gavin Smith, *Sight and Sound*, p. 32; Martha Frankel, 'Pulp Fiction', *Mademoiselle*, October 1994, p. 91.
- <sup>75</sup> Martin Amis, *The London Sunday Times Magazine*, p. 20.
- <sup>76</sup> Steven Rea, 'Look Who's Stalking', *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 12 October, 1994, p. F1.
- <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. F4.
- <sup>78</sup> Burchill, *The London Sunday Times*, p 7.
- <sup>79</sup> Anthony Lane, 'Degrees of Cool', *The New Yorker*, 10 October 1994, p. 97.
- <sup>80</sup> Cited in E. Deidre Pribram, 'Seduction, Control, and the Search for Authenticity: Madonna's *Truth or Dare*', in *The Madonna Connection: Representational Politics, Subcultural Identities, and Cultural Theory*, Cathy Schwichtenberg (ed.), Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993, pp. 201-202.
- <sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.
- <sup>82</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', p. 117.
- <sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 117-118.
- <sup>84</sup> Leela Gandhi, p. 171.
- <sup>85</sup> John Fried, 'Pulp Friction: Two Shots at Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*', *Cineaste*, vol. 21, no. 3 (July 1995), p. 6.
- <sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>87</sup> Saying the pawn shop scene 'reeks of homophobia', Devon Jackson writes of the connection between heterosexual masculinity and the fear of homosexuality, 'These two faggots are deviants of the worst kind: queers who pass themselves off as he-men.' Devon Jackson, 'Quentin Tarantino's Negro Problem -- and Hollywood's', *Village Voice*, 28 March 1995, p. 40.
- <sup>88</sup> Amy Taubin, 'Queer Male Cinema and Feminism', in *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader*, Pam Cook and Philip Dodd (eds), London: Scarlet Press, 1994, p. 179. The similarities across generations are evident in, for instance, J. Hoberman's description of Scorsese's innovativeness, which is specifically compared to Tarantino's: '*Mean Streets* synthesized American exploitation flicks and European art movies -- creating a jagged, rock-scored, in-your-face, wildly gestural mode, characterized by conversational gambits seemingly inspired by Abbott and Costello, and a frenzied, if not tormented, maleness.' J. Hoberman, 'Back on the Wild Side', *Premiere*, August 1992, p. 31.
- <sup>89</sup> John Fried, *Cineaste*, p. 7.

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- <sup>90</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>91</sup> J. Hoberman, *Village Voice*, p. 61.
- <sup>92</sup> Pat Dowell, *Cineaste*, p. 5. Another current example might be director Warren Beatty's *Bulworth* (1998, Twentieth Century Fox).
- <sup>93</sup> An idiom from 'want to be', used about someone emulating out of a desire to be accepted by or taken for a cultural 'other'. According to one dictionary of slang, it is applied particularly 'to a white who seems to be emulating blacks or a black who is emulating whites.' Paul Dickson, *Slang: The Topic-By-Topic Dictionary of Contemporary American Lingoes*, New York: Pocket Books, 1990, p. 227.
- <sup>94</sup> Pat Dowell, *Cineaste*, p. 5.
- <sup>95</sup> Devon Jackson, *Village Voice*, p. 39.
- <sup>96</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>97</sup> Cited in Dareh Gregorian, 'Spike Warns Tarantino to Watch His Language', *New York Post*, 18 December 1997, p. 6.
- <sup>98</sup> Cited in Terry Lawson, 'Tarantino Still Sure of Himself', *Knight-Ridder Newspapers*, reprinted in *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, 26 December 1997, p. 11B.
- <sup>99</sup> Fatima Mernissi, pp. 34 & 35.
- <sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 3.
- <sup>101</sup> Ibid., pp. 1-2.



## *CONCLUSION*

The purpose of this study has been to outline some of the culturally significant ways independent film has become established, over the past two decades, as an emergent, recognisable system of representation and as a distinct discursive field. Among the aspects marking independent film as a distinct cultural formation are:

- i. An institutional/industrial infrastructure with its own mechanisms of distribution, marketing strategies, exhibition venues, and so on.
- ii. Its formulation as a hybrid between Hollywood and alternative discourses, borrowing from each, replicating neither but owing allegiance to both.
- iii. The field's interventions in dichotomised concepts of cultural production and its attempts to mediate such oppositions as form and content, aesthetics and ideology, art and politics.
- iv. Its incorporation of emerging postmodern representational and cultural practices.
- v. Efforts made to represent a heterogeneous, pluralistic, and multicultural society, carving out for itself a representational niche concerned with identity politics.

Independent film calls upon its own series of aesthetics, narrativity, subject matter, political concerns, social agendas, target audiences or markets, as well as a discrete set of institutional structures and industrial practices to put into effect all of the preceding.

At the same time, independent cinema is not a singular or unified cultural site, but a complex and heterogeneous one. I have traced some of the economic, aesthetic, and sociopolitical conditions which enabled independent film to establish a place for itself in the landscape of the 1980s and 1990s and which continue to influence its development. A diverse, abundant range of representational and cultural discourses are set in motion within the field of independent film, from paens to modernism to testing and contesting some of the social categories which form the foundation for a current politics of identity, from an aesthetics inclusive of almost everything or nothing necessarily to a return, with some uncertainty, to narrativity. Although independent film is a distinct discursive formation it is not an autonomous or closed system. Its evolution has occurred in close relation to other cinematic formations, most notably those associated with Hollywood and the avant-garde. But instead of the either/or polarisation most often construed between these two historical, powerful cinematic configurations, independent cinema offers *another* conceptualisation, *another* means of artefactual formulation.

In order to capture independent film as a coherent domain of knowledge and arena of cultural production, while always keeping in frame its multifacetedness and complexity, my methodology utilises a system of analysis based on multiple, simultaneous, layered, and interacting discourses. To this end, I have analysed independent film in terms of four discourses which together construct it: representational (formal and narrative languages, aesthetic traditions, and so on), institutional (material, economic factors), interpretive (reception, multiple readings), and cultural/historical (ideological and political claims, normative cultural constructs, and so on). The method followed here has been to trace the thread of each of these compound discourses as sites of meaning production; to locate examples of the manner in which each discourse signifies independently; and then to investigate some of the ways these differing

discourses interact to create further meaning effects including, in certain instances, putting various produced meanings into tension, conflict or contradiction. This methodology serves to organise independent film as a set of cultural practices and institutions that cohere into an identifiable discursive formation, historically constituted within specific language and power relations and which, in that process, construct it as a significant cultural arena. I believe that this analytical approach provides a more dynamic and polyvalent assessment of cultural production.

Further, the reading strategies and analytical procedures developed here for independent film could be applied effectively to other cinematic formations. This study calls into question the too unified or all-encompassing approach towards Hollywood in film studies, for instance, in configurations such as 'the new Hollywood'. That category relies largely on an economic and institutional analysis, uniting factors, attributes, and artefacts that might signify differently when viewed through another discursive framework. How might 'new Hollywood' texts operate, additionally, in representational, cultural/historical or interpretive terms? And certainly, this study suggests that further conceptualisation of narrativity would be beneficial for film studies, providing a more nuanced, inclusive and polyvalent model for the working of narrative, in particular as a formation constituted by both representational and cultural/historical discourses.

It is impossible to predict if independent film will continue to exist in something approximating its current configurations or for how long. A currently existing threat is that it will be absorbed by Hollywood's more dominant industry. Ironically, it is precisely independent film's successes of the last two decades which pose absorption or appropriation as an imminent danger. Alternatively, independent film may well evolve into as yet unknown forms of representation and unforeseen avenues of production and dissemination. Some analysts predict that

shooting on digital video and distributing via the Internet are poised to create less expensive, more accessible mechanisms for independent film.<sup>1</sup>

Its future open, I hope I have convincingly charted independent film as a significant, emergent cultural site and brought to bear some of the critical discursive layers which construct it and enable it to perform. In undertaking this study of independent cinema, I have attempted to emphasise its importance for filmmaking and for cultural politics, for practice and for theory.

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<sup>1</sup> The prospect of originating on digital video received a boost with the success of Danish film, *The Celebration* (Thomas Vinterberg, 1998, October), shot on digital video then transferred to film for release.

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SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY  
LEARNING CENTRE  
PSALTER LANE CAMPUS  
SHEFFIELD, S11 0UZ