

Smart cinema as trans-generic mode: a study of industrial transgression and assimilation 1990-2005

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Abstract

Following from Sconce's "Irony, nihilism, and the new American 'smart' film", describing an American school of filmmaking that "survives (and at times thrives) at the symbolic and material intersection of 'Hollywood', the 'indie' scene and the vestiges of what cinephiles used to call 'art films'" (Sconce, 2002, 351), I seek to link industrial and textual studies in order to explore Smart cinema as a transgeneric mode. I categorise it as a grouping of films which may have different formal characteristics, but are linked by industrial origins and production contexts, and through their use of genre, as Smart cinema embeds more challenging arthouse or cult tendencies in a framework of variable generic familiarity or accessibility. Individual texts contain thematic, stylistic and structural elements which can be positioned at, and interpreted along, loci on a continuum from mainstream to independent.

This is achieved through a process of "double coding" (King, 2009), which King relates to Bourdieu's ideas of habitus and distinction, but which I expand to include utilising textual attributes to create simultaneous calls to action to multiple audiences, along a continuum from 'indie' to 'mainstream', often in a manner that obscures their industrial positioning. Double coding works to simultaneously cultivate mainstream-resistant audiences, actively positioning texts as distanced from the industrial circumstances which produced them, and to accrue cultural capital for producers. Crucially, Smart attempts to combine the potentially transgressive, 'cool' underground appeal of cult cinema with echoes of high culture and artistic status which comes more directly from the arthouse tradition, and is therefore embedded within what James English calls 'the economy of prestige'. (English, 2009)

Rather than a generational outcropping, or intrusion of independent cinema into the mainstream, Smart cinema demonstrates product differentiation within the context of horizontal integration: studios making strategic interventions into what would previously have been seen as 'indie cinema territory'. While encouraging framing within an auterist model, and by utilising – or fetishizing – what we might casually consider 'indie style,' Hollywood studios extended their reach beyond the mass market by co-opting notions such as 'independence', 'cult', 'authenticity', and 'prestige'.

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Chapter One: Introduction

the very regularity with which declarations of new epochs have been made, the sheer number of ‘New Hollywoods’ that one finds posited over the course of film history, recommends this more sober view: if things are always ‘new’, nothing is ever really new. There *is* a constant process of adjustment and adaptation to new circumstances, but this is an adaptation made on the basis of certain underlying and constant goals: the maximizing of profits through the production of classical narrative films. Rather than looking for a fundamental break between classicism and a putative post-classicism, we would do better to look for smaller-scale changes and shifts, at both the institutional and aesthetic levels, within a more broadly continuous system of American commercial filmmaking.

(Neale and Smith, 1998, 14)

This dissertation explores one of the “smaller-scale changes and shifts” of which Neale and Smith write, that is, the emergence and popularisation of Smart cinema during the period 1990-2005. The expression comes from Jeffrey Sconce’s 2002 “Irony, nihilism, and the new American ‘smart’ film”, and as a term, it allows us to contain and examine a particular intersection of mainstream and independent American cinema. An unwieldy label for an unwieldy category, something Sconce acknowledges, the closest to a definition that he comes is to describe it as an art cinema ‘mutation’, or indeed “an American school of filmmaking that survives (and at times thrives) at the symbolic and material intersection of ‘Hollywood’, the ‘indie’ scene and the vestiges of what cinephiles used to call ‘art films’.” (Sconce, 2002, 351) It is this somewhat nebulous territory I explore, and my goal is to do so in a manner which elucidates both industrial *and* textual elements and contexts. As any exploration of the field indicates, there is no specific common definition of what a Smart film constitutes. The type of textually-based description implied by the word ‘Smart’ (the common strand Sconce sees as linking the texts being that highly mutable concept *tone*, rather than anything more textually concrete), has been all but replaced by more industrially-grounded classifications, circulating around terms such as ‘indie’ and ‘indiewood’; in light of the common use of these descriptive categories, my use of the term ‘Smart’ may perhaps seem somewhat archaic.

I discuss the relevance of Sconce’s work in more detail in Chapter Two, but it is important to state at the outset that I use Sconce’s term throughout on the grounds that it both captures in a

generalised way the textual ‘tenor’ of the films under discussion, and locates them in a territory spanning independent *and* mainstream industrial practice. In this sense, I concur with many aspects of Sconce’s analysis: his foregrounding of a film-historical context in which to locate the tendency of Smart films to make amendments to classical forms; his contention that narrative/textual constituent features do not appear consistently across Smart texts, but are “deployed in differing configurations by individual films” (Sconce, 2002, 358); his emphasis on tone as a primary textual determinant within the films; his central location of them within a production and reception environment of white middle class taste cultures. I am, however, conscious that more contemporary accounts of the field have rather moved away from textually-grounded attempts at definition, an epistemologically understandable tendency, given that Smart’s formal qualities are – as pointed out by Sconce – variable and difficult to pin down.

To produce a rigid taxonomy of textual features would not simply be impossible with films employing such a diversity of textual strategies, but would be pedagogically misleading, and minimise the extent to which industrial considerations are at issue. At the same time my use of the term is not a simple matter of descriptive brevity. I feel that to define these films through more or less singular industrial origins would neglect considerations of the way in which the textual strategies employed by Smart cinema have been mobilised across a *variety* of industrial contexts, and over time: within the mainstream studio system, through the major independents and quasi-autonomous studio production units often thought of as the locus of indiewood, and in the economically-marginal world of independent cinema. Additionally, I acknowledge that the term remains widely under-utilised in contemporary academic contexts, having resisted broader adoption. This may be as much due to academic tendencies towards maintaining sharp focus on a topic – to adopt narrative-textual *or* industrial *or* sociological perspectives in research rather than attempting to combine them – as due to the undeniable fluidity or vagueness of the term itself: certainly it is the case that distinctions are now more commonly made using terms such as ‘indiewood’, which foreground production and textual contexts over those of reception.¹

Having said that, I am not alone in utilising the term, and others who use it also remark on – indeed embrace – the fluidity which characterises it. Brereton, who acknowledges that despite having “acquired popular currency in academic circles in the late 1990s” (Brereton,

2012, 1), the term's meaning remains subject to dispute, links Sconce's term with "a reflexive and playful postmodern tendency which in turn is augmented by the specific attributes of contemporary new digital media.....[and] a particularly complex dialogical engagement with cineastes" (ibid., 2). In addition, he acknowledges the inclination of Smart aesthetics to arise at both ends of the cinematic marketplace, something which dovetails with my own vision of the Smart tendency as a 'continuum'. Indeed Brereton argues that home viewing technology including DVD add-ons played a role in creating "a level playing field between big- and small-budget productions and continue to remove the more obvious distinctions between niche/independent and mainstream output." (ibid., 12) Given his study's focus on the processes and results of DVD add-ons' intertextual mediations, Brereton's view of the Smart film is more technologically-defined – approached through the idea of "smart media" (ibid., 14) – than my own, but he too concludes that it "remains an extremely elastic term and constitutes a very broad church...a somewhat cloudy prism that constitutes a certain tendency in the evolution of new cinema." (ibid., 199)

Perkins veers away from industrial considerations, taking a Deleuzian approach to the texts at hand and explicitly attempt to extend Sconce's work, and one which emphasises its generational aspects, describing it as "perhaps best understood as a nebulous *tendency*...[whose] films can be linked on the basis of characteristics pertaining to industry and production, textual properties and audience reception." (Perkins, 2012, 5) Her language repeatedly acknowledges this nebulosity, saying that "the smart sensibility...is not reducible to story, style or authorial disposition alone" (ibid., 20), emphasises that individual "films participate in this class discursively" (ibid., 21), and particularly that the smart film is a site of competing meanings...not intended to form a definitive group. A consequence of understanding smart cinema as something in which films 'participate without membership' is that the designation 'smart' can never be exact.....The films considered are designed not to define but to *demonstrate* the sensibility.....seeking to release the notion of smart cinema from a fixed textual type to a constellation of forces and affects. (ibid., 24-28)

Therefore, while Smart cinema can be described, investigated, analysed, and utilised as a descriptive category in itself, it is less clear as to whether *as* a category, it can ever be said to have a sharply-delineated 'outline'. In light of this, it may in fact help to conceive of it as a *tendency*, rather than anything more rigidly-defined. However, in an effort to characterise the

set of broadly-described Smart films in a wider sense, I would describe the form as a *trans-generic mode*. This term, I feel, captures both the sense in which common identifiable textual features and strategies are indeed often at issue, and function in ways that evoke generic characterisations (at the level of narrative structure, thematics, authorial strategy, tone, and so on), *and* the sense in which Smart cinema is an industrially-grounded category – certainly, all of these films are (regardless of their production origins) distributed by and exhibited within the more-or-less mainstream Hollywood context. Additionally I feel the term facilitates the perspective I take, that Smart is not a ‘containing’ set of practices or features so much as it is, vitally, a spectrum or *continuum* along which a diverse range of creative work, and from a variety of industrial contexts, is positioned. This is why the term can, for example, encompass Todd Solondz’s low-budget suburban dramas, and the lo-fi experimentation of Darren Aronofsky, as well as costlier studio action and sci-fi films like *The Matrix* and *Fight Club*, the ‘quirky’ tonal comedy of Wes Anderson, and the diegetic and narrative play of Spike Jonze and Michel Gondry.

To clarify this, I must state that I am not using the term ‘mode’ in a purely textual-theory sense; that is, I do not use it to describe a genre-transcending textual modality, such as those of ‘comedy’ or ‘romance’, which manifest as textual components in a variety of ways across diverse genres. Instead I use it in a similar manner to Bordwell’s description of the art film – a wide-ranging category encompassing a wide range of industrial, narrative-textual, and generic practices – not as a *de facto* genre but as “a distinct mode of film practice, possessing a definite historical existence, a set of formal conventions, and implicit viewing procedures.” (Bordwell, 1979, 56). This argument, that the art cinema constitutes a “mode of production/consumption. . . . [wherein] the overall *functions* of style and theme remain remarkably consistent. . . a logically coherent mode of cinematic discourse.” (ibid., 57) utilises the term ‘mode’ in a way which links textual, industrial, and consumption contexts, and therefore sets a useful example for my own work. In contemporary academic practice, I note too that Janet Staiger (2013) adopts Bordwell’s framework as she attempts to negotiate the blurred distinctions between mainstream and independent production, an approach I feel relevant to my own.

I do not argue that Smart cinema constitutes a standalone genre, for all that the concept of genre remains useful in exploring the field. Genres themselves evolve and alter over time, as

does the popularity (or perceived significance) of any individual genre, and in ways which can be reflective of wider social as well as economic trends. The term ‘generic cycle’, used to invoke the idea of a fixed set of discrete, sequential processes a genre may undergo, cannot be considered a sufficiently sophisticated model on which to base suppositions, in that it encourages an essentialism which is profoundly ahistorical. In that sense, while I believe tentative suppositions can be made regarding the emergence, consolidation, and even gradual withering over time, of Smart cinema as a mode, these function to create a context in which to discuss the films themselves.

Genre tends to be placed in the background of considerations of Smart film: regarded as a conventional (or even devalued) framework from which it *diverges*, a marker of mainstream tendencies against which Smart film gains distinction, something Perren refers to, writing of the diverging discursive attitudes to Miramax ‘proper’ and its genre label, Dimension (Perren, 2012, 132-142). We see this explicitly in Newman’s statement that “narratives like these might seem to be devoid of genre conventions such as those found in more recognizable popular entertainment forms...this lack of generic framework is a significant part of their appeal.” (Newman, 2011, 89) However, generic aspects are present, albeit subordinated to narrative structure and thematics, in many approaches to the work.² Perhaps this is due to a tendency to frame film which may seem to fall within an ‘independent’ category *as* a genre, as per Jon Lewis’s note that “we have come to talk about independent film as a genre” (Lewis, 1998, 7), or indeed more practical considerations: the budgetary exigencies of low-cost production sometimes privilege classically realist forms such as the domestic drama over more expensive non-realist types. Regardless, that approach involves adopting a *de facto* generic perspective, but one taking a macro view, neglecting more detailed considerations of genre within individual films.

Therefore, without arguing for the existence of a distinctly Smart generic life cycle, I foreground generic concerns in my textual analysis. The emergence of Smart as a significant element within Hollywood cinema (as opposed to an ‘offshoot’ of independent cinema, for all that some of the films I discuss come from independent filmmakers) during the 1990s does follow a tentative historical narrative. As such, while *sex, lies and videotape* (Steven Soderbergh, 1989) constitutes a significant intervention of independent cinema into the mainstream during the period immediately preceding the 1990s, its ‘official’ entry could be

marked by *Pulp Fiction* in 1994, with *Welcome to the Dollhouse* a year later included on the basis of illustrating the extent to which the ‘expropriation’ of indie cinema was beginning to take place. The major studios’ involvement was becoming a great deal more evident by 1997 and 1998, with *Boogie Nights*, *Rushmore*, the tiny but disproportionately successful *Pi*, and *Dark City*, which I count as of particular interest for its comparative mainstream failure, when a year later the similar *The Matrix* would be so colossally successful.

Arguably the studios’ biggest year during the period, 1999 marked a significant moment for the Hollywood industry – or rather, for the way in which it was being represented within the wider media, with comparisons made to that other supposed *annus mirabilis*, 1939,³ yielding *Magnolia*, *Fight Club*, *Being John Malkovich*, and *American Beauty*, with the labyrinthine *Memento* following a year later. During the following years it seemed Smart cinema might constitute a tenable framework of its own, with films like *Donnie Darko*, *Storytelling*, *Adaptation*, *Lost in Translation* all emerging. 2004 produced *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, and *I ♥ Huckabees*; however while *Brick* can be seen as embedded in ‘independent’ discursive contexts, by 2005 Smart tendencies also appear in much more mainstream films, illustrating a process of assimilation but not an ‘ending’ in any concrete sense.

To digress in a manner which I hope will illuminate my reasons for using the term ‘trans-generic mode’, I would like to focus for a moment on an almost analogous – and yet clearly in many ways textually dissimilar – mode, the ‘blockbuster’. The blockbuster may seem diametrically opposed to the Smart film, which tends, comparatively speaking, towards the lower-budget end of the spectrum. However, as a category, ‘the Smart film’ and ‘the blockbuster’ have more in common than might at first appear: each category is placed somewhere outside of the stricter concerns of genre theory, as a term used to *contain* a wide variety of generic frameworks. However, both are defined as clearly in the mechanisms of production as of reception and consumption, and are perhaps most clearly delineated by industrial elements, from production contexts to marketing campaigns. Indeed, few things illustrate more clearly the mutable nature, and intertwinement, of genre and industry than the evolution of the term ‘blockbuster’.

As Tom Shone points out, it has been subjected to a kind of “sideways drift” (Shone, 2005, 28) and where once it “was conferred solely by a movie’s box office returns – and, by default, the audience...[t]oday it has...become the name a movie calls itself, before it is even out of the gate...Now it signifies a type of movie: not quite a genre, but almost; often science fiction but not necessarily; something to do with action movies but not always.” (ibid.). This has a great deal to do with how the film industry defines its own production contexts: as Sheldon Hall says, “[w]hile at one time blockbusters were distinguished partly by their exceptionalism, their status as an economic category different from and ‘above’ the normal run of general releases, it now seems possible to believe that Hollywood makes nothing *but* blockbusters.” (Hall, 2002, 11)

As Barry Langford suggests, the action blockbuster is, of all post-classical forms, “at once the most contemporary, the most visibly relevant to present-day Hollywood film-making, and also the least discussed and least well-defined.” In line with Shone, Barry Langford points out the difficulties in assessing generic markers for the blockbuster as a ‘type’ without recourse to a wider set of parameters than the strictly iconographic or thematic, as

a form like the action blockbuster pushes genre study to its limits, requiring it to integrate several diverse critical approaches (film-historical, economic/institutional and aesthetic/ideological) in the very process of constituting, defining and historicising a generic field...a task made yet more difficult by the rampant generic hybridity in contemporary Hollywood (Langford, 2005, 233)

As the term ‘blockbuster’ has stopped functioning exclusively as a measurement of financial performance, it has become instead a term of marketing or *positioning* – one which attempts to convey and signify a measure of industrial-generic meaningfulness.⁴ Charles Acland clarifies this when he states that “there is a certain contemporary common sense about those claims. We refer to something as a *blockbuster* and expect that others will understand what we mean.” (Acland, 2013, 11) So, too, the term ‘Smart film’ attempts to convey a measure of meaning about both industry and genre; of production contexts and of textual strategy. In the way that Smart cinema functions as a trans-generic industrial mode, it also illustrates the way in which the conglomerated entertainment industry gives trans-generic modes industrial *purpose*, so to speak. In the case of Smart cinema, my thesis is that that purpose was: to extend audience reach beyond mass markets, mainly by co-opting ideas such as

‘independence’, ‘prestige’ and ‘quality’, so as to compete with or push out films of other cinematic origin.

The industry does this in a number of ways. The one I regard as most significant is what I describe as a process of ‘double-coding’ texts – the term comes from Geoff King’s 2009 *Indiewood, USA*, and where he uses the term largely in the context of Bourdieu’s ideas of habitus and distinction, by contrast I use it to investigate the material or textual qualities of Smart films. That is, I contend that each film contains both multiple generic ‘entry points’, or ways into the text which attract different types of viewer, and frequently a level of textual experimentation and narrative play which would in another industrial context present as something more ‘art-house’ in origin. This is a major aspect of my argument in relation to Smart cinema: that an understanding of its mechanisms must take into account the means by which any individual text uses a combination of generic appeals and other textual strategies (experimentation with narrative structure and the conventions of realism, references to ‘art cinema’ and often a high degree of formal and/or tonal play).

These strategies also draw on the discursive mechanisms of prestige (however signalled – sometimes through critical perspectives, sometimes in reference to cult cinema, other times again through calls upon auteurism), and thereby function to create simultaneous calls to action to multiple audiences. In this way, potential revenues from individual ‘small but significant’ audiences can be maximised. We see the post-classical period – the post-*Jaws* period, so to speak, as focusing on opening audiences *out* – appealing to the widest possible audience. In that context, Smart cinema functioned as a kind of economic mopping-up operation: the studios extending their reach beyond the mass market, by co-opting ideas such as ‘independence’, ‘prestige’ and ‘quality’, to smaller and perhaps more isolated or more disparate audiences, but in large enough numbers to be financially viable.

Historically, the ‘New Hollywood’⁵ has been characterised by some as a post-Fordist industry (Murray Smith 1998, for example, although he acknowledges that there is not in all circumstances a strong case), defined by flexible specialisation rather than mass production, even where its target is the so-called ‘mass audience’. In its own way, this suggests that the post-Fordist model, calling for production of smaller quantities of specialised goods for more specifically and narrowly-defined groups with pre-defined tastes, is well positioned to

produce what we might term as ‘independent’ or niche cinema. In practice though, the industrial structure of New Hollywood can tend more towards the mercurial than the monolithic. It is this idea that I hope to unpack by illustrating how the historically specific conditions I outline in Chapter Three, during the 1980s-2000s period, resulted in the particular industrial circumstances which gave rise to Smart cinema.

The industrial bifurcation I discuss in that chapter produced on the one hand extravagant ‘blockbuster’-style films, whether action-oriented or not, designed for mass international audiences, focusing on innovation-through-spectacle and minimal intellectual or psychological engagement, and made on budgets which did not allow for a high degree of flexibility (i.e., exemplifying Hollywood as monolith). On the other it produced smaller, more intimate films of a variety of different types, whose status as ‘contemporary, new or different’ relied specifically on textual innovation, whether at a narrative-structural level, or in terms of appeal to an intersecting set of specifically-targeted niche audiences (Hollywood in its ‘mercurial’ aspect). In summary, industrially speaking these occur across a continuum from those wholly studio-produced, to those more-or-less independently produced, but distributed to wider audiences via studio-controlled exhibition structures.

A fundamental element, too, in the complexities of exploring the industrial contexts of Smart cinema production, is the extent to which the industry itself plays “a central double role” in the contemporary cultural field, “as industries in their own right and as the major site of the representations and arenas of debate through which the overall system is imagined and argued over.” (Wasko, Murdock and Sousa, 2011, 2) The vagaries of the box office and fan culture aside, film production remains an essentially lopsided or “asymmetrical” (Hesmondhalgh, 2010, 146) set of communicative practices, with no directly qualitative feedback loop built in from a producer standpoint. Therefore, approbation from within the system (via awards and peer-to-peer networks, and through discursive approval in the form of media coverage) assumes a proportionally greater importance in the establishment of evaluative mechanisms. As I discuss in Chapter Five, studios court ‘prestige’ via niche picture production, partially in their capacity as individuals in search of personal validation, but also as a means of position-taking within ‘Hollywood’ as a quasi-social, quasi-industrial entity itself, which figures both as producer *and* recipient of cultural markers of distinction.

This means that while individual studios do not necessarily directly construct brand images – as was the case in the studio system of the 1930s, with, for example Warner Bros. becoming noted for their mastery of the gangster picture – from the texts they create, the strategic positioning of individual texts can feed into the market positioning of a particular company. Labour functions as a commodity in the film industry as in other industries, and clearly cross-pollination across modes of production, and internationally, is not new to the film industry: the industrial process is such that not only does, on occasion, marginal or independent talent ‘infiltrate’ the mainstream, but it can also come to *constitute* that mainstream.⁶ Therefore, I also argue that Smart cinema comes to constitute a training ground for filmmakers, and that the trajectory of Smart cinema during the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first constitutes something of an assimilatory process.

This helps, I believe, to illustrate how we can discuss the idea of Smart cinema in generic terms without immediately having to segregate specific films solely by means of textual or stylistic attributes. Formally, Smart cinema can certainly be discussed in terms of the presence of particular traits, while bearing in mind that the set from which they are taken contains a wide variety of potential elements, structurally, iconographically and thematically. A defining characteristic of Smart film is that it comes from an industrial point tentatively within the mainstream but contradictorily – and vitally, to its positional identity – claiming the position of the outsider. At the same time, this is usually only partially revealed within the industrial-public discourse, therefore many Smart films find themselves residing in a definition-resistant or contradictory space. This can be seen in the cautious semantics employed by, for example, industry trade papers in discussing this tendency towards industrial hybridity, even some considerable time after it appeared to have become established.

To illustrate, a 2006 *Variety* front-page article discusses the autumn release schedule and concludes that “the majors are jumping into the fray, not just with their own niche divisions, but with also with their own highbrow productions...that could be defined as art-house fare, but with bigger budgets.....the fall of 2006 is loaded with studio projects that could be mistaken for art pics.” (Mohr, 2006, 1) There is here a strong recognition of the industrial and textual hybridity – “they’re hybrids, meant to appeal both to rarified auds [sic] and the masses” (ibid.) – which Mohr argues characterises the 2006 release schedule, but the article’s

strapline and sub-heading are revealing. The latter, “Studio sked jammed as town leans on niche pix” (ibid., sic.) emphasises both their importance and the difficulty of positioning, generically, such films as it refers to: among them *Crash*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *Babel*, *Marie Antoinette*, *The Fountain*, *Stranger Than Fiction*, and *Southland Tales*. Without leaning on the notion of ‘art-house’ cinema, and in particular drawing on the notion of the search for prestige as a triangulation point, the article finds it difficult to ascribe commonality to them; the headline “Lost In Transition” seems not just a nod to Sofia Coppola’s work, but to the uncertain ground being described.

Few accounts are as explicit even as this. The emphasis – even where studio involvement is referred to – instead rests on normalising the move of independent-styled cinema away from the traditional indie producer, towards the majors or aspirant mini-majors, through personality-driven accounts of the activities of industry personnel, whether production executives or stars (see Lyons, 2002; Bing and Lyons, 2001; Roman, 1998). This is, in a sense, a kind of mirror image of the manner in which the mode of ‘cult cinema’ is inscribed, industrially speaking (and which I discuss in more detail in Chapter Four): that is, as possessed of an outsider status which presents it as marginal to, or directly challenging, conventional industrial systems. As Mark Jancovich says, “the frequently stated problem of defining cult movies is precisely based on the fact that they are specifically defined according to a subcultural ideology in which it is their supposed difference from the ‘mainstream’ which is significant, rather than any other unifying feature.” (Jancovich, 2002, 308), although ideas of what ‘the mainstream’ itself might constitute remain fuzzy.

For my purposes, drawing specifically industrially-based distinctions between ‘mainstream’, ‘indie’ and ‘indiewood’ film – labels indicative of the kind of part-industrial, part-textual, media industries research which has become prominent over the last decade – is a useful task. However it is not one that is necessarily vital to an understanding of how Smart cinema operates, although the *linking* of textual and industrial trends that grounds that work is of paramount importance. As Tzioumakis points out, as the classics divisions and quasi-autonomous industrial units formed after 1990 ventured into the areas of film finance and production, “films associated strongly with the independent sector...were produced with funds from the conglomerated majors’ subsidiaries.....the label ‘independent’...became a signifier of a particular type of film, the ‘indie’ film (which subsequently gave birth to

arguments about films with an ‘independent spirit’).” (Tzioumakis, 2013, 34) There are indeed tensions and contradictions at play, in particular between individual films’ industrial contexts and discursive representations, which I explore.

As such, the terms will arise repeatedly, given that I am discussing an industrial context which spans mainstream, indie, and indie wood frameworks. However, as per Staiger, the question of independence generally matters where “implicit declarations are being made that this sort of film is ideologically better or more worthwhile than what it is not: a classical Hollywood film.” (Staiger, 2013, 16) Certainly, I intend to make no such declarations or inferences, and so, while the question of ‘independence’ arises insofar as it is necessary to make specific points about the evolution or development of Smart, I make no claims to Smart film’s place as an independent practice, or anything approaching it.

Largely this relates to my conception of the nature of Smart cinema as an assimilatory practice or process: through its movement into the mainstream, the notion of independence itself was being evacuated from the designation ‘indie’. At the same time, it would be simplistic to regard this process of mainstreaming as an abandonment of some deliberately marginalised political or aesthetic perspective. As an example, the standpoint of James Schamus and David Linde of Good Machine, later part of Focus Features, was that the task at hand was one of positioning. They outlined their reasoning in an industry article at the time as follows:

‘We have a very symbiotic relationship with the studio,’ says Linde. ‘We’re not going to be making movies that the studio is making and vice versa.’ ‘Size doesn’t really matter to us, specificity does,’ says Schamus. ‘By definition, we make movies that aren’t necessarily for everyone... That’s our business, to find movies that make sense, that are made for specific but pretty substantial audiences.’ (Rooney, 2003, 11)

The idea of the “specific but pretty substantial audience” is *key* to understanding the industrial processes which moved Smart cinema from the margins to the mainstream. If the 1970s facilitated the move to the centre of that era’s ‘maverick auteur’, and the 1980s consolidated the place of the event movie as the defining element of the industry, then the 1990s was the period in which the market stratified once more, the Smart film forming part of a mid-range slate of what might be termed ‘prestige B movies’: perhaps independent in spirit or form, but industrially quite removed from the art-house periphery. It would therefore be a

grave mistake to regard Smart cinema as a *de facto* independent cinema: where it in many cases constitutes a textual surge towards experimentation and innovation, industrially we find that a) much of it originates from directly within the studio mainstream, and b) where it does not derive straight from major studio activities, the drive to *recuperate* it into the Hollywood studio system (or rather the conglomerated international media industries) remains paramount.

Smart cinema is circumscribed at all points by the wider industrial environment, and while individual films, or even the work of individual production companies, may represent a textual challenge to the dominant aesthetics and thematics of 'Hollywood' as a notional evaluative system, that is not to say that they represent a direct structural challenge to the industrial economics of same. Independent cinema has often produced crossover hits, but the proportional success of films like *sex, lies and videotape*, and the expansion of the quasi-indie marketplace (as exemplified by the rise of Miramax with *Pulp Fiction*) provided convincing commercial reasons for major studios to embark on a strategy of product diversification (P.T. Anderson's *Boogie Nights* (1997), and *Rushmore* (1998) by Wes Anderson perhaps indicating the first significant incursions of the 'Smart' style into the studio structure) which could serve two ambitions.

The first goal was to exploit this revenue stream at moderate cost, in some cases at the risk of diffusing their own brand recognition, in an effort to obfuscate their industrial involvement (as certain audiences could theoretically be alienated by studio-originated products), and the second was to heighten their status within the industrial and social networks of Hollywood by exploiting the (multiple, and disparate) kinds of prestige that accrued to this work. This process ran in parallel with the work of the traditional independent film sector, occasionally opening up mainstream access to independent filmmakers, but not in a systematic manner; the major studio 'gatekeeper' function retained the traditional power it has exerted over independents' access to exhibition structures, despite the appearance of loosening control and greater access to the mainstream.

My intent is not to produce a detailed industrial history, or to argue for or against these films' independence (while such arguments are interesting economically, they add little of value to textual analysis), but to illustrate that to analyse these films textually without producing a

framework of industrial context against which to foreground them, is to neglect aspects of meaning which have become part of the texts themselves. At the same time, these are films for whom the discursive perception or expectation of their ‘difference’ is key to the ways in which they can be read, and forms part of the continuum of reading along which they lie. In this sense, given that *expectations* (to be fulfilled, denied or complicated by an individual text) constitute an element of genre, they also form an aspect of the trans-generic mode ‘Smart cinema’. With all this in mind, I posit a research question as follows: can conceiving of Smart cinema as a trans-generic mode, in which arthouse or cult tendencies are embedded in a framework of (variable) generic familiarity or accessibility, such that textual attributes create simultaneous calls to action to multiple audiences along a continuum from ‘indie’ to ‘mainstream’, allow us to describe more clearly how these film texts are linked by production and reception contexts; and if so, through what textual and industrial processes and strategies do they function?

A word here on my use of some terms throughout. I use the term ‘discourse’ liberally, following primarily from the example of King (2009, 2013), Perren (2012) and Newman (2009, 2011). In their usage, the word stands for (or implicates) public and private frameworks of thinking about this kind of cinema, which are created through a multiplicity of interrelating threads of meaning, and originate both inside and outside of the text itself. Therefore, the discourse of Smart cinema is constructed through textual and autorial choices, paratexts such as DVDs, posters and trailers, industrial positioning strategies at a formal and informal level (including reviews, interviews and other publicity, focusing on personalities and controversies as well as texts, in addition to paid-for advertising and promotions, although with more emphasis on journalistic criticism than academic), and prestige-awarding mechanisms originating outside of the direct industry (festival and audience awards) as well as those of industry bodies.

I should note that my work rather neglects online content, for two reasons. The first is that the growth over time of the internet as a site of fan interaction, and indeed as a paratextual channel, rather parallels the development of Smart cinema itself. To that extent, it is really only in the latter part of the period that the internet presents itself as a wholly alternative realm of investigation, and I judged that retaining a bias towards, in particular, press criticism gave a sense of historical continuity to the project. The second reason is a problem of digital

historiography, and relates to the tendency of websites to manage their archives in eccentric or at least non-standardised ways. Given the proliferative nature of the internet, the task of reconstructing some sense of internet users' approach to these films at the time of their release – that is, to produce a temporal approximation of online information equivalent to the conventional media of the time still available to me – was beyond my limited technical skills. I say this with the additional recommendation that a useful further research project would be an exploration of the extent to which, if any, the spread of Smart cinema was itself related *to* the rise of the internet during that same time period.

I use the term 'positioning' a great deal; as with discourse, to qualify its meaning in a given context is a complex task, and I utilise it in a similar way to Newman when he describes

positioning in the market for culture...[as operating] on multiple levels: textual (forms and meanings of films) and paratextual (promotional discourses such as trailers and ads, as well as critical discourse) and contextual (institutions of cinema and culture).
(Newman, 2011, 226)

It is an effect and combination of: film professionals' intent; the film as a text itself (its structure, tone, narrative aims, thematics, and effects); the paratextual materials which these days so often come with DVDs (and to a certain extent film websites, which as I say is a subject sufficiently large for me to have rather neglected here); the marketing and promotional tactics used in its service; the release strategy; the critical response to the film; and the audience's response to it: a response which has to be, at many points, assumed, there being not a tremendous amount of available literature on actual audience interaction with Smart films. Additionally, the positioning of an individual film can, I believe, reveal wider points about its originating studio's wider industrial goals.

To give a somewhat extended example, Miramax's strategy was to position itself within the distribution market in such a way that the types of film it later produced dovetailed entirely with its image, even where that image contradicted fact (see Perren, 2012). Miramax's aggressive and controversy-courting marketing strategies not only arguably (*ibid.*) changed industry perceptions of quasi-independent film's possibilities – Newman refers to the entire 1990s period as the "Sundance-Miramax era" (Newman, 2011, 1) – but made the field of independent production a target for studios. This segment on advertising for Miramax's most successful early foray into Smart production illustrates, I believe, not just their canniness in

micromanaging the marketing of their products, but also the extent to which genre is a preoccupation at the forefront of constructions of Smart cinema:

The campaign was designed to cross over as soon as possible from an art house audience to a wider action-thriller clientele. The trailer demonstrates this approach: the preview begins solemnly by announcing that the film has won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival and that it has been one of the most critically acclaimed films of the year. Suddenly gunshots appear through the screen, and a fast-paced barrage of shots from the film stressing the action, sexuality and memorable sound bites. Through the trailer, Miramax has been able to sell to the art house audience through the film's credentials, but, more significantly, an image was created of the film as being full of action, comedy and sex. This approach no doubt broadened the film's audience without alienating those drawn by the critical acclaim. This strategy can also be evidenced in *Pulp Fiction*'s one-sheet which defines the term 'pulp fiction' for those unfamiliar – a process clearly aimed at educating the masses who might have been alienated by an 'obscure' title. (Wyatt, 1998, 81)

While Wyatt's account of the trailer is factually correct, he somewhat neglects the importance of tone to the marketing's ultimate effect. The trailer begins with a solemn stereotypically-deep and resonant male voice, describing the film in terms of its status within a framework of bourgeois cultural endorsement signified by the awards it has won. It then moves on to present its more directly textual rather than extra-textual claims, chiefly those of sex, violence, comedy, and coolness. However it does not just smoothly shift from one mode of presentation to the other. For the first part, the pretentious narration ("Miramax Films is proud to present one of the most celebrated pictures of the year, the winner of the 1994 Palme D'Or, the Best Picture of the Cannes Film Festival"⁷) is underpinned by an almost unbearably ponderous piano soundtrack.

This music has an almost parodic character, its style something one might more closely associate with a television movie of the week – therefore it signals itself automatically as *simultaneously* the music of a mode known for 'taking itself too seriously', and which is often read as 'trash' (see Sconce, 1995). This clearly-outlined over-seriousness is ruptured by the visual representation of gunshots appearing on the screen, as per Wyatt above, and the transition to more generically predictable elements. This faux-seriousness is played on again

towards the end of the trailer, where cast names are read out in an almost ritualised manner which recalls more ‘high culture’ ensemble casts, or a ‘prestigious’ theatrical tradition. Adding an extra dimension to the recitation, though, is that although it does function as a conventional invocation of star power, at the time of the film’s release many of the names (Ving Rhames, Maria de Medeiros, Amanda Plummer, Samuel L. Jackson) would have been all but unknown to mainstream US audiences other than as character actors, and Tarantino’s championing of John Travolta was seen as little more than a manifestation of the director’s eccentricity. This call to contradictory discourses of prestige, mockery, and transgression of accepted marketing norms, again locates the film in a more satirical territory than would otherwise be the case.

Here, then, we have industrial appeals which rest on a number of simultaneous calls to action. The first, directed at the more traditionally art-house fan, relies on the creation of a sense of cultural status for the text itself – and for Miramax themselves, although this would be a somewhat (indeed, perhaps deliberately) ironicized status restricted to the highly-informed viewer, given the company’s reputation for the promotion of ‘exploitation’ films. The second rests on the promise of conventional sex, violence and comedy (intended to attract the more mainstream action/thriller fan, presumed to be less interested in cultural prestige). A third aspect is the manner in which the heavily ironicised use of, and play with, traditional markers of prestige creates a sense of breach or rupture of the ‘proper’, or socio-culturally sanctioned, structures of approval.

This constitutes, I suggest, an appeal to – or indeed *calls into being* – a theoretical third audience. While noting that this is empirically problematic in the absence of audience studies, following directly from the idea of the ‘implied audience’ which appears in the work of King, 2009 and Newman, 2011, it is possible to suggest that some audiences take a more liminal, or indeed contradictory, interpretive position, simultaneously claiming and rejecting hierarchical constructions of prestige. This subversive gesture – this double-coding – makes a delicately-balanced and *knowing* case to multiple audiences: speculatively, those who may use awards as evaluative guidelines, those who reject the notion of those evaluative mechanisms, those curious regarding apparent disparities between text and award, and those who have no specific prior interest in extra-textual elements such as international awards (as

denoted by the manner in which the initial rolling text and voiceover outline that the Palme D'Or is equivalent to Best Picture at an American awards ceremony).

However, we must also note that there is a consolidated effort at work to sell the film on the basis of its most obvious generic attributes (the 'thriller' or 'action' elements), and to obscure more narratively expansive and experimental elements. Here, some aspects of the 'Smartness' of the film are erased in favour of an action-based discourse with which the audience is presumed to be familiar, and to which it can be assumed to be kindly pre-disposed. This perhaps illustrates how genre can help to elucidate the notion of Smart: its generic attributes are alternately maximised in order to satisfy the necessity for a selling strategy that can be targeted at wider, rather than more niche, markets, and explicitly minimised when considered in relation to more attention-grabbing structural elements. The critical impetus has been, it seems, to downplay generic features and references, rather than to tease them out more expansively.

Smart cinema did begin to display its attributes more self-consciously as audiences for it consolidated. Ten years later, the poster campaign for *Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind* would make cautious references to its own generic liminality, with its hero and heroine pictured in one poster in a conventional romantic pose, but with a backdrop of fracturing river ice, and in another more explicitly 'daring' image, in a bed on a snow-covered beach which emphasises the more distinctly unconventional, narrative thematic, and visual elements of the film. That said, the poster as a form is one which can restrict interpretation to a more narrow range of references. By contrast, the original trailer for the film takes a range of positions heavily loaded towards conventional generic interpretations. Starting out framed in strictly romantic terms, it highlights courtship and love, utilising text inserts which declare "when you first fall in love...everything is perfect", but signals a move towards rupture of the idyll with the words "until the day...you want to forget...you ever met". From here, while darker elements are hinted at when Joel and Clementine fight, these are swiftly elided via a switch to self-consciously 'quirky' music, in favour of a mode references science fiction, but privileges comedy. Here, grinning slapstick takes prominence in the shot selection and rapid-fire editing style, as well as a clear call on the bumbling comedic star persona of Jim Carrey.

The more existential elements, or questions of identity, which the film raises are minimised or rendered invisible, and the last textual intervention is in the form of the words “when it comes to love...some things can’t be erased”, returning the text’s position squarely to that of romantic quest, despite the somewhat other-worldly nature of the mind-erasure conceit. The one note of generic transgression is the final exchange of the trailer between Joel and Clementine, as he, dressed as a child, calls “I want my mommy”, receiving the reply “This is sort of warped.” The trailer signals clearly that the desired interpretive frame for viewers is that of ‘romantic comedy’, in spite of the text’s darker view on matters. This is not necessarily a successful positioning strategy; it is worth noting that top rated comments on a Youtube channel which hosts this trailer include: “Horrible trailer for an amazing film” (user [NEKALI](#)) and “This trailer makes this movie seem much more lighthearted and happy than it actually is.” (user [walruspower60](#)). So we can see here the idea that (as well as illustrating Neale’s conviction that genre is a matter of process as much as anything else – that generic regimes succeed, dominate and change each other) there is a sense in which the marketing of any Smart film can be tethered, either successively or in parallel, to both its more conventional generic *and* its more ‘art-house’⁸ attributes. These strategies may be more or less successful in attracting audiences, but primarily we should note that they are strategies which evolve according to the extent to which previous iterations have been seen to succeed.

The final clarification, then, relates to my choice of films. As my initial exposure to the Smart film as a theoretical construct came through Jeffrey Sconce’s work, I was certainly mindful of his perspective, and many of the films and filmmakers he analyses, I too have chosen to investigate: the work of Todd Solondz, Wes and Paul Thomas Anderson, Alexander Payne, Quentin Tarantino, *Being John Malkovich*, *Fight Club*, *American Beauty* and *Donnie Darko*, to start with. I have also included works from that period which he does not mention (*Pi*, in particular) and those which I feel certain would have interested Sconce had he been writing after their release: *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Lost in Translation*, *I ♥ Huckabees*, and *Brick*. I have also attempted to extend Sconce’s grouping by including texts which he might not perhaps have considered – *The Matrix* and *Dark City* – but which seem to me to present enough similarities to be worthwhile in engaging in the debate. However I do not intend to defer to Sconce’s definitions at all points, and feel a debate on the field should be able to stand some differences of opinion on categorisation. Where I have made textual selections, I have done so in some ways by triangulating the work

of Sconce against that of King, Tzioumakis, Newman, MacDowell and others, and with a view to extrapolating on the basis of common characteristics.

I exclude work from outside of America which might conceivably have qualified on textual grounds (such as that of Tom Tykwer, Michael Haneke or Chan-wook Park) in order to produce a more focused industrial picture. Some filmmakers, such as David Lynch, Jim Jarmusch, Gus Van Sant, Robert Altman and David Cronenberg, I consider ‘father figures’ to Smart, on the grounds that they had significant prominence prior to the period I analyse, which I have chosen to restrict to 1990-2005 as this is where the Smart film came to prominence, with its peak probably between 1997 and 2001. However, certain of their films (*The Player* (1992) and *Short Cuts* (1993) for Altman, *eXistenZ* (1999) for Cronenberg, the Coen brothers’ *The Big Lebowski* (1998)) could just as easily have been included. For these filmmakers, I consider it likely that the emerging popularity of Smart cinema created a reception context in which, in some cases, their work was retrospectively re-evaluated by audiences, and in others, new production opportunities (and audiences) presented themselves as a result.

Additionally, I exclude work from the broad hinterland occupied by those films which are independent but *not* Smart films. By this I mean that while they may be characterised by a marginal industrial-discursive position, or be embedded within certain of the discourses of auteurism or prestige of which Smart films also avail themselves (see Chapters Four and Five), they adhere strongly to classical narrative structure without incorporating the generic, narrative-structural, formal or tonal play which characterises Smart cinema. These films (such as *Gas, Food, Lodging* (Allison Anders, 1992), *Before Sunrise* (Richard Linklater, 1995), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Joel Zwick, 2002) or the work of Nicole Holofcener) adhere more to a tradition of classical realist fiction across a variety of genres and modes, and to include them here would, I believe, confuse rather than clarify. There are a number of other individual films of the period, clearly, which I could have chosen: Ang Lee’s *The Ice Storm* (1997), Cameron Crowe’s *Vanilla Sky* (2001, itself a remake of *Abre Los Ojos* by Alejandro Amenábar), *Living In Oblivion* (1995) by Tom DiCillo, *Crumb* (Terry Zwigoff, 1994), the films of Neil LaBute or of Steven Soderbergh (excluded primarily on the grounds that I feel I would be merely re-treading Geoff King’s 2009 analysis of his work). Some I excluded (Harmony Korine, Larry Clark’s *Kids* (1995), the films of Hal Hartley) simply

because I believe their work tends more strongly towards the ‘independent’ than tends to be the case with Smart cinema, which has pretensions to popularity even when these are not realised in practice. At the same time I have included analyses of two films by the almost as independent-leaning Todd Solondz, which I feel is justified by the extent to which his work is representative of work occupying the more ‘marginal’ end of the Smart continuum.

I am conscious that there are several filmmakers whose works feature disproportionately (Wes Anderson, those written by Charlie Kaufman), and accordingly I have attempted to explore some of the complications the discourse of auteurism brings to Smart in Chapter Four. I am equally conscious that there are several films in this selection (*Fight Club*, *The Matrix*) whose industrial underpinnings would often exclude them from consideration, but which serve to illustrate the way in which Smart operates at the higher-budget end of the spectrum as well as at the lower. In short, I am conscious that no selection is ‘perfect’, and each path chosen implies another rejected, but I hope that the choices I have made in compiling this group of films serve to illustrate both the industrial and the textual aspects of Smart which make it most interesting as a research topic, and justify my approach of combined textual and industrial analysis.

In Chapter Two I undertake a review of some of the most relevant literature on the field. Chapter Three attempts to unpack the industrial processes and conditions which gave rise to Smart cinema. Chapter Four explores the way in which ideas of auteurism and cult cinema influence and are implicated by the rise and reception of Smart film. In Chapter Five I look in more detail at the prestige industry in relation to Smart, and how the films concerned engage with the evaluative mechanisms which bestow prestige upon texts and industry alike. Chapter Six examines the industrial contexts of particular Smart texts and how these relate to their positioning as well as their textual strategies. In Chapter Seven I analyse a representative sample of Smart films and make the case for their classification as a trans-generic mode. Chapter Eight takes two films and explores them in even more depth, engaging textual and industrial factors. In Chapter Nine I discuss my findings in more detail, and make some recommendations for future research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter I review some of the extant writing covering the field; a significant proportion does not utilise the term ‘Smart’ specifically, but relates to industrial categorizations of that liminal zone in which this cinema is often located. I use terms like ‘independent’, ‘indie’ and ‘indiewood’ throughout this chapter in the same way these books’ authors do; the fact that I tend to use ‘Smart’ elsewhere (as I think it captures more clearly the textual strategies and particular trans-industrial nature of the work more clearly) should not, I hope, lead to any confusion. This dissertation is indebted in several ways to the work of Jeffrey Sconce, whose work I discuss below. My usage of the term, however, diverges from Sconce’s sociologically-grounded conception of Smart film as a generational outcropping, which foregrounds irony not as nihilism, but a practice of resistance to explicit constructions of social and political identity. This perspective, while vital in its own right, particularly in its emphasis on Smart cinema as a mode of consumption practiced by the “younger, more educated, ‘bohemian’ audiences who frequent the artplexes” (Sconce, 2002, 351) neglects questions of industrial and economic power and access, limiting itself largely to questions of tone and taste. I, instead, move towards framing Smart cinema as a textual tendency providing ‘evidence’ of the mobilisation of political-economic forces in specific ways. These forces may be bound to and inflected by generational tendencies or cultural trends, but are not necessarily driven by sociological factors so much as by industrial ones, for all that these industrial factors are mobilised in complex ways which do not adhere to binary independent-mainstream distinctions.

More generally, my approach combines a genre-based perspective and that combination of cultural studies and political economy research often referred to as ‘media industry studies’, and so I review some work in those fields as well as work covering the area more directly. There is a tendency for work on Smart cinema to minimise genre as a dynamic textual driver in which formal experimentation is embedded, something which I find surprising, given the way in which genre links industrial and audience approaches, meaning that we can use “genre as a means of mediating the relationship between film and social, political and economic contexts.” (Langford, 2010, xv)

This is with the proviso that, while no theoretical structure will provide a ‘perfect’ explanation of texts and contexts, genre theory is particularly prone to accusations of vagueness and lack of definition. As per Stam’s summary of the problems of genre analysis (2000, 128-129), some generic labels are too broad to be of analytical use, while others are too narrow, and there is a danger of conceiving of genres as monolithic, when in practical terms they merge and mix continually.⁹ Crucially, there is a danger of “*normativization*, of having a preconceived *a priori* idea of what a genre film *should* do” (ibid., 128); and yet this essentialist view is at the heart of genre theory, given its central problem: that genre can only be ‘created’ retrospectively. This “empiricist dilemma” (Tudor, 1973), has been explored by many scholars (a sample includes Altman, 1984; Neale, 1980, 1990, 2001, 2002; Staiger, 2000; Sandler, 2002) and constitutes a larger theoretical debate than this work can encompass.¹⁰ Indeed, it can be argued (Brown, 2013), that genre theory does not constitute “a theory as such” (Maltby, 2003, 501) but has historically functioned as a broad scholarly framework within which to academically legitimate explorations of film which were not rooted in an auteurist or other ‘high culture’ matrix.

With those caveats, Stam’s conclusion that “[a]t its best, genre criticism can be an exploratory cognitive instrument” (Stam, 2000, 129) is relevant: I do not argue for its position as ‘grand theory’, instead working from Tudor’s proposal that the only realistic solution to this potential theoretical dead end is to “lean on a common cultural consensus as to what constitutes a [genre] and go on to analyze it in detail.” (Tudor, 1973, 5) I draw primarily from Neale (1980, 1990, 2001, 2002), in particular his contention that

[g]enres can be approached from the point of view of the industry and its infrastructure, from the point of view of their aesthetic traditions, from the point of view of the broader socio-cultural environment upon which they draw and into which they feed, and from the point of view of audience understanding and response. (Neale, 2002, 2)

As Altman (1984) points out, prior to the development of anything that could be described as ‘genre theory, generic definitions were produced from within the industry itself, highlighting the importance that the institutions of production have in constructing formulations of genre. But they do not do so in isolation; ‘genre’ is, as well as an industrial construct, an audience construct, a textual construct, and a product of the intertextual relay (Lukow and Ricci, 1984).

It is, above all, a construct of the discourses between the text, various publics including but not limited to actual audiences, critics, and so on. Audiences are vital to the discursive process which produces genre: genres are not simply groups of films with similar formal characteristics, however classified, but constituted from audience expectations as well as from texts. As per Neale,

genres are not simply bodies of work or groups of films, however classified, labelled and defined...they consist also, and equally, of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema, and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process (Neale, 1990, 46).

That is, genres consist of systems of “fluctuating series of signifying processes” (Neale, 1980, 19), or “systems of expectation” (Neale, 2002, 2) assisting audiences in recognising, framing, and producing significance from texts: systems to which audiences bring their own preconceptions and experiences. Common to these ideas of genre is the notion that one cannot regard the selection of a fixed corpus of films, a ‘generic canon’, as the goal of genre analysis, as this denies the (as per Neale, 1990) *processual* nature of genre. Key here is not just the idea that generic hybridity is a significant feature of Smart cinema, but also the idea that this hybridity is part of the process of generic development:

[t]hese processes may, for sure, be dominated by repetition, but they are also marked fundamentally by difference, variation and change.....Each new genre film constitutes an addition to an existing generic corpus and involves a selection from the repertoire of generic elements available at any one point in time.” (Neale, 1990, 56)

Finally, I lean on genre theory in much the same way that Tudor does when he classifies the ‘art film’ as a genre, saying

genre is a conception existing in the culture of any particular group or society; it is not a way in which a critic classifies films for methodological purposes, but the much looser way in which an audience classifies its films. According to this meaning of the term, ‘art movies’ is a genre. (Tudor 1973, 9)

Tudor’s notion here that critics are “mediating factors” (ibid.,) in such a development has resonance for the way in which I discuss Smart cinema as being embedded within discourses of prestige, and for the way in which the ‘fluid’ critical descriptions which attend it as a mode are largely born of a tendency to background questions of genre in its discussion.

I also draw on ideas of political economy, in particular the contention that “the communications industries play a central double role in modern societies, as industries in their own right and as the major site of the representations and arenas of debate through which the overall system is imagined and argued over.” (Wasko, Murdock and Sousa, 2011, 2) Political economy perspectives complicate the way in which contemporary visions of convergence, and of consumption as the locus of meaning, elide the importance of “the rise of marketization, the consequent consolidation of corporate power, and the expansion of strategies for incorporating popular creativity into revenue generation.” (ibid., 4) and instead ask questions which foreground power dynamics as expressed through industrial practice. In this sense I find particularly useful McDonald and Wasko (2008), and Wasko’s position that political economy research “seeks to understand Hollywood specifically as an industry that produces and distributes commodities within a capitalist system, as well as the political, social, and cultural implications of that process” (Wasko, 2011, 308). This is exemplified by the work of Schatz (2008, 2009, 2011), whose linking of texts, industries and audiences within a political economy perspective leads him to a vision of the contemporary American film industry as characterised by “symbiosis of sorts, a dynamic tension that has become integral to the ‘studio system’ in its current configuration.” (Schatz, 2011, 33)

At the same time, the interlinking of political economy frameworks and cultural studies has led to the growth of ‘media industry studies’ as a distinctive academic territory, in particular through the work of Holt (2001, 2011) and Perren (2001, 2004, 2012, 2013). Specifically, Perren’s emphasis on integrating industrial, aesthetic and discourse analysis perhaps locates my work most strongly in that field, seeking to blend “political economy’s critical approach to the production and distribution of culture with cultural studies’ concern with the power struggles that occur over the value of and meanings within specific texts.” (Perren, 2012, 5) This is a backdrop which adds complexity and depth of vision to explorations of territory which originated in a largely aesthetic and sociocultural framing, that is, in Jeffrey Sconce’s 2002 article “Irony, nihilism and the new American ‘smart’ film”.

Largely disregarding industrial factors, this piece remains significant for its commitment to linking textual structure and sociological concerns, through Sconce’s use of ‘sensibility’ as a framing device, without immediately calling upon an independent-mainstream binary. Sconce makes a case for this mode of filmmaking as a significant branching from both Hollywood

methodology, and the ‘independent’ ethos which is frequently cast as that model’s opposite. Sconce does identify certain structural aspects of Smart cinema, and categorises them loosely, describing films linked firstly by irony, and more frangibly, by a “shared set of stylistic, narrative and thematic elements” (Sconce, 2002, 358) he classifies as:

- 1) the cultivation of ‘blank’ style and incongruous narration; 2) a fascination with ‘synchronicity’ as a principle of narrative organisation; 3) a related thematic interest in random fate; 4) a focus on the white middle-class family as a crucible of miscommunication and emotional dysfunction; 5) a recurring interest in the politics of taste, consumerism and identity. (ibid.)

For Sconce, not all Smart films share these characteristics, or mobilise them in similar ways. The idea of ‘blankness’ is a key concern, conveying “*dampened affect*...authorial effacement and blank presentation achieved not through a feigned verité but through a series of stylistic choices mobilized to signify dispassion, disengagement and disinterest.” (ibid., 359) and “the tactical use of incongruity” (ibid., 361).

Citing the work of Ang Lee, Neil LaBute, Todd Haynes, Todd Solondz, Atom Egoyan, Spike Jonze, Richard Kelly, Wes Anderson, Hal Hartley, Alexander Payne, Richard Linklater, Terry Zwigoff, and Paul Thomas Anderson,¹¹ Sconce links these creative strategies with what he describes, reframing Bordwell (2002), as a tendency towards ‘de-intensified continuity’, achieved through long shots, still or static framing, and slower-paced editing. He also notes Smart’s alternative approaches to narrative causality, often favouring interlocking episodes: not inherently character-driven, as in the classical Hollywood form, but centred on a more ‘postmodern’¹² synchronicity, a coalescence of seemingly random events and loosely-linked characters.¹³ Here, Sconce argues that the ‘loosening’ of cause and effect and “the workings of an impersonal and unknown causality” (Bordwell, 1985, 206) which had become prevalent in the European art film from the 1960s onwards, were being replicated and extended in Smart cinema.

Sconce’s sense that Smart cinema used specific textual strategies in differing configurations, and displayed tendencies relating more to ‘the art film’, rather than *of necessity* arising directly from a linear history of American independent film, is worthy of note. Structurally, however, we can see the restrictions of Sconce’s piece; he begins but does not complete the task of teasing out the formal elements of Smart into a systematised, coherent picture. For

example, many Smart films do not share the fixation with long-shots, static composition and sparse cutting to which he refers. Contrarily, many Smart texts disrupt concepts of classical space and time, not by *de-intensifying* continuity, but by complicating or *re-intensifying* it, such as *Memento*, *Fight Club*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Adaptation*. These are films which may not foster “clinical observation” (ibid. 360), but use different strategies to divide audience and storyworld, by foregrounding their narrative manipulations, or veering off into deliberately fantastic, ‘non-realistic’ directions (as with *I ♥ Huckabees*, and *Eternal Sunshine*).

Sconce acknowledges that ‘blank’ narrative style is not always confined to films which utilise static framing, but links it with “the tactical use of incongruity” (ibid., 361) as a constituent of irony: juxtaposing mismatched elements of form and content within a text to create unexpected, unsettling contrasts which contribute to tone. I concur with him on its relative importance; however, where he sees this as simply “[a]nother operative principle in blank narration, found in practitioners of irony across the ages” (ibid.), this position neglects the importance of genre to considerations of Smart. For me (see Chapters Seven and Eight in particular), tactical incongruity functions as much to create and complicate generic expectations as it does to serve ‘blankness’ or indeed ‘irony’. It is also interesting to note that he regards the blankness of many of these films as conveying a sense of “authorial effacement” (ibid., 359); this is a simplification of the strategies at play, and neglects the importance of auteurial considerations in framing and positioning this work (see Chapter Four).

Sconce’s argument centres on the cultural politics of representation, in particular the dramatisation of social and familial alienation within the white American middle classes, a focus so “obvious and relentless” (ibid., 364) that it almost renders itself invisible. Smart could indeed be regarded as a somewhat glib intervention within popular culture – a cinema of shallow emotional dysfunction – were it not for the attention it pays to what Sconce himself calls “a more subtle critique of the politics of identity within consumer culture...from playful derision of various ‘taste cultures’ to more complex considerations of the links between identity and consumerism.” (ibid., 365) Sconce regards this as a generational issue, with supposedly hypocritical sell-out “baby boomers” and an apathetic, cynical “Generation

X”¹⁴ increasingly at direct odds with each other, and argues that it is exemplified in the American ‘uncertainty’ about irony to which he refers.

Smart cinema therefore, for Sconce, manifests an underlying seam of tension between generations who are in “competition for prestige and legitimization.” (ibid., 357), and ‘position-taking’ becomes a consumerist task performed by a younger generation in order to distinguish themselves culturally. This engagement with the ‘deadening’ nature of consumer culture is a preoccupation of much of Smart cinema, and Sconce’s conception of irony in this context rests on the principle that it can be used as a way of ‘seeing through’ consumerism. In this sense he regards Smart as both “a popular point of identification for an educated white middle class in search of victim status” (ibid., 356) *and* “a transition rather than an abnegation of political cinema” (ibid., 367).¹⁵

Primarily for Sconce, the common denominator is ‘tone’, informed broadly by Raymond Williams’ conception of ‘structure of feeling’: he argues it is used as a way of critiquing contemporary taste and culture, while formally maintaining the broader configuration of the classical Hollywood narrative. Understandably, the difficulty with this broad perspective is that by evacuating deeper industrial contexts, the link he posits seems vague. Focusing on tone and irony limits deeper considerations of political-economic context, narrative structure, thematics, genre, or more nuanced aesthetic analysis, and restricts his field to work which he considers broadly “ideologically sympathetic” (ibid., 350). Therefore, while Sconce’s conclusion that Smart cinema is inextricably linked with the socio-cultural conditions of its emergence seems correct to me – his desire to place the form in an explicitly social field¹⁶ – this framing tends to view it as the product of a simultaneous creative outpouring by a select generational group, rather than as an industrially-grounded tendency. His attempt to locate it in a wider socio-cultural world is significant, but more so is his contention that Smart film exists as a kind of intersectional practice, “an American school of filmmaking that survives (and at times thrives) at the symbolic and material intersection of ‘Hollywood’, the ‘indie’ scene and the vestiges of what cinephiles used to call ‘art’ films.” (ibid., 351).

However, Sconce was clearly not alone in attempting to describe this tendency: much of the work I explore here comes from efforts to clarify distinctions between independent cinema and studio work. Academically there has been a focus on analysing individual films from

within the Smart canon to use in service of micro-specific theories (Carol Vernallis' exploration of sound in *Eternal Sunshine*, or the many pieces on *Fight Club* and masculinity, such as Gronstad, 2003, or Ruddell 2007), or to explore more broadly related ideas, as in Ramirez Berg's (2006) detailed taxonomy of contemporary narrative structures, which is relevant to Smart's narrative play. These are useful analyses, indeed, but they do not provide an over-arching view of the field; self-limiting in many ways, they constitute individual jigsaw pieces, rather than the completed puzzle.

Much contemporaneous writing on the area was not strictly academic, but 'journalistic' work which, in a somewhat cavalier manner, identifies Smart (if it does so at all beyond the casual label of 'new indie') as an outcropping of 'Generation X', a trend focused around the urban 'hipster' crowd's beloved Sundance Festival. Peter Biskind's *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance and the Rise of Independent Film*, James Mottram's *Sundance Kids* and Sharon Waxman's *Rebels on the Backlot* provide gossipy 'rags-to-riches' tales of Quentin Tarantino and Spike Jonze; not rooted in film theory so much as applying a kind of casual – and on occasion hagiographic – auteurism, and rooted more in celebrity culture than in academic theory. The subtitle of Waxman's book, "Six maverick directors and how they conquered the Hollywood studio system", gives a flavour of the tone of this writing; these books trade on the idea that they are providing a glimpse into the 'hidden' world of the Hollywood system.

The effect is to construct a mythic narrative in which unknown directors are seen to 'make it big' within the system by virtue of their unique vision and unconventional attitude. 'Hollywood' itself functions most clearly as the dominant force within this strand, the books evincing a nostalgia for the New Hollywood of the 1960s, which the newer independent directors are challenged to recapture: these works constitute both an attempt to describe the emergence of Smart, *and* part of the cultural discourse which made it prominent. Hollywood itself is seen at a structural level as the ultimate originator of these films, and working within the Hollywood system the logical pinnacle of these filmmakers' careers (provided, of course, that they are seen to retain the supposed 'unique vision' which brought them to the attention of the studio system in the first place).

Whether by charting the progress of one-time independent distributor Miramax as a tale of personal ego writ large (the Weinstein brothers featuring alternately as quasi-mythological

heroes and villains), or by simplifying the American film industry into a corporate machine which attempts to crush deviation from the blockbuster norm, these books are as keen to provide a sense of drama and of ‘inevitable’ narrative causality as much they are to examine the nature of this kind of cinema. These accounts, then, focus more on valorising individual directors (or screenwriters in the case of Charlie Kaufman) as ‘quirky geniuses’ or ‘off-beat visionaries’ working within a particular ‘scene’ than on a methodical appraisal of the characteristics of Smart cinema, its industrial underpinnings, and its implications as cultural and social form.

In the 1990s and into the early 2000s, much of the work relating to Smart cinema came directly from considerations of independent film. However, in some cases attempts to chart this territory result in a broad sweep that, problematically, assumes that independent and quasi-independent cinema experience broadly the same conditions of production and reception. For example, Levy’s *Cinema of Outsiders* straddles the gap between popular and academic accounts, and takes an extremely wide view of the field of ‘the American independent film’ in the 1990s. On the one hand this serves as an expansive survey of the field, including work on African American, gay and lesbian, ‘female/feminist’ (Levy’s designation) cinemas, examining work geographically (what he terms the New York School as well as regional cinema), the auteurial heritage of independent cinema, and thematic preoccupations within drama and comedy. On the other, the scope of projects of this nature militates against drawing detail or nuance from any individual element.

Levy, for example, delineates what he regards as the conditions which gave rise to the late century’s rise in independent cinema:

1. The need for self-expression.
2. Hollywood’s move away from serious, middle-range films.
3. Increased opportunities and capital in financing indies.
4. Greater demand for visual media, driven by an increase in the number of theatres and the adoption of home video as a dominant form of entertainment in the United States.
5. Supportive audiences: the Baby-Boom generation.
6. The decline of foreign-language films in the American market.
7. The proliferation of film schools across the country.

8. The emergence of the Sundance Film Festival as the primary showcase for indies and the rise of regional festivals.
9. The development of new organizational networks.
10. Commercial success – the realization that there’s money to be made in indies.” (Levy, 1999, 20-21)

However his point rests on the idea of ‘self-expression’ – an overtly auteuristic perspective which somewhat contradicts the industrial history; for all this, his conclusion is industrially-based, that the 1990s were characterised by “institutionalisation. Indies now form an industry that runs not so much against Hollywood as parallel to Hollywood.” (ibid., 501)

As the first decade of the new century moved on, work exploring the nature and industrial position of independent cinema emerged which was more likely to contain references to what we might describe as Smart cinema, and attempted to locate it within both the cultural framework and the political economy of cinema. Yannis Tzioumakis provides a thorough account of the works which charted this progression, in two literature reviews of the field, the first exploring 1980s accounts and noting that “attempts towards a comprehensive definition of the label independent film [are] destined to remain futile.” (Tzioumakis, 2011a, 108) The second provides an account of the most pertinent pieces of the 1990s, and concludes that the academic discourse on American independent cinema has been also far from unified.....American independent film’s own trajectory, which moved progressively closer to Hollywood cinema (especially from the late 1980s onwards), in tandem with the expansion of Hollywood cinema courses in university curricula, inevitably made the discourse that saw American independent film as related to Hollywood more visible and therefore dominant.....American independent film and cinema had become part of the same academic discourse that came to characterise Hollywood cinema studies. (Tzioumakis, 2011b, 335-336)

However, this position is, of necessity, one achieved through retrospection, and much of the work produced during the period reflects what Tzioumakis describes as the division of the territory into ‘smaller’ discourses.

This tendency to explore micro-trends rather than take a wider view is seen in Jon Lewis’s 2001 collection *The end of cinema as we know it*, which circumnavigates a great deal of territory over the 1990s: trends and technologies, reconsiderations of Hollywood history,

independent cinema, and the changing role of corporations. Attempting to unify the disparate strands of the period, in that he does not ‘segregate’ independent from mainstream work, Lewis entertains the possibility that the decade was “a transitional period from one new American cinema to another.” (Lewis, 2001, 8) Foregrounding industrial concentrations of power (particularly trans-industrial alliances leading to convergence), international markets, new technologies in production and exhibition, and a decline in cinemagoing, Lewis pessimistically concludes that “[w]hat made certain films and filmmakers important in the nineties had less to do with relative quality than with success in the marketplace...The important films were those that seemed to use filmmaking technology best, films that declared in their very form and format their status as contemporary, new, or different. (ibid., 3)

Of particular interest in this collection, historically speaking, is James Schamus’s piece, in which he states that “today the economics required to make oneself heard even as an ‘independent’ are essentially studio economics.” (Schamus, 2001, 254), and that films with ‘meaning’ “can now be found both within the studio system...as well as ‘outside’ the system.” (ibid., 255). Legitimate fears surrounding monopoly, antitrust enforcement and intellectual property notwithstanding, for Schamus the developments of the 1990s represented “[t]he successful integration of the independent film movement into the structures of global media and finance” (ibid., 259) Here, Schamus’s own status as a figure of scholarly, creative and industrial importance is noteworthy, perhaps accounting for the accuracy of his prediction of future entwinement of independent and mainstream industrial contexts, and for the impression the piece produces of a call to integration, for creative practitioners more than industrial figures.

This sense of integration is reinforced in Hillier’s *American independent cinema* (2001), which contrary to its title emphasises the interconnectedness of the industry when it includes – along with sections on ‘Pioneers’ (Cassevetes, Brakhage and Warhol), ‘African Americans’ (Spike Lee, Marlon Riggs, Julie Dash) ‘Queers’ (Rose Troche, Gregg Araki, Kimberly Peirce, Gus Van Sant, Todd Haynes), and ‘Minimalists’ (Jim Jarmusch and Hal Hartley) – the works of only tangentially independent filmmakers like Spike Jonze, Quentin Tarantino and Paul Thomas Anderson. Noting that Hollywood’s history constitutes it as, originally, an independent outcropping in itself, he argues that independence has usually implied work

different from the mainstream “whether this relationship is defined primarily in economic terms...or in aesthetic or stylistic terms” (Hillier, 2001, ix).

He elides more nuanced arguments about the bases of production, although acknowledges that rather than marking the advent of American independent cinema as a distinct economic force, 1989’s *sex, lies and videotape* may in retrospect “represent the assimilation of that cinema.” (ibid., xv), and that the career trajectories over the period of filmmakers such as Soderbergh, Tarantino and Van Sant would appear to reinforce this impression of “incorporation into the mainstream” (ibid., xiii). Hillier is left with only questions, asking if we should regard the form as “alive and well, but living in sin, a sign that the spirit of independence has permeated some levels of the mainstream?” (ibid., xvi). By 2006 Hillier’s outlook had solidified into a pertinent but under-theorised position that the work under discussion could best be described as taking “centre ground in a continuum that runs from a much earlier period and from frankly experimental avant garde work to movies indistinguishable from mainstream studio product” (Hillier, 2006, 249).

Holmlund and Wyatt’s 2005 *Contemporary American independent film: from the margins to the mainstream*, I find useful in that it, as its title suggests, emphasises the transition of independent styles and contexts towards the mainstream. Refusing to be drawn on strict categorisations, Holmlund states in her introduction that “[w]hat’s at stake is a continuum, not an opposition.....Neither ideologically nor economically are [independent and mainstream films] purely antithetical” (Holmlund, 2005a, 3) and argues that “in the last fifteen years key sectors of independent films have indeed migrated towards the mainstream, from the margins, with attendant effects.” (ibid., 4) Their work therefore prefigures accounts of the field attempting to chart this ‘migration’; the volume briefly chronicles the industrial and technological changes which shaped the 1980s and 1990s independent scene (surging costs, conglomeration, the advent of cable television and home video, the strengthening of festival culture, and the advent of the ‘major independent’ and ‘mini-majors’,¹⁷ citing the rise of New Line and Miramax as of particular significance). Holmlund’s note that filmmakers like Soderbergh, Tarantino, Russell, Aronofsky and the Andersons have “capitalized on the buzz surrounding their indie debuts to move into studio productions or to move back and forth between studio and independent productions” (ibid., 9) illustrates the fluidity of independent/mainstream boundaries, something I find relevant to my own research.

However, the task of producing a volume which contextualises historical antecedents of the auteurist and economic kind, symptomatises certain quasi-independent practices (such as Diane Negra's analysis of the positioning of Parker Posey), explores a diversity of topics ranging from pornography and the avant-garde (Capino) to digital technologies (Zimmerman), is so large that the result is conceptually disjointed.

By 2005, Geoff King's *American independent cinema* had moved towards a framing of the field minimising the casual auteurism which tends to pervade accounts of Smart cinema. He notes the intersectionality of independent and mainstream modes of production, saying that "[t]he centre of gravity of American independent cinema has certainly shifted closer to Hollywood since the upsurge from the mid 1980s" (King, 2005, 262). This emphasis, usefully, moves closer to describing a Smart – rather than 'independent' – frame of operations, making the book's title slightly misleading. For King, independent cinema "exists in the overlapping territory between Hollywood and a number of alternatives: the experimental 'avant-garde', the more accessible 'art' or 'quality' cinema, the politically engaged, the low-budget exploitation film and the more generally offbeat or eccentric." (ibid., 2-3). Therefore, in contextualising independent cinema in its industrial, formal/aesthetic, and socio-cultural aspects, King attempts an intersectional approach.

King also relates genre to his consideration, noting that "[i]f familiar genre location is sometimes abandoned, complicated or undermined in the independent sector, it also forms an important point of orientation in many cases." (ibid., 166) – although the films he explores in relation to it tend, predictably, to lean to the independent side, rendering his analysis of them somewhat tangential for my purposes. King cites a variety of factors as contributing to the rise in prominence of indies and subsequent intervention of studios: the establishment of indie infrastructures, including independent festivals and distributors; the conservative tendencies of Hollywood which concentrated their efforts on a limited slate of expensive films, pushing more adventurous viewers elsewhere; developments in home video, an increase in cinema screens and the expansion of cable television; and the increased availability of investment capital at specific periods since the 1980s (ibid., 21-27). The search for audiences is foregrounded, and the success of companies like Miramax and New Line "has been based on their ability to achieve a crossover into larger audiences" (ibid., 32).

However, King regards this crossover as problematic, as per his argument that to maintain competitiveness, independents had to get bigger, with larger operations and higher overheads resulting in independent sector overproduction, and increasing competition within a limited market (ibid., 36) making ‘the breakout hit’ a matter of necessity rather than aspiration. The move of major studios into the distribution of independent features meant that “the majors increased their ability to share in the very high levels of profit enjoyed by specialized/indie-type features that break out into the mass audience.” (ibid., 45), as a result of which “the lines between the independents and Hollywood can become blurred” (ibid., 47), and independent film’s success “has turned the notion of independence into an exploitable marketing angle...coined deliberately in an attempt to gain ‘indie’ cachet” (ibid., 56). Therefore King argues that “[o]wnership by the majors...has tended to polarize the market.” (ibid., 44), meaning that “[t]he relationship between the commercial mainstream and various different degrees of independence is dialectical and dynamic rather than fixed” (ibid., 57).

In a similar vein, Tzioumakis’ 2006 *American independent cinema: an introduction* foregrounds historical context, noting that confusion regarding use of the term ‘independent’ stems largely from its use in a variety of different contexts throughout the history of American cinema – the history of ‘Hollywood’ being a history of various attempts at achieving independence – and the ideological idealism in which many of its uses are embedded. He emphasises the importance of rooting textual approaches in industrial considerations, noting that “these distinctions are not clear cut in the current state of American cinema, certainly not in terms of economics.” (Tzioumakis, 2005, 6) Additionally, he argues that “an approach that sees independent filmmaking as different from mainstream in terms of aesthetics or use of film style produces equally, if not more, problematic results.” (ibid., 7) as independent films do not possess a monopoly on the textual strategies which might at first be seen to characterise it, giving rise to the possibility that a broadly ‘post-classical’ style may have been emerging in both sectors.

For Tzioumakis, the 1970s wave of conglomerations constitutes a transitional period following which, initially at least, distinctions between independent and mainstream seemed clearer, in that the success of independent film of the period “demonstrated that the oligopolisation of American cinema...was impossible.” (ibid., 210). However, the 1980s advent of the mini-major or major indie set the scene for what he describes as the

“institutionalisation” (ibid., 225) of independent cinema, intensifying in the 1990s to constitute a “symbiosis” (ibid., 246), and indicating that “independent cinema has become a category of filmmaking practised mainly by the majors” (ibid., 247), a move he describes as a transition “from independent to ‘specialty’ cinema” (ibid., 281). His contention that independent cinema forms

a discourse that expands and contracts when socially authorised institutions (filmmakers, industry practitioners, trade publications, academics, film critics, and so on) contribute towards its definition at different periods (ibid., 11)

seems pertinent to me in light of my own research. This is largely because of his placing of it within a context involving questions of power. Here, if the term ‘independent’ is applied to texts with a degree of fluidity, the implication is that an equal fluidity can be attributed to the process by which studios and quasi-independent autonomous units exert their industrial power in order to mobilise textual strategies traditionally associated with ‘independence’.

The mobilisation of ‘independence’ in different contexts is the subject of *Declarations of independence* (John Berra, 2008), a curiously stand-alone piece which fails to engage deeply with scholarship on independent cinema history and theory. Berra’s casual use of the term ‘independent’ is not based within solid definitional terms and therefore covers a wide variety of films of different industrial origin. However, I include this on the basis that it presents a case for *not* maintaining distinctions between mainstream and independent cinema, a perspective I feel brings it more squarely into the territory of Smart film, as well as for including research into Smart audiences. Although Berra’s arguments are sweeping and sometimes without obvious evidentiary basis¹⁸ his contention that independent cinema exists “somewhere between a method of physical production and a form of popular thinking” (Berra, 2008, 71) usefully illustrates the liminal nature of the Smart field. This framing foregrounds the assimilatory nature of the studio system, arguing that filmmakers do not exist independently of the workings of economic power, and that therefore “the film-maker is always in a compromised position.” (ibid., 15)

Here, independent cinema is “not so much an opposition to the Hollywood mainstream, but an alternative version of it, telling similar stories but placing a different emphasis on key elements as a means of distinguishing itself.” (ibid., 90) and as such the studio system is strongly dependent on independent film, not least as a means of “discovering the shifts in

popular sentiment that will shape the next direction, or at least the next trend...[and] a way to discover young talent” (ibid., 22). In addition, independent films form an important source of cultural capital for American cinema as a whole, as despite their lack of economic significance, they “are more valued by the critical establishment...making them more intellectually prominent examples of America’s cinematic output.” (ibid., 19) – something I see as relevant to my work on prestige and Smart cinema.

Berra sees the mode as existing “somewhere between the ‘popcorn picture’ and the ‘prestige picture’...[in a] market niche as a middlebrow entertainment” (ibid., 27) combining high production values, broadly recognisable forms, and star presence with “some novelty value and the cachet of being ‘independent’.” (ibid.) Idealistically, he sees this as potentially liberatory, arguing for a synthesising position on the basis that “to divide [filmmakers]...into these two culturally opposing camps would be a mistake...Many ‘independent graduates’¹⁹ are trying to forge a third form of production, one that is financially sustained by the economic power of the corporate giants, but artistically progressive and free of compromise” (ibid., 111). Berra’s work on audiences is also of interest for the suggestion that independent and mainstream audiences are not separate, but intertwined; insofar as the independent sector is integrated into an overall system of studio dominance, for him their audiences are “are one in [sic] the same” (ibid., 24) Although I do not feel he proves this point conclusively,²⁰ his note that the advent of multiplex cinemagoing created a demand for screen-filling product which “‘legitimized’ [independent films] for the non-cinephile audience.” (ibid., 184) has merit, as does his contention that they “are as well attended as Hollywood ‘blockbusters’, providing they receive blanket promotion.” (ibid., 193): his empirical rationale is thin, but the conclusion foregrounds the importance of media profile and positioning.

Arguing that cinephile audiences are particularly significant in demonstrating initial support for individual films and spreading word of mouth, Berra contends that mainstream and independent audiences frequently coincide, particularly when “commercially identifiable attributes as stars, genre, and Academy Awards can be ably exploited by marketing teams” (ibid., 182). His point is also that this crossover has diluted the meaning of the term ‘independent’ in position-taking, having “come to mean a certain type of film, as opposed to a certain method of production...used to succinctly sum up the core attributes of the films themselves, not their production backgrounds.....[and] characterised by its aesthetic

choices” (ibid., 127). Berra’s conclusion is that independent film is embedded as a parallel practice within the wider industry, as a

‘marginal Hollywood cinema’...a cinema that sustains itself through the cultivation of a niche audience by exploring subject matter that is out of the intellectual reach of the summer blockbusters...with the aid of recognizable Hollywood characteristics such as genre and movie stars and a reliance on industrial resources and institutional bodies...to an audience that is so eager to accept the existence of a form of ‘alternative’ media, that it will largely ignore the corporate origins of such films and accept them as doctrines of independence.” (ibid., 202)

Geoff King’s *Indiewood, USA* (2009) takes a more holistic view of production and distribution, explored through textual analysis of individual films and case studies of studio subsidiaries, and through perspectives of consumption, linking the field to an implied audience through the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Moving from binary distinctions between studio- and non-studio-produced work in a consolidatory way, King conceives of Indiewood as a relational concept, with films drawing from arthouse and independent as well as classical antecedents occupying a

region characterized primarily by a form of studio/indie hybridity....distinctive...without being subject to any single detailed definition. Its most clear-cut ground of demarcation is industrial-institutional, in the form of the output of the studio-owned specialty divisions, but this also includes some films that remain more distinctly ‘indie’ in character and Indiewood can also be taken to embrace some work produced on occasion from within the main studio operations themselves. (King, 2009, 271)

Therefore his definition encompasses a wide range of work, and one for which “[i]t is doubtful that anything as specific as a distinct set of Indiewood norms can be identified” (ibid.). Acknowledging that economic and ideological tensions can work to romanticise indie production and devalue Indiewood work on the grounds of its industrial origin,²¹ King argues that “[t]he fact that Indiewood... exists as, or has become, a largely marketing-driven niche need not mean that it is *only* that...Some of its products might be quite cynically targeted at a particular blend of niche and cross-over potential, but that does not mean they are as a result evacuated of any interest or significance beyond their commercial status.” (ibid., 274)

Linking audiences and films, King's textual analyses investigate the kinds of appeal that Indiewood texts provide to their viewers, in some cases by contextualising user comments from www.amazon.com alongside, illustrating the ways in which audiences self-position – and award or deny themselves and others cultural capital – in relation to their chosen texts. Using Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' to orient this in the context of "Indiewood...as part of a tendency of mainstream industry (not just the marginal) to buy into and exploit aspects of what is understood to be the 'cool', 'hip', and 'alternative'." (ibid., 15), he looks at cultural consumption choices as a way of establishing difference, and hence taste cultures. Locating concerns with taste status in the middle- and upper-middle-class cultures from which Indiewood is considered likely to seek its audiences (ibid., 16), King suggests that different audiences will invest in texts in different ways, and that while it is not possible to directly identify them in class terms, "films produced/distributed from a particular part of the spectrum are designed, if only implicitly at some levels, with specific kinds of audiences broadly in mind" (ibid., 23).

If more cultural capital is required for the consumption of more 'difficult' works, King argues, for Indiewood "some markers of distinction often remain present but in combination with more mainstream/accessible characteristics than might generally be associated with examples of art or less conventional indie film" (ibid., 21). Therefore, while Indiewood products remain based on largely conventional emotional appeals (those of plot and character), their implied audience is one which also desires engagement with more self-consciously challenging material, and "receptive to the presence of some markers of difference or distinction within the context of frameworks broadly familiar from the Hollywood mainstream...[and] able to find pleasure in the specific difference constituted by examples such as...complex or self-referential narratives...or...stylized touches" (ibid., 35)

An Indiewood implied audience may therefore take pleasure from the combination of classical emotional appeals *and* reflexivity, non-linear structure, and metafictional play in, for example, Charlie Kaufman's work,²² where these are integrated into classical narrative and character structures; "'contained' and made-sense-of, in a manner which locates the work at the more conventional end of the wider alternative/conventional spectrum" (ibid., 78).²³ The combination of 'mainstream' pleasures and markers of distinction can also function in somewhat political ways. *American Beauty*,²⁴ a film King sees as almost designed for a

combination of critical acclaim and a multi-demographic youth/adult crossover, and *Three Kings* both take positions which have “overtly (rather than just implicit) social/political resonance, a dimension that distinguishes them from the norm for Hollywood” (ibid., 205), for all that the former’s politics are constrained by the individualism of American cultural ideology. Regardless, while different films target different audiences, each “offers a range of points of access that require the mobilization of differing degrees of cultural or subcultural capital...[reaching] beyond smaller niches and towards the broader, mainstream audience.” (ibid., 135)

Therefore, for King Indiewood film forms a “significant zone” (ibid., 236) – a vague term, but which indicates the balancing of challenging and commercial appeals, in which “some degree of formal departure from Hollywood norms is found...but...generally quite limited and balanced by other factors that keep the films located relatively close to the commercial mainstream.” (ibid., 237) It is, crucially, an industrial zone, with two separate strands of Miramax’s activities exemplifying the differing poles of the Indiewood tendency. These were, respectively, the drive to colonise space in the prestige film marketplace (as illustrated by *Shakespeare in Love*), and the desire to produce ‘mainstream’ cult cinema, primarily through Tarantino, whose status “enabled the Miramax brand to maintain something of its earlier associations with ‘cool’ and ‘edgy’ as well as more ‘elevated/prestige’ production, appealing in general to a younger demographic.” (ibid., 112)

Other filmmakers negotiate Indiewood territory in individual ways. Where Kaufman’s work brought him an unusual degree of recognition for a screenwriter,²⁵ and King argues for Russell’s “relative autonomy” (ibid, 220), he regards Soderbergh as a particularly Indiewood auteur, whose movement between mainstream and indie work (some films dominated by star power and genre considerations, others by more marginal tendencies) has for King created a particular kind of “brand identity.....in which style is said to follow content” (ibid., 178).²⁶ More significantly, this demonstrates the “ability of some filmmakers not just to move between Hollywood and the independent sector, but to produce hybrid features that occupy the ground between the two.” (ibid., 141), and illustrating that Indiewood textual qualities are not specifically ‘indie’ but “can be found in the orbit of the main arms of the studios as well as the semi-autonomous realm of their specialty divisions.” (ibid., 226)

King emphasises the importance of individual studio executives in – while working from a base circumscribed by their own personal and political capital, itself dependent on previous projects’ performance – facilitating this kind of production, thereby “widening the bounds of what was permissible, to some extent, within the studio machine.” (ibid., 192). In this sense, Indiewood’s development is strongly linked to the evolution of the wider industry during the period, and King emphasises that much of this work also comes from *inside* the major studios, thus visualising Hollywood “as something other than an entirely seamless monolith of impersonal heteronomous business practices.” (ibid., 227) He also links the rise of the ‘indie subsidiaries’ which account for much Indiewood output to a shift in emphasis towards post-Fordist production (or at least marketing): positioned to exploit the possibility of crossover hits and emerging filmmaker potential (American and international), with smaller films serving as ‘practice runs’ for larger projects, and maintaining star relationships by providing attractive vehicles (ibid., 6-7). In addition, they provided a means to “buy into the...award-garnering prestige achieved by a number of indie features during the 1990s.” (ibid., 192) and to create or strengthen brand images for studios.²⁷

King contrasts the ‘middle market’ Focus with Sony Pictures Classics, which he finds distributed films of “a much wider scope...including more challenging art-cinema-oriented works” (ibid., 258), and Fox Searchlight, and concludes firstly that they embrace a range of work (including those films more identifiable as ‘indie’ or arthouse than Indiewood, and imports), and secondly that “the divisions that have proved most successful are those in which the studio has interfered least and where longer-term stability has proved possible.” (ibid., 259) His perspective is that while prestige-accrual is a related factor, it is so more for in the way it which prestige can be marketed to audiences, than in its own right: this prestige is of a particular kind, however, given Indiewood’s “tendency to play safe, ultimately, to rely on proven templates and to combine material that might be challenging in some respects with more easily marketable components such as stars, ‘name’ filmmakers and strong, broadly familiar narrative and emotional hooks.” (ibid., 270) Fundamentally, for King, while Indiewood was not an entirely new phenomenon, and not one whose significance should be overstated, it was the result of a particular set of circumstances which “created a certain amount of space for particular kinds of relative departure from what are usually understood to be the dominant norms of Hollywood.” (ibid. 195) Predicated as much on the desire to be seen as a cinema of distinction as to appeal to wider audiences, he regards it as “a careful

balancing in which degrees of departure from the norm are kept within the bounds provided by more recognizably familiar routines.” (ibid., 163)

By contrast, Alisa Perren’s *Indie, Inc.* focuses on political economy, making a detailed case for Miramax as not simply exemplifying, but (both before and after its link with Disney) providing a template *for* a larger industrial drive towards the studio co-option of the independent form. Her approach integrates industrial, discursive and aesthetic analysis in a way which makes this a key text for media industry studies, seeking to blend political economy analysis with cultural studies while emphasising historical specificity and empirical research. Perren makes three central arguments. The first is that the Miramax-Disney partnership “helped alter the structure of the industry, the marketing of low-budget films, and motion picture aesthetics” (Perren, 2012, 3), in particular in developing techniques for appealing to niche audiences, and exploiting discourses of independence. The second (contrasting with accounts such as Biskind’s, which suggest that Miramax helped to make independent film mainstream) is that Miramax’s history needs to be seen “as part of a much larger process: the restructuring of global Hollywood.” (ibid., 12) The third is that the media-discursive practices in which Miramax *and* the press were engaged and implicated did not simply reflect practices within the industry, but assisted strongly in shaping them.

Perren contends that the Weinsteins recognised, ahead of other independent distributors, that low-budget films could be sold through “a combination of exploitation marketing tactics and an emphasis on quality and difference.” (ibid., 23). Initially, at least, steering away from in-house production meant that Miramax’s economic position was stronger than their competitors’, particularly given their emphasis on retaining merchandising, publishing and music rights, and their aggressive pursuit of investors and finance partners. Soderbergh’s breakout hit *sex, lies and videotape* became an exemplary Miramax text, in demonstrating that marketing tactics could be use “to appeal to several distinct niches through one advertisement.”²⁸ (ibid., 34) These niches were, Perren argues, “united by the film’s status as a quality independent – an identity that, in later years, would evolve into a subgenre of its own” (ibid., 36). In this way, the Miramax model demonstrated the potential profitability of low-budget films, foregrounding the importance of viable niche audiences, the importance of demographic shifts, and in particular their ability to provide viable competition to summer

‘tentpole’ pictures. For Perren, this “laid the groundwork for a realignment of the industry away from B-grade genre product and towards American indies.” (ibid., 40)

Miramax pursued a variety of (sometimes contradictory) objectives throughout the 1990s and 2000s, and while in the late 1980s their emphasis was on ‘quality’ US indies, their wide-ranging ambitions led them to appear, Perren notes, to be expanding beyond their means as early as the early 1990s. Therefore, the decision to seek capitalization through Disney²⁹ not only provided them with the means to expand (which they did, rapidly, in particular through the establishing of Dimension Films as a genre picture label) but placed them in a compromised situation whereby Miramax “simultaneously presented an image of itself as a specialty company that supported small artistic films produced by iconoclastic auteurs while...it increased the size and scope of a commercially oriented genre division geared toward films widely perceived as trashy or low-brow.” (ibid. 115)

Perren argues that Miramax’s downfall was their devotion to both genre production, and the middle-range films³⁰ which other studios were abandoning.³¹ Functioning as a diversified media company working in publishing, music and television, as well as investing in films with ever-larger budgets, meant that Miramax’s “ability to effectively sell itself as independent or as a young upstart became less and less tenable...No longer could Miramax sustain the myth that it was the ‘little guy’ facing off against big bad media corporations.” (ibid., 209)³² By the early 2000s Miramax was in peril, and the Weinsteins “were busting the indie business model that they played a lead role in forging” (ibid., 225) – drawing them away from the mandate of their agreement with Disney: to produce high-quality, low-cost films. Following battles over autonomy, cost, and content, and in the shadow of Michael Eisner’s problems at Disney (225-228), Perren sees Miramax’s “breaking point” (ibid., 228) as differences over Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*, in May 2004. The Weinsteins left Miramax in autumn 2005, although the label itself remained with Disney until 2010.

Perren strongly implicates the wider media industries in the evolution of the Miramax mythology, and in the *creation* as well as chronicling of the quasi-independent era. From this perspective, just as Miramax was constructing its own mythology, “[n]ewspapers and magazines across the country, in turn, repeated this mythology.” (ibid., 106) and, as significantly, parlayed it into a public narrative about ‘independent film’. She notes both that

“the attention paid to the indie film sector was disproportionate to its economic impact” (ibid., 7), and that Miramax was made “central to discussions about autonomy, authenticity, and creative freedom.” (ibid.) – something the company frequently exploited for the purposes of marketing and product differentiation. Not only that, but Perren attributes a degree of myopia to media accounts of the field, which presented the increasing intervention of studios into independent production, in an unproblematised way, *as* independent film.³³ This was, she argues, largely related to the way in which “stories about a new wave of American indie auteurs provided strong press hooks and an easy means by which to differentiate low-budget films from effects-driven event films” (ibid., 80)

As Miramax moved towards a “cinema of cool” (ibid., 94), this encouraged a discursive tendency “to conceptualize the low-budget film scene within ever-narrower terms... [which] further marginalized discussions of other types of filmmakers” (ibid. 79).³⁴ While economic prospects for independent films did not appreciably change, press accounts pursued a Miramax-centred view, whereby “little had changed for most of those unaffiliated with the major Hollywood system and large conglomerates. The mythology of the ‘little film that could’ grew, but their box office returns did not.” (ibid., 163) Simultaneously, Miramax and its products “were still being hyped by the press into the independent category.... aided by the larger narrative being promulgated by the mainstream press at this time – namely that Hollywood was out of touch and that ‘outsiders’ now made the quality films.” (ibid., 169) Where questions about the profitability of independent and quasi-independent film were raised, she states that rather than interrogating the involvement of the bigger studios, indie companies were blamed “for releasing too many films, many of questionable quality... the underlying logic driving the industry toward the creation of indie subsidiaries was never called into question.” (ibid., 180)

What faultlines did emerge were elided, such as when controversy over *Kids* (Larry Clark, 1995) drew attention to the increasing entwinement of the studios with low-budget production; this was framed not as an industrial issue, rather as raising questions “about the ways that the incorporation of small companies into publicly held global media conglomerates posed a threat to artistic expression, individual autonomy, and the exercise of free speech.” (ibid., 114) This framing avoided problematising Miramax’s brand identity: as she argues, many accounts of Miramax “have greatly overstated its role in distributing

controversial content.” (ibid., 116) for all that the company’s image depended on reinforcing this perception.³⁵ Miramax’s response in supporting the film helped to publicly contradict its industrial position; at a time when its budgets were rising and its films becoming more strongly middlebrow, it could be seen as reassuring the creative community. To have relinquished *Kids* would have confirmed “that the low-budget landscape was changing, that from now on, institutional forces would overwhelm individual efforts” (ibid., 121-122).³⁶ Therefore, Perren’s argument is that “[t]he tale of Miramax is ultimately the tale of the reorganization and reconstitution of the film industry during the 1990s...Tapping into journalists’ and critics’ discourses about ‘independence’, Miramax facilitated this industrial reorganization.” (ibid., 230)

While she recognises the development and importance of a distinct taste culture which brought this form of cinema to prominence, the reorganization of the film industry is at the root of Perren’s work. In this analysis, “the rise of indie film was part of a broader, industry-wide reorientation...only one component of a much larger process.” (ibid., 76) Where Miramax led, media conglomerates followed, using practices she argues were “modelled largely on Miramax’s production and distribution strategies” (ibid., 4), and signalling a wholesale structural transformation whereby “indie divisions became the primary means through which conglomerates financed, produced, and distributed a diverse range of niche-oriented films.” (ibid.) These were utilised as talent development sites, and to experiment with new business models.

Here, the rise of indies

can be seen as intersecting with the global media conglomerates’ increasing focus on producing and distributing niche products to specific demographic groups...within the context of a shift from a model of mass production and consumption that dominated until the 1970s, and toward a late twentieth-century model of specialization and ‘just-in-time’ production and consumption. (ibid., 6)

It was not that conglomerates moved away from mass production, but that they restructured operations to include niche-oriented film within a wider strategy of investment and acquisition which also included niche-oriented television, and reflected a broader industrial shift. In this, studio engagement within the field of independent production signals an emerging consciousness that greatest profits could be derived from “high-budget, high-

concept franchises that had broad international appeal, or low-budget films that could be targeted to a number of audiences and promoted inexpensively through festivals, word of mouth, and positive critical response.” (ibid., 37)

Perren argues that subsidiaries were better-equipped than studios³⁷ to deal with low-budget releases in an environment in which long-term deals and relationships had become paramount, particularly library rights for video and cable and international rights, and that while press discourse incorrectly framed the industry as a two-tier division between “the Hollywood majors and an imprecisely defined group of independents” (ibid., 153)³⁸ it had in fact solidified into three (occasionally overlapping) tiers by 1996. This was, vitally an *industrial* rather than cultural issue, as “producers and distributors began to reconceptualise the studios’ mid-range films as indies. This involved lowering films’ budgets by employing non-union labour or asking well-known talent to work for less” (ibid., 159). In this framing, the industry was divided into

the majors (tier 1), the studio-based indies (tier 2), and the true independents (tier 3...)...each tier increasingly focused on particular types of films with specific budgetary ranges; employed distinctive production, distribution, and marketing strategies; and was covered – and valued – differently by journalists. (ibid., 155)³⁹

The intervention of the studios meant that budgets rose, and competition for rights to films increased; problematically for Miramax, who were moving more to the centre even as “a rapidly expanding set of competitors proceeded to occupy the niches that Miramax had begun to neglect.” (ibid., 217) This was illustrated by the release schedule of summer 1999, which was packed by indie films⁴⁰ – the returns from some of which, she argues, both “obscured the ever more hit-driven nature of the specialty business... a growing number also made only negligible amounts at the box office.” (ibid., 220) This made vulnerable films which did not fit a specific formal-aesthetic mould, and “contributed to a further solidification of the narrative and aesthetic traits of indie films that received support from specialty divisions.” (ibid., 150)⁴¹

In summary, for Perren, Miramax were for a period genuinely innovative in marketing and acquiring films which appealed to under-served niches, some of which crossed over to the mainstream. However, they were simply the most initially visible instance of the process by which “specialty companies and low-budget films became an important way for

conglomerates to reduce labour, production, and distribution costs and expand their libraries...[and] for new talent to break in.” (ibid., 230), and fundamentally, the success of quasi-independent film after their advent resulted from “the intersection of their distributors’ substantial financial resources and influence with the increased emphasis placed on targeting a diverse array of demographic groups.” (ibid., 76) Similarly, Miramax’s decline was simply a high profile – and more personality-driven – example of the wider decline that would follow.⁴²

Having reviewed a selection of major works on the field, most of which foreground the importance of industrial processes to the development and prominence of Smart film, in Chapter Three I turn my attention to a more detailed industrial history.

Chapter Three: the industrial history of Smart cinema

Where in my previous chapter I reviewed literature on the field, much of which takes a sociocultural perspective as well as an industrial one, here I unpack the industrial-historical contexts which gave rise to Smart cinema, considering its rise from the wider industrial circumstances of the conglomerated entertainment industries. My proposal that Smart cinema is a ‘trans-generic mode’ implies directly that it is an industrial construct, and therefore cannot be discussed without looking more closely at industrial factors. In fact, as Neale points out when discussing the work of Tino Balio (Neale, 2002, 4), the terms ‘production trend’ and ‘genre’ are often used interchangeably, in a way that highlights the inextricable links between the economic contexts and contradictions of production, the economic contexts of consumption, and the form that a text itself takes. This is by way of suggesting firstly that there is no such thing as ‘innocent’ production or consumption, but secondly, that when we take a historical view of the emergence of genre, the industrial circumstances of production reveal themselves textually. This is because, in economic terms, films are

aesthetic commodities, commodities demanding at least a degree of novelty and difference from one another...it is necessary to explore the analogies and the distinctions between cycles and genres in the cinema, on the one hand, and models and lines in the field of non-artistic commodity production, on the other. (Neale, 1990, 64)

When looking at the emergence of Smart cinema from the industrial environment, a vital factor to keep in mind is that “an overview of Hollywood’s post-war industrial history must emphasize convergence, consolidation and synergy among the audio-visual entertainment industries.” (Maltby, 1998, 28) This is particularly clear when we explore the general market (and socio-cultural) changes during the period of the 1980s-1990s, which altered the economic horizons of the industry. The factors of greatest importance included demographic trends towards a larger youth market, the growth of cinema chains in suburban America, the introduction of a coordinated film rating system, the increase in the number of European and Far East cinema screens, home viewing, the deregulation of global television markets, and the effective end of state broadcasting in many countries.

As a consequence of these changes, the eventual outcome was that “by 1990, there were more available screens [in the US] than there had been since the height of audience attendance in the late 1940s.....Between 1984 and 1989, the total world market for filmed entertainment doubled in size.” (ibid., 34-35). In fact, between the mid-1980s and 2005, according to the MPA, industry revenues had increased, adjusted for inflation, nearly fourfold (Schatz, 2008, 36). Certainly by the end of the twentieth century the structure and scope of the American film industry had been transformed, via two decades of

[c]onglomeration, diversification, transnationalization of ownership, multiplication of distribution outlets, escalating production budgets, event movie production, exploitation of ancillary markets, the freelance market for creative and craft labour, and the global dispersal of production. (McDonald and Wasko, 2008, 4)

Maltby’s perhaps premature contention that “[g]lobalization and the new markets have made the majors increasingly stable, whoever actually owns them” (Maltby, 1998, 37) remains subject to dispute at some levels. For a period during the 1980s, certainly, studio power seemed diminished by a series of mergers and acquisitions which drew focus away from production, and towards stock market perceptions – the purchase of Universal by Seagram just one example, where by 1999 film profits lagged behind those of the spirits and wine, and music divisions (McDonald and Wasko, 2008, 1). However, industry buyouts and mergers since then have been largely calculated to facilitate the drive towards media convergence and the ‘synergy’ which has become so vital to cross-media operations.⁴³ With this, I believe, has come a seemingly paradoxical contemporary refocusing on ‘the text’ of cinema – or ‘content’, as it tends to be termed, once the text crosses from cinematic exhibition to the multiplicity of other delivery systems – as well as its profits and technologies.

Whether said text is a billion-dollar grossing action blockbuster, the mid-budget product of a quasi-independent studio subsidiary, or an independent low-budget production absorbed into the mainstream exhibition system, the continual demand for ‘content’ produced by horizontal integration across delivery systems has created unprecedented demand; a hierarchy of dominance as regards the *kind* of texts which will feed such demand has not yet been established. Smart cinema’s brief boom came too early to benefit from the proliferation of screen systems and delivery channels we see today: and yet perhaps its moderately successful reliance on the clustering of ‘small but significant’ audiences can be seen as a harbinger of the kind of highly-targeted segmentation of audiences we currently see, where superhero

blockbusters share multiplex space with genteel romantic comedies aimed at pensioners, and experimental works by celebrated auteurs. It is, it seems, perennially claimed that cinema is dead, and yet it persists, albeit continually shifting circumstances. Smart cinema therefore usefully illustrates the circumstances under which the entertainment industries have operated – and changed – over the past two decades.

The focus of much work on Hollywood as an industry remains on the importance of the big-budget high-yielding blockbuster. In some ways this can be seen as the polar opposite of the Smart film, but in others, as an almost analogous industrial ‘type’, somewhere outside of the stricter traditional concerns of genre. While many (even, most) blockbuster texts fit into a singular industrial category, their formal elements tend to fit into a specific set of different generic categorisations; sci-fi, action, thriller, and so on. The blockbuster does have commonalities with Smart, if we look at it industrially: characterised by textual hybridity, defined as clearly in its consumption as in its production, and most clearly delineated by the manner in which its industrial elements are made a manifest part of its discursive operations, from production context and press treatment to marketing campaigns. This is one of the main reasons I have chosen to concentrate my attention on this specific topic: I believe the industrial significance (that is, financial and *structural* importance, as well as textual) of that majority of films which do not fall into the blockbuster category, tends to be obscured by the proportional financial impact of those which do.

Schatz argues that during the 1990s a combination of deregulation, globalization and digital technology appeared to hand the balance of power back to the studios, but that in reality the new rulers of Hollywood – and of the global entertainment industry at large – were not the studios but their parent companies.....the movie studios, along with the conglomerates’ ‘indie film’ divisions, television and cable networks, and myriad other holdings, have become players in a game they no longer control. (Schatz, 2008, 14).

Whether or not that is the case, the globalised media marketplace of the new millennium has brought a degree of unprecedented profitability to the conglomerated media industries in a wider sense – that is, across the accumulated strands of film, television, internet, cable, gaming, and general home entertainment. Certainly, international recession has had mixed consequences for the communications industries where others have experienced pure disaster; while *cinema* attendances may have decreased, profits are not always directly affected.⁴⁴

In this sense, and bearing in mind the fact that US take accounts for only a portion of profitability, this fits with Schatz's position that

the worldwide movie marketplace was now so lucrative that it was difficult for Hollywood-produced blockbusters *not* to make money..... even mediocre films...routinely returned \$500 million within a year of their initial release, with cable and DVD now assuring the studio-distributor a much longer 'shelf-life' than was the case even a decade earlier. (Schatz, 2008, 35-36)

Schatz also makes the point that while studios during 2004-2005 publicly lamented slumping box office figures and slowed DVD sales, synergy across the home entertainment industry as a whole made their disquiet seem rather feigned, producing as it did unprecedented revenues and profits. (ibid.) At the same time, the nature of the film industry is such that revenue is unpredictable, and anxiety dominates present predictions of future profits.⁴⁵ In any case, the opening-up of the marketplace has happened in a way that might be said to have broadened the theoretical range of opportunities open to those studio executives tasked with green-lighting movie projects. This is in line with the manner in which Drake (2008) and Miller et al (2005) stress the importance of conceiving of 'Hollywood' as an industry where true power and profit lie with those who control the rights to a text and its distribution, rather than its production, who "maintain their economic power primarily through their access to and control over global distribution networks, where these rights are exploited". (Drake, 2008, 81)

Of course, despite Hollywood's post-*Jaws* insistence on focusing on broad family fare, there is nothing particularly new about the idea of using specific marketing and distribution strategies not just in order to maximise commercial potential, but as a way of differentiating between 'classes' of film. For example, Tino Balio's history of Hollywood as a business outlines the means by which 1930s Hollywood, while popularly characterising itself in terms of 'simple' entertainment appeal to the largest possible audience, was engaged in specific market segmentation and differentiation from very early on, "at every level of production, from the humblest B Western to the most colossal epic. As a general rule, differentiation mattered most at the highest level, where a studio stood the chance of gaining (or losing) the most money." (Balio, 1995, 11) While one important means of doing so was the creation of the 'prestige picture', which I discuss in Chapter Five, it is important too to remember that

the studio system has always needed to source additional resources outside of the core productive capacities of the studios themselves.⁴⁶

While textually this work would have been quite different to the Smart film, as Hall points out (Hall, 2002, 13-15), historically, qualitative distinctions were made at the point of production, between films to be ‘roadshown’ and those to be screened via ‘saturation booking’. These distinctions were drawn from notions of ‘quality’, in a way that calls to mind contemporary distinctions between the blockbuster, and the smaller quasi-independents. Films screened through roadshow distribution from the 1950s to the 1970s were more self-consciously offered through a commercial framework of limitation and exclusivity; via cinemas in major metropolitan areas, often with raised ticket prices, perhaps even in a ‘specialty’ format like Cinerama or 70mm. They were frequently presented as events with a closer kinship to theatre than cinema, with seat reservations, intermissions, and on occasion souvenir programmes – the emphasis being on differentiating specific films, perhaps only a select few each year, from the general crowd.

In contrast to a mass booking strategy, dependent on fast release and response, with screens dropped after opening weekend to make room for the next potential blockbuster if initial response is unfavourable, roadshown pictures were distributed in a slow, controlled manner, building on word of mouth, in an attempt to define niche markets within the post-WWII Hollywood slump. The success of Smart cinema would appear, to me, to be broadly analogous to this, and illustrative of the cyclical nature of industrial practices:

[roadshow distribution] was...aimed at attracting back to the cinema that section of the population which no longer attended on a regular basis, but which might be persuaded to go downtown for the kind of special occasion or ‘event’ which a roadshow offered..... roadshow blockbusters offered the kind of prime product needed to entice exhibitors to offer competitive bids against one another, to guarantee extended playing time and to pay advances on box-office receipts...the studios could remain in control of exhibition even after the formal divestiture of their theatres.”

(Hall, 2002, 13)

Crucially in relation to its relevance to Smart cinema, as Hall points out, the focus of many of the major creative and commercial successes of the late 1960s (he cites such films as *Bullitt*,

The Graduate, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *Easy Rider*, and *M*A*S*H*) was not the mass family audience, which was migrating towards the suburban mall-multiplex wherein the viewing experience was explicitly ‘detheatricalised’, but “the up-market adult and college-educated ‘youth’ audiences, which the studios tried increasingly to cultivate in the early 1970s.” (ibid., 17; see also Holmlund and Wyatt 2005, Shary, 2002, Hanson, 2002, and Drake, 2008⁴⁷) Schatz (2008) describes the key factors in the emergence of what he defines as a “director-driven, youth-oriented, art-cinema movement that defied the conventions of classical Hollywood narrative, subverted its genre traditions, and openly challenged that studio-controlled mode of production” (ibid., 18) as the increased availability of foreign films, the end of the Production Code, and the maturing of the post-war ‘baby boom’ generation as filmmakers as well as audiences. David A. Cook expands on this idea of maturity, arguing that as well as being “younger, better-educated and more affluent” (Cook, 1999, 12) than Hollywood audiences had traditionally been, they had “grown up with the medium of television, learning to process the audiovisual language of film on a daily basis.” (ibid.)

Schatz notes in line with Hall, that “the studios supported the movement, mainly due to the reliability of the youth market, with Paramount, Columbia, and Warner Bros. taking the most aggressive tack.”⁴⁸ (Schatz, 2008, 18) – an instance of corporate culture and (perceived) counterculture interacting in a way that prefigures some of the equivalent debates around Smart cinema; independence, the co-opting of cultural practice, and ‘authenticity’. However, where Hall takes the view that while ‘prestige’ blockbusters still existed during the 1990s and 2000s,⁴⁹ “the synthesis between popularity and prestige which the roadshows attempted to achieve has disappeared.” (Hall, 2002, 23), others see different outcomes. Tino Balio (1998, 2002) argues that while on the one hand the wave of mergers and conglomerations which swept Hollywood during the 1990s resulted in a de-prioritising of cinema within overall corporate structures,⁵⁰ on the other an increased international demand for product in an era of spiralling costs drove an upswing in lower-budget production, thus effectively bifurcating the industry.⁵¹

This, again, could be argued to parallel the post-New Hollywood world; after all, Cook points out that the ‘takeover’ of Hollywood by the young auteurs of the late 1960s and 1970s was as much to do with their relative cheapness to hire, in a period of massive uncertainty for the

studios, as anything else, that their rise coincided with a period during which fewer feature films were produced than ever before, and more problematically, long-term, that

an industry that had been driven almost since its inception by the orderly pursuit of profit was gobbled up by new owners who saw it as a locus for high-stakes speculation and corporate tax-sheltering...the extent to which film production became an investment-specific strategy during the 1970s was unprecedented, and it warped the shape of the industry for years to come, driving production and marketing costs to hitherto unimagined levels. (Cook, 1999, 34)⁵²

Jennifer Holt links this bifurcation with Hollywood's return to vertical integration, itself "a direct result of the manner in which the [Paramount] consent decrees were (re)interpreted by the Reagan administration during the 1980s." (Holt, 2001, 25) This is broadly in line with how other writers see the manner in which the interlinking of state and economy affected the media industries during the period (McChesney, 1999; Meehan, 2008; Christopherson, 2008, and Jin, 2012). As per Jin's account of horizontal integration in a time of neoliberal globalisation,

[i]n the 1980s, the Paramount ruling, in effect since 1950, was revisited. In a complete reversal of its original holding, the New York District Court allowed Loew's, which had restricted itself exclusively to exhibition, to produce and distribute films as long as it did not screen any of its own films (United States v. Paramount Pictures, 1980–2 Trade Case (CCH), 63). The court noted that much had changed in the film industry since the last time it visited the Paramount decision: television, home video, and the growth of national theatre chains (Gil, 2008)." (Jin, 2012, 414)

Schatz in particular notes "the importance of the Reagan administration's free-market economic policies and media deregulation campaign, which led to the steady relaxation of both ownership restrictions and antitrust activities by the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) and the Justice Department." (Schatz, 2008, 22)⁵³

For Holt, while conscious of arguments that other avenues of distribution (in particular home video and television) were becoming more important than theatrical exhibition "first-run domestic exhibition still determines how a film performs in all other arenas: international exhibition, television, video, marketing tie-ins, etc." (Holt, 2001, 28) She argues that the deregulation of the industry (for her, a specifically politicized intervention motivated by

Reagan's Chicago School-influenced economic policy) resulted in a process of vertical reintegration (ibid., 26-28). This process led to a radical recalibration of Hollywood's structures, shifting the balance of power between producer, distributor and exhibitor, no matter that all might be constituted in the same media group.

Here, as studios moved back into exhibition from 1986 onwards, and the number of screens at any given site of exhibition increased, the 'saturation' release schedule became commonplace (Acland, 2008), which placed a greater emphasis on a film's opening weekend.⁵⁴ The goal became to maximise revenue for the three-day opening weekend, as box office figures started to function not only as indicators of predicted success, but also as discursive markers in themselves, as 'signs' of quality and popularity, both within the industry and to the public: as a gauge of "the value of the film in overseas markets and a partial determinant of its sell-through price in distribution windows such as television and home video...its 'marquee value'.....operating as a signal of value in other media markets." (Drake, 2008, 64). With a smaller potential time period available for any film to be exhibited in, the 'sleeper' hit, building on word of mouth over a longer period, became more and more difficult to achieve: instead, aggressive – and costly – marketing became a vital part of the budget, designed to attract audiences faster, and frequently by turning the opening weekend into an 'event'.

In turn, special-event-based marketing tended to be much easier to coordinate if the film's themes, narrative and iconography lent themselves to commodification via merchandising based on simple and convenient 'hooks', hence the increasing focus on the 'high concept' spectacle film, as per Justin Wyatt (Wyatt, 1998). As high marketing costs became increasingly embedded in the practice of all filmmaking, the effect was to place significant pressure on work at either end of the financial spectrum. As Balio puts it,

no studio had the financial means to produce blockbusters exclusively. Annual rosters regularly contained a few mid-range entries and an occasional niche picture budgeted at around \$10 million or less...only a handful of limited releases crossed over to the mainstream market to gross more than \$5 million. For this reason, niche pictures were relegated pretty much to studios' specialised production arms. (Balio, 2002, 165)

However, using the word ‘relegated’ fails to take cognizance of the fact that essentially studios were now obliged to focus their attentions in different directions. Balio’s most pertinent phrase is perhaps his most throwaway one: he cites the studios as, over this decade, evaluating their proposed projects “on their potential to reach a specific segment of the audience.” (ibid.,) but his conclusion is that the globalisation of Hollywood

kept production tightly focused on the two main segments of the theatrical market, the ‘teen and pre-teen bubble’ and the ‘boomers with kids’. Satisfying these segments meant that studios devoted their resources to high-concept projects that could easily be pitched in national marketing campaigns and released simultaneously in thousands of mall theatres. This is just another way of saying that nothing much changed in Hollywood in the 1990s. (ibid., 181)

This is, perhaps, an unnecessarily pessimistic characterisation of Hollywood in the 1990s as a whole, as it assumes a somewhat monolithic structure, whereas I argue that ‘Hollywood’ functions at a multiplicity of different levels, which together form a matrix of industrial circumstances producing work of a widely varying nature. The American film industry as symbolised by the term ‘Hollywood’ is simultaneously (and serially, in that any one of these facets can predominate in any given context) a loose industrial organisation, a social peer grouping, a creative network, a technological development lab, a skills base, a library of texts, a political lobby group, and a public discourse. It is, above all, a post-Fordist industry which seeks to mobilise capital and resources in order to maximise profit and minimise cost; while it has done so most visibly and spectacularly in the form of the blockbuster, we should not minimise the extent to which the American film industry, by its nature as a capitalist enterprise, also continually seeks to develop texts (Smart film among them) which can unearth, mobilise, and monopolise new markets.

Balio points out, correctly, that the broad focus of the industry has been, since the 1980s, on the teen and pre-teen audience (defined, sweepingly, by Balio as the 10-24 year old age group, focusing almost exclusively on the teenage male), followed in a vague and ill-defined way by “‘Boomers with kids’, consisting of children, parents and grandparents in the eight-to-eighty demographic” (Balio, 2002, 165), who would see family films exclusively, and ‘Geezers’, or those over 50 who attend the cinema irregularly. It is, clearly, a shallow classification that tells us almost nothing about who watches films or why, but it is important

to remember that it is based on based on *Variety*'s 'Top All-Time Grossers': films generating \$80 million or more at the US box office, of which around 150 are from the 1990s and subject to analysis. Therefore this look at box office gross illustrates how the financial contribution of independent and quasi-independent cinema can get lost in the staggering financial figures which define the cinema market.

In a similar manner to Maltby, Balio (1998) cites various factors influencing Hollywood's changing industrial circumstances: economic growth in Western Europe, the Pacific Rim and Latin America, the end of the Cold War, the commercialization of state broadcasting, and the development of new distribution technologies and processes. This gave rise to a market wherein "companies upgraded international operations to a privileged position by expanding 'horizontally' to tap emerging markets worldwide, by expanding 'vertically' to form alliances with independent producers to enlarge their rosters, and by 'partnering' with foreign investors to secure new sources of financing". (Balio, 1998, 58) In this interpretation, the US market divided into 'mini-majors' (Orion, Cannon, Dino De Laurentiis) and independents (Atlantic, Carolco, New World, Hemdale, Troma, Island Alive, Vestron, New Line) filling the demand inspired by home video, rather than the major studios, which instead focused on ultra-high budget works which

reduced the risk of financing because (1) they constituted media events; (2) they lent themselves to promotional tie-ins; (3) they became massive engines for profits in ancillary divisions like theme parks and video; (4) they stood to make a profit in foreign markets; and (5) they were easy to distribute. (ibid., 59)

Particularly crucial was the foreign market. Linked with a widespread programme of cinema upgrading and development by the majors and their European partners, and as a consequence of the first wave of mergers in the 1980s facilitated by the Reagan administration's *laissez-faire* perspective on the Paramount decrees, was a massive increase in advertising spend outside of the US.⁵⁵ And, indeed, not just advertising: another factor was the intensified search for international funding, whether through direct investors or co-production deals availing of international subsidies. The importance of the 'ancillary market' became greatly amplified; as Neale and Smith emphasise when discussing the work of Balio, James Schamus and Douglas Gomery, "the mass of profits on films are now derived from nominally 'ancillary' markets. While this is true of all films, in the case of the independent art house

film, the key ‘back end’ is the foreign market (rather than domestic video etc.).” (Neale and Smith, 1998, xviii).

These markets were inextricably intertwined. Foreign markets for quasi-independent film relied on the buzz and publicity of a film’s initial American opening in order to create a groundswell of enthusiasm, which could then be followed with a platform release (as opposed to the saturation release employed in the case of blockbusters, designed to maximise revenues for the opening weekend, as discussed previously).⁵⁶ Conversely, international festivals were and are also used as launching pads or test markets, with critical acclaim and/or popular success there parlayed into publicity in the US. This intertwining has been perhaps more obvious in its latterday disappearance than at the height of the indie boom; as Edward Jay Epstein has pointed out, following the closure or studio reintegration of many of the studio-backed specialty distributors (such as New Line Cinema, Picturehouse, Warner Independent Films, Paramount Vantage, Fox Atomic) the value of the US market declined sharply. As such “indie producers had to base their ability to borrow money almost entirely on the foreign market. Yet, foreign distributors then greatly reduced the amount they were willing to commit because they could no longer be confident that indie films would have the publicity and hype that goes with an American release.” (Epstein, 2012)

This emphasis, then, is not necessarily because independent or art-house films will in all cases perform better internationally than they do in the US market (although this is sometimes the case), but rather because the balance of how and where profit and loss are accumulated has radically changed over the last twenty years, with an increasing focus on what were once regarded as ancillary markets. Studios can more easily afford to allocate large sums to international promotion and advertising in cases of films with existing brand recognition (e.g. superhero franchises), or where generic considerations predicate a certain lack of narrative complexity and linguistic difficulty (with subtitling therefore less of a barrier to audience comprehension), while spreading their financial risk over a wider exhibition field. As Drake puts it:

The theatrical release has been displaced by other windows as Hollywood’s core sector, although... Cinema exhibition retains an important price-setting and marketing role for these windows and is the most significant determinant of their success. Extensive media coverage about Hollywood means that the opening box-office performance is also often seen as a judgement about popularity and

quality.....theatrical box office may in part be exactly that: theatre, the ‘show’ of Hollywood’s business, a marketing platform for a product that reaps its major profits in other windows such as DVD, pay television, and network syndication over long periods of time. (Drake, 2008, 81)

The ultimate point to be taken from this industrial account is, of course, that as might be expected from its historical dominance within the entertainment field, “Hollywood responded to globalization by competing for talent, projects and product for their distribution pipelines. The competition typically took the form of partnerships with the new breed of independent producers.” (ibid., 64). The importance of these production and distribution companies – in particular Miramax, and New Line’s Fine Line Features⁵⁷ – and the second wave of mergers involving them, cannot be underestimated. It is their approach, as facilitated by the 1980s and 1990s bifurcation of the Hollywood industry – temporary and statistically insignificant as it may have been, in terms of box office grosses – that provided the commercial context in which Smart cinema could develop.

Without the polarization of the marketplace that resulted from the vertical reintegration of the industry, and its influence on rising costs throughout the 1980s, it is possible that no specific conditions would have existed which would have necessitated such a move into the ‘alternative’ end of the market. However, following the change in political climate leading to an assumption that “[v]ertical integration was...benign: it was perceived as a strategy promoting economic efficiency as opposed to anti-competitive behaviour or restraint of trade.” (Holt, 2001, 26), I believe two sets of conditions resulted. On one side, the increasing financial clout, proportionally speaking, of the major studios, squeezed independent production companies to the point of inability to compete.⁵⁸ On the other, spiralling costs, and the general volatility of the market during this period,⁵⁹ meant that increasing pressure was gradually being exerted within the studio system to ‘go small’ as well as to focus on blockbusters.⁶⁰ By this I mean, to leverage studio power at a more potentially economically advantageous level, by producing lower-budget films of the type which could once have been characterized as ‘indie’, but by the early 1990s, were vulnerable in an environment where “the necessary conditions for establishing a successful first run at the box office...are subject to the limitations imposed by vertical integration” (ibid., 28).

Justin Wyatt's exploration of the 'major independent' identifies in more detail how industrial structures changed for independent and marginal distributors during the period. Increased demand related to video and cable expansion initially seemed to promise great potential for independent producers⁶¹ but the concomitant rapid growth of costs during the period of the late 1980s and early 1990s in fact led to the ruin of many independents; for some, where initial success had been swift, overextension was a serious problem.⁶² Wyatt also cites a tendency for audiences viewing at home to be somewhat less adventurous than initially anticipated, frequently choosing to rent or buy films which had previously been successful at the box office. This is particularly interesting in light of the complexities of achieving successful market positioning when it comes to Smart films. We can see, for example, how a film such as *Fight Club* proved extremely successful in ancillary markets: both in foreign markets and particularly via DVD sales following an initial lacklustre performance at the cinema. However, Wyatt may have underestimated the extent to which audiences will seek out new cinematic experiences under certain conditions; timing, in particular, seems to have been of importance in the industrial positioning of the Smart film. Tarantino's debut *Reservoir Dogs* is key here, in that while it received a very limited cinematic release and grossed just \$2.83 million, DVD sales eventually reached \$18.8 million – partially in response to the notoriety which *Pulp Fiction* would later achieve.⁶³

For Wyatt, New Line and Miramax became 'major independents' "by consistently developing movies with the potential to cross over beyond the art house market" (Wyatt, 1998, 76).⁶⁴ This highlights, to me, the sense in which Smart can usefully be viewed through the prism of genre as an industrially-motivated construction. New Line, Miramax, and later others (whether under the direct ownership of major studios or not) in essence developed Smart cinema as a liminal model: part-popular, part-marginal, utilising a wide range of generic strategies, textually drawing figurative relationships between the classical Hollywood narrative, art cinema, and cult film, and – formally as well as thematically – mobilising wider societal anxieties about creative work, 'authentic' expression, and mass culture. They did so by utilising its narrative and stylistic tendencies, including its tendencies towards hyper-extended hybridity, as tools of market differentiation, and by engaging enthusiastically with a media discourse that found it expedient to simultaneously (or alternately) validate Smart film as evidence of a creative 'movement', and problematize it as an expression of quasi-millennial angst. Textually hybrid, but industrially consistent in its liminal positioning, it

constitutes a trans-generic form, or a ‘mode’ in the sense in which ‘art cinema’ or ‘blockbuster’ are modes, their referential structures grounded more in *industrial* bearings and consumption outcomes than texts; defined in ‘otherness’ rather than as extant unit.

Another factor in the origins of the Smart film – or more particularly, in its filtration through to the mainstream – is the way in which discourses of auteurism became prominent during the 1990s. This is another interesting point of similarity between the way in which Smart cinema arose and how the New Hollywood of the 1960s and 1970s established itself.

Corrigan relates the increasing influence of the French position to the end of the studio system – a fraught transitional period, during which independent production companies attempted to exploit markets ignored by the majors⁶⁵ – and the need to find ways of ‘marking’ films for distinction, the rise of youth movements, the entry of cinema into the world of academia, and the rise of international art cinema (Corrigan, 1999, 40). Cook posits that the linking of auteurs with certain genres or styles – for example George Lucas with sci-fi, Spielberg with the spectacular blockbuster – and the rise in popularity of the saturation booking pattern, meant not only that promotion came to dominate the distribution and exhibition parts of the production cycle, but also that “[a]uteurism...became a marketing tool that coincided nicely with the rise of college-level film education among the industry’s most heavily-courted audience segment.” (Cook, 1999, 35)

While he is cynical about the manner in which this played itself out thereafter,⁶⁶ Cook’s argument that these auteur directors exercised a disproportionate (although not necessarily unwelcome) level of influence, formally and informally, is relevant. The 1990s iteration of New Hollywood-style auteurism, in the form of Smart, could perhaps be regarded as a reaction against the high-concept franchise brutalism of the 1980s – always bearing in mind that the characterisation of the 1980s as such is as much a discursive construct as the supposedly free-wheeling and experimental decade that followed. Certainly, the increasing centrality of quasi-alternative festivals played a key role in bringing marginal filmmakers to the attention of mainstream discourse; if Robert Redford’s goal in setting up Sundance was “to ‘eliminate the tension that can exist between the independents and the studios’” (Grainge, Jancovich and Monteith, 2007, 505) then its corollary was the associated diffusion of that tension in the media. As Kleinhans shows, this move into mainstream consciousness was swift:

By the mid-1990s the low-budget independent theatrical feature film gained enough consistent attention in the marketplace and public eye that such films were regularly reviewed across the media spectrum...the Sundance Film Festival became so well known that *Vanity Fair*'s April 1996 cover could headline 'Special Issue: Hollywood '96, From Sundance to Sunset.' (Kleinhans, 1999, 307)

The recruitment of outsiders has always been a way for Hollywood to periodically refresh its creative labour pool. However, a modal shift occurred in the 1990s which connected that labour movement with a nascent celebrity culture, and with a cultural discourse which conflated, in a somewhat naïve way, ideas of 'authenticity', 'counterculture' and 'consumerism' (see Heath and Potter 2004; Newman, 2009; Potter, 2010), perhaps in an attempt to express disquiet with the trajectory of late modernism and capitalism. Under these circumstances, the studios were able to utilise these tensions to 'unite' indie and mainstream film. Where potential market niches – often described at the time under the catch-all heading of 'Generation X' – had been tentatively identified at the beginning of the 1990s with films like *Reality Bites* (Richard Linklater, 1991), *Singles* (Cameron Crowe, 1992), and *Slacker* (Ben Stiller, 1994), the increasing tendency to include film directors in the circuit of 'celebrity' which had previously been reserved for onscreen stars created enhanced opportunities for the marketing and promotion of independent-style cinema.⁶⁷

As the big names of the 1980s began to be seen as out of touch with contemporary trends, or simply began looking to expand their range by moving into more 'serious' work, studios seeking artistic credibility could exploit the 'hip' credentials of filmmakers who had originally come from the independent sector (see Austin, 2007, 534-536) in search of profits as large as those which had – unexpectedly – come Miramax's way through their championing of Quentin Tarantino. Not only that, but they could embrace the auteuristic marketing of films as a low-cost – vital for those studios on the (relative) fringes of the industry, such as Miramax – promotional and positioning strategy, insofar as it aimed "to guarantee a relationship between audience and movie whereby an intentional and authorial agency governs, as a kind of brand-name vision whose aesthetic meanings and values have already been determined." (Corrigan, 1999, 40) It could be utilised similarly by audiences, as a mark of self-positioning and distinction, a means by which to access the (generally defined in opposition to the mainstream, that is, as 'alternative') signifiers of cool of the period.

‘Coolness’, or countercultural prestige, has been equally important to more conventional or elitist prestige in the establishment of the kind of evaluative hierarchies by which texts are publicly judged and privately consumed, and fan communities developed (see my discussion of prestige in Chapter Five). However, one important element during this particular period was the new centrality of filmmaking – rather than film consumption – within the discourse, as an *aspirational* activity. Indeed, Kleinhans argues that the myth of auteurism, and its hyping by the media, at this time is intimately linked to two things. The first is the growing perception during the period that, with increased demand for content via changes in film exhibition and the expansion of communication networks, new opportunities were opening up for so-called Generation Xers to become creative practitioners without relying on the traditional models of access – film school, ‘inheriting’ a related trade or business links, or apprenticeship via some related industry e.g. TV or music. The corollary to this was that, of course, one could notionally start out in indie film and then move to the ‘glamour’ of the mainstream; while Kleinhans does not explore this further, it is interesting to note that the cult of auteurism formed a highly functional means of obscuring the extent to which ‘Hollywood’ had become corporatized and hierarchically structured, and was arguably a great deal less ‘permeable’ than in the 1960s or 1970s.

The second is the extent to which filmmaking as a culturally-sanctioned creative activity had come to dominate traditional means of expression:

Just as an earlier generation of American intellectuals interested in narrative expression aspired to become novelists, by the end of the twentieth century the goal of becoming a screenwriter or screenwriter/director (or sometimes independent producer) was an important part of many young peoples’ imaginations. (Kleinhans, 1999, 310)

This idea of a culturally-sanctioned, artistically-legitimated cinema means that the ‘coolness exchange’ worked in a variety of more and less complex ways. One could argue, for example, that just as Quentin Tarantino’s official ‘sanctioning’ by France as the home of the auteur theory, through the conferral of the Palme D’Or, provided him with a certain amount of artistic credibility, equally it allowed the French to refute some of the traditional accusations of elitism, hidebound conservatism, and a simple failure to ‘get’ American culture, which have been levelled at them.

An interesting consequence of the position the Smart period carved out, albeit temporarily, is the industrial space within the broader notional ‘Hollywood’ that it seems to have opened during the period for two groups. The first (outside of the direct scope of this study) being filmmakers working outside of America in a more distinctly ‘European’ or even art-house style (Tom Tykwer, Michael Haneke, Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu). The second is the parallel resuscitation, or movement into the mainstream, of the work of filmmakers who had been longtime practitioners of ‘left of centre’ cinema within a Hollywood context.⁶⁸

Robert Altman’s late career revival with *The Player* (1992) and *Short Cuts* (1993) also constitutes a clue to the generic origins of the Smart film; as Robin Wood notes about him as early as 1975 “[Altman’s] best films are hybrids...products of a fusion of ‘European’ aspirations with American genres” (Wood, 1975, 29). While this revival would be short-lived, comparisons could be made between Altman’s work and the work of several other Smart filmmakers, particularly that of Paul Thomas Anderson. My conclusion is that the critical and, to a certain extent, commercial acceptance of the Smart filmmakers who came to prominence during the 1990s and just after (themselves influenced by the progenitors, such as Altman and Cronenberg), itself paved the way for a reconsideration of their influences, and an associated elevation of their status to that of ‘grandees’ or respected veterans. While this elevation tends to happen as part of any generational transition, I argue that here, prestige became the mechanism by which the industrial territory proportionally shifted, allowing former outsiders to be recuperated into the mainstream.

This general discussion of the industrial positioning of specific directors’ careers also calls to mind Richard Caves’ work on the creative industries (Caves, 2000), particularly the sociological notion of the industrial ‘gatekeeper’ within each creative realm (visual and plastic arts, the music industry and publishing as well as cinema). That is,

its set of intermediaries who select artists. Dedication to advancing the arts is often present, but profit is usually sought, and the costs of humdrum inputs must be covered...many are excluded at the gate, although they would gladly sign the contract that the gatekeeper offers to those who pass. (Caves, 2000, 21)

The question of who may pass, and why, is a large one – Chuck Kleinhans, as I have mentioned above, makes some highly relevant points regarding the *perception* of gates being more – or less – tightly closed. However, one key to the assimilation of Smart filmmakers

into the wider Hollywood industry is the perception on the part of Hollywood ‘gatekeepers’ – the set of script readers, producers, financial experts and other studio executives who decide on the fate of proposed projects – that their work represents a reasonable return on invested risk.

While one way of minimising risk is to rely on proven star talent and formulaic output, resulting in a certain textual homogeneity (which itself may prove risky), another is to *diversify*, “to form a portfolio of film projects divergent in terms of genre, target market, budget size (hence different risks and returns involved) and the phase of production” (Kawashima, 2011, 481).⁶⁹ The issue here, as Kawashima acknowledges, is that only the majors have the kind of financial and structural clout to successfully do so:

[t]o sustain such a portfolio requires a vast amount of capital beyond the reach of the independents, while the portfolio distributes risks between different film products, allows successful ones to subsidise failures and levels cash flow over time...Economies of scope seen here, thus, probably help amplify the effects of the economies of scale. (ibid.)⁷⁰

An additional element to be taken into account is that, given that our notional ‘Hollywood’ is, as well as an industrial accumulation, also a peer network and professional community or “art centre” (ibid. 30), those filmmakers whose early work achieves financial and critical success are more likely to be offered a wider range of further opportunities than those whose early work does not. Therefore the industry becomes a self-selecting employment pool, which equates past performance with future success (although clearly this is aside from the gatekeeping difficulties associated with making and distributing early work in the first place)⁷¹. The converse also applies, as one box-office failure can ‘taint’ a filmmaker’s reputation. ‘Market stability’ then, for the Hollywood industry, may involve a narrowing of options for marginal filmmakers with non-traditional perspectives, and a concomitant (over)reliance by gatekeepers on filmmakers already defined as established, once the initial difficulty of passing by the gatekeepers has been overcome.

Industrial drives to minimise risk, and the sense of established writers and directors as assets to position within an overall product platform (the ‘slate’) contribute to a culture of solidification, characterised by retention of particular skill-sets (directorial styles, thematic

preoccupations) within the mainstream, once they have established themselves as financially successful at the margins. In light of this tendency for filmmakers to move from the fringes into the mainstream, one could argue from the examples I have cited above that, influenced by the drive to minimise creative risk in the face of high costs, many of the more innovative or radical tendencies of smart film have become more ‘flattened’ – or utilised for strictly spectacular ends – in an effort to reach ever-larger audiences, as the drive to repeat success becomes an apparently inexorable movement towards reassuring generic repetition.⁷² This, then, is a function of the fact that Hollywood constitutes a multiplicity of different things: “a centralised core of production, and a powerful nexus of economic, cultural and social interaction. What appears on the surface as an unravelling spool, on closer inspection is revealed as a tight-knit fabric of integrated working relationships, practices and technologies” (Harbord, 2002, 98).

To return to the industrial history which gave rise to Smart, it seems clear to me from Wyatt’s account of the ‘New Hollywood’ of the 1970s and 1980s that it was the idea of market differentiation via niche segmentation which was the primary focus for those companies which would become the ‘major independents.’ This is illustrated in the way New Line established itself firstly in non-theatrical distribution to, e.g. college campuses with films which “mixed foreign, sexploitation, gay cinema, rock documentaries and ‘midnight specials’ reserved exclusively for midnight exhibition. The intent behind these choices was to tap markets under-served by the majors, and to maximize the difference of New Line’s product from more traditional commercial film.” (Wyatt, 1998, 76) and only later went into production via Fine Line Features, with its industrial niche already established, and budgets easily split between the more ‘exploitation’ elements of its slate and those projects with greater cachet.⁷³

This brings us to Geoff King’s interpretation of the field, and his concept of ‘Indiewood.’ This suggests a production environment and discursive arena where institutional practices and industrial structures mirror those of the major studios, but produces texts that share a softened (or indeed neutered) combination of textual and stylistic elements taken largely from the independent or art-house sector. These would be “hybrid forms that draw on a number of different inheritances, including those associated with notions of ‘art’ cinema and more mainstream narrative feature traditions.” (King, 2009, 5). This is regardless of strict

industrial origin, as King identifies not only those operations which can be acknowledged as ‘legitimately independent’ (insofar as such a definition is possible) but also, specifically, those which can be located squarely within the greater studio-industrial Hollywood framework, whether “indie/specialty-oriented distributors and/or producers owned by the major studio companies...studio-created subsidiaries...or formerly independent operations taken over by the studios.” (ibid., 4).⁷⁴

For him, it is “an industrial/commercial phenomenon, the product of particular forces within the American film industry from the 1990s and 2000s” (ibid., 2) among which he identifies a strong desire within the mainstream system to emulate the box-office success of ‘breakout’ independent features from the late 1980s and early 1990s, and of lower-grossing independents with strong profit-to-cost ratios, and linking this with the identification and/or creation of significant audiences for quasi-art-house fare. For major studios, particularly following the massive cost hikes of the 1980s, there were potentially multiple advantages to investing relatively modest amounts of capital in quasi-independent subsidiaries. Allocating such work to a ‘specialist’ division allowed for more effective exploitation of the potential – marginal but still financially substantial, were it to be brought within the reach of the majors – independent-leaning market, often through recruiting the production expertise of figures from the independent sector (such as Harvey Weinstein, James Schamus, and Christine Vachon).

These figures were – as what I would regard as a direct result of the corporate co-option of the quasi-independent marketplace – all gradually assimilated into the mainstream, whether in the case of the Weinstains’ sale of Miramax to Disney, or Schamus’s position as CEO of Focus Features (Vachon still operates largely at the intersection of the mainstream and independent worlds). A similar ‘assimilative process’ affecting executives is involved to that involving certain Smart directors, albeit in a much less publicly visible context, and complicated by the fact that producers can tend to exhibit a higher degree of variation across their projects. Without wishing to label it as intrinsically *more* significant than any other generational change in Hollywood’s history, this is the period associated with what King labels “the rise of a small but significant group of executives committed to creating some space for less conventional approaches within or on the margins of the studio system.” (ibid., 7)⁷⁵

The ‘old guard’ within was being replaced by a new generation coming of age during the period; for example Robert Daly and Terry Semel spent eighteen years and twenty-four years respectively at Warner Bros. from the 1980s into the 2000s, but were being followed closely by the likes of Bill Gerber and Lorenzo di Bonaventura (without whom films like *Three Kings* and *The Matrix* would, King asserts, have been unlikely to be made by Warner) and Bill Mechanic at 20th Century Fox⁷⁶ (Fox Searchlight having been established during his tenure, in 1994); for him similar functions were served by Amy Pascal at Sony, Stacey Snider and Casey Silver at Universal (the latter a particular champion of Steven Soderbergh), and Mike de Luca at New Line and subsequently DreamWorks. At the same time, increasing costs meant that generally speaking, the financial risk entailed in assigning untested writers and directors to large-scale projects had become too great for comfort. The market environment within which a company like Good Machine operated meant that specialty subsidiaries could more easily manage the process of developing emerging filmmakers, allowing them the luxury of ‘practice runs’ on medium-sized budgets, while also exercising an element of risk minimization. The careers of such filmmakers as Michel Gondry, moving from the Smart ‘circuit’ to the \$90m budget of *The Green Hornet* (2011),⁷⁷ and Steven Soderbergh, lend some credence to this theory.

King also notes the way in which studios moved towards co-opting projects and practices associated with independence as a way of producing “attractive vehicles for existing star performers, enabling the studios to maintain valuable relationships while providing different or more challenging work than the roles with which stars are usually associated” (King, 2007, 6-7). This is also linked strongly, at an industrial level, with the escalation of economic star-power during the 1980s. This period saw an apparently paradoxical contraction of the range of acting options available to many of Hollywood’s top stars, or at least the apparent limiting of the range of the ‘circuitry’ between genre and star, whereby movement outside of the genre within which one had achieved stardom – and inscribed a distinctive star persona, such as Tom Cruise’s cocky adolescent charmer – was constrained. While one might imagine that the range of seductions necessary to keep mega-salaried stars compliant could easily be fine-tuned to include the odd vanity project, an accidental effect of the period’s tendency towards horizontal expansion⁷⁸ seems to have been to keep stars (particularly those who traded on hyper-masculine hard-bodied action images⁷⁹) more or less continually engaged within narrow parameters.

This began to change in the following decade, as the power dynamic in which stars were engaged began to alter. Moving away from a kind of *ossification* of the relationship between role and persona, the 1990s began to, at a wider cultural level, privilege a certain shifting or fluidity in identity, which I believe began to see its reflection in a resistance to genre-based typecasting. As in real life, a ‘softening’ or blurring of gendered roles and racial identities came into evidence, in everything from the resurgence of the romantic comedy, to the new action hero.⁸⁰ While the top-grossing American film of 1991 was hardbody classic *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (Cameron, 1991), the hero of Cameron’s 1997 record-breaker *Titanic* provided a very different model of masculinity.⁸¹ This shift in the territory of identity politics coincided with globalisation, the rise of the mega-corporation, and the rise of attendant concerns about the nature – and future – of work.

While it is a stretch to compare pampered multimillionaire film stars to the average worker, it does seem possible to see echoes of post-Fordist economic logic in the newfound emphasis on ‘versatility’ (that is, flexible specialization) in acting circles. This ranged from blockbuster actors taking roles in out-of-the-mainstream films, such as Tom Cruise’s memorably against-type cameo in *Magnolia*,⁸² to respected film actors moving into the previously devalued medium of television, as with Kyle McLachlan and *Twin Peaks*, with the goal of seeking status via critical acclaim rather than box office remuneration. It also takes in the idea of career rehabilitation via projects which feature ironic casting; that is, not necessarily casting against generic type, but against judgements made by industrial and public discourse. The stellar example here is Tarantino’s casting of John Travolta in *Pulp Fiction* – while Travolta’s bankability was never an issue, as demonstrated by the *Look Who’s Talking* series, his persona was so closely associated with several (at this point) terminally un-cool cultural moments including disco, that its standing seemed unrecoverable. And yet, recover it – albeit temporarily – Tarantino did.

Certainly, during the period there was a sense in which the options available to actors had opened up; as John Sayles said in 1996, “‘It never used to be hip the way that it is now to be in little independent movies...It was a signal that your career was in trouble’.” (Levy, 1999, 14) This increased fluidity of movement between types of role, and the tendency for actors to evince a greater interest in parlaying indie roles into ‘high culture’ cachet – and a counterbalancing trend for success in indie roles to sometimes harbinger future mainstream

success (see Zahed, 1998) – are also perhaps linked to the intensification of celebrity culture during the period.⁸³ While this is a tentative link that invites further scrutiny, contemporary celebrity culture does not constitute a closed and hierarchical circuit of singular representations, closely controlled by the studio system, and dependent on that system for good will (and therefore access to celebrities), as might once have been the case.

Instead it involves an uncontrollable proliferation of multiple images, without centre, frequently irrepressible, and largely delivered outside of the mainstream (corporatized) media. In this context, it becomes difficult for a star persona to retain an ‘intact’ centre: therefore rigid framing, or generic policing, of that persona may be rendered impossible, or pointless. Indeed, one could argue that the ‘real’ individual’s strongest mean of protecting their private self lies in an attempt to hide, or disappear, that self via continually *shifting* their persona from mode to production mode.⁸⁴ Therefore we have something of a chicken-and-egg situation; the presence of star actors in independent and quasi-independent roles helped insulate against financial risk, provided free publicity in place of conventional marketing, encouraged a culture of investment in similar productions, and added extra dimensions to the star’s own persona, which could be useful both professionally and personally (insofar as ‘celebrity culture’ can be described as ‘personal’).⁸⁵

However, none of this would be of particular import without a film industry which was prepared – again, via a circuitous route of agglomeration, international expansion, and vertical integration into all manner of delivery media – to encourage the identification of James Schamus’s specific but substantial audiences. Certainly, by 1998, the movement of stars into independent cinema was recognised as being of specific value and relevance to the industry as a wider entity, as illustrated by Cassian Elwes, then head of the independent film department at the William Morris Agency: “Right now, the only ancillaries that you can count on are pay TV in America and foreign sales...Both of these require stars to drive consumer interest. It doesn't matter if the film costs \$1 million or \$10 million.” (Roman, 1998, 11)

While stars since the early days of cinema have engaged in struggles for creative control with the studios, the discursive repositioning of stars is illustrative. We see a movement from the star as figurative, if wildly expensive, ‘cog in the wheel’ during the 1980s – exemplified in

the perceived interchangeability of action heroes such as Stallone, Schwarzenegger and Van Damme – to their symbolic relocation during the 1990s, via the medium of independent cinema, to a more officially central position within the creative ‘engine’ of film production. This may well be linked to the increasing growth in social and economic importance of what Richard Florida describes as “the Creative Class” (Florida, 2002), as well as the fluctuating value of ‘prestige’ within the cinematic economy.⁸⁶

To bring this account back to the economic details, the direct industrial underpinnings which brought Smart cinema to its primary period of prominence, I return to Thomas Schatz. His main focus is on positing a three-tier theory of Hollywood during the early twenty-first century which takes into account the effects of the changes of the 1980s and 1990s that I outline here, and I believe Schatz’s account of the period is the most accurate. He maintains that one feature of the contemporary Hollywood industry is that it now constitutes a three-tier system.⁸⁷ The top tier consists of the ‘Big Six’ studios (Warner, Disney, Paramount, 20th Century Fox, Universal, Columbia) whose primary focus is the franchise film or more generally ‘the blockbuster’, and whose production practices are driven by ‘conglomerated’ high-level priorities.

Schatz sees two sectors as operating below this level. One is the sector defined by “conglomerate-owned film subsidiaries” (Schatz, 2009, 25) or “Dependents” such as Fox Searchlight, Focus Features, Sony Pictures Classics, and Fine Line, producing “more modestly budgeted films in the \$30 million to \$50 million range for more specialized and discriminating audiences” (ibid.) but which, crucially, have a relative degree of autonomy from their parent company, as well as significant access to production funding, marketing capacity, and distribution power, in comparison with the third tier. The third ranking is that set of ‘truly’ independent production and distribution companies, which, as he points out, constitutes

literally hundreds of companies that supply over half of all theatrical releases, usually budgeted in the \$5 million to \$10 million range (often far less), and that compete for a pitifully small share of the motion picture marketplace, due largely to the proliferation of the conglomerate-owned film subsidiaries.” (ibid.)

This indicates most clearly why the spontaneous eruption of a particular form or style, or the intrusion of innovation to within the system, or indeed the systematic alteration of a genre, *cannot* occur without the intimate involvement – the backing, more or less – of the major studios, those with access to the distribution and exhibition networks. This analysis also tallies with Allen J. Scott’s mapping and analysis of Hollywood production and distribution, which he sees as being founded on a combination of flexible specialisation and systems-house forms of production.⁸⁸ An important caveat is that the changes in technological consumption practices (via home viewing, on-phone access, downloading of the legal and otherwise variety) which have come about during the past two decades have the potential to allow audiences to challenge this orthodoxy. In this sense, audiences are enabled to select viewing material in ways which free them not just from localised exhibition practices, but also in theory from mainstream production (see for example the proliferation of web series and individualised content on Youtube). However, the conglomerates also maintain a gatekeeping function in terms of managing information about available content, thereby reinforcing the ‘buzz’ of discourse around corporate products: to give one example, lifestyle magazine division IPC, gossip and light entertainment magazines *People* and *Entertainment Weekly*, and gossip website TMZ.com all belong to Time Warner.⁸⁹

King discusses the power wielded by individuals working within the Hollywood system, and notes that the high standing attributed to particular projects was “owed to the industrial clout of individual senior executives or studio heads and that enabled them to proceed without being subjected to the full array of processes usually associated with the operations of the majors” (King, 2009, 227): I would argue that King perhaps overestimates the level of significance that individuals can hold within a highly codified industrial system. Although he notes that it is a specific *reprioritisation* of the studios that has facilitated this, my argument is that the thrust to, at a systemic level, prioritise one type of project over another is born of industrial-structural factors rather than personalised or individualised ones, and it is these factors which enable the ‘mavericks’ to move to the centre of the industry, rather than the other way around. I believe only industrially-centred analysis can account for the move to prominence of particular filmmakers during this period, as outlined previously. In this I concur with Scott, who shows that throughout the transition to ‘New Hollywood’, while the majors still dominate “they also rely more and more on smaller subsidiaries and independent

production companies in order to spread their risks, to diversify their market offerings, and to sound out emerging market opportunities.” (Scott, 2002, 963)

Therefore, while the likes of Christine Vachon and James Schamus had worked towards opening space within mainstream markets for many years, the change here was not within independent cinema, but within the Hollywood industry itself. As King’s case studies of films such as *American Beauty*, *Three Kings*, and *Solaris*⁹⁰ show (King, 2009, 141-230), during the period 1990-1995 the majors themselves, rather than even the specialty divisions, were providing what King described as “‘protected’ status” (ibid., 227) – in terms of production, distribution and marketing budgets and expertise – to films which a few years previously might have been relegated to the industrial margins. Essentially, for King, Indiewood is characterised not by what might be understood within genre studies as textual hybridity, but alternatively, by an *industrial* hybridity:

distinctive...without being subject to any single detailed definition. Its most clear-cut ground of demarcation is industrial-institutional, in the form of the output of the studio-owned specialty divisions, but this also includes some films that remain more distinctly ‘indie’ in character and Indiewood can also be taken to embrace some work produced on occasion from within the main studio operations themselves.” (ibid., 271)

King acknowledges that the case for isolating Indiewood is somewhat tenuous, but takes the position that it is characterised both textually, and as an institutional model of production, with a significant, and in his opinion *causal* relationship between the two. As he emphasises, “Indiewood is used at the textual level to distinguish examples in which such an aim or strategy [crossing over from art-house to commercial market] appears to be embodied more fundamentally in the fabric of the production itself.” (ibid., 5). This, too, aligns with King’s characterisation of Indiewood as a broadly industrial hybrid, and suggestion that the Smart film functions as a ‘hybrid industrial practice’ as much as hybrid form. By this I mean not that Smart fails to display significant textual hybridity, as clearly it does, but that as textual hybridity has become as dominant a feature of mainstream cinema as it has any other kind,⁹¹ there may not be a specific diagnostic value at an *industrial* level in arguing for the existence of textual hybridity itself as a definitive feature, whatever about the value of attempting to draw distinctions around specific textual manifestations within that hybridity.

This is not a new position; Perren argues that 1990s independent cinema “could be considered a hybrid of the studio system’s A picture and the post-studio era exploitation film.” (Perren, 2001, 37) For her this emphasises the importance both of wider public (including press and industry) discourse to establishing the ‘credentials’ of quasi-independent cinema, and also the extent to which the idea of ‘independence’ itself became an important discursive marker, eliding the extent to which supposedly marginal or maverick figures were imbricated within the system itself. In her industrial analysis and framing of the importance of extra-economic factors, I agree, but feel that she here underplays the textual elements. In addition to industrial underpinnings, I would point too towards the importance of the textual interplay of genre, tone, theme, and formal experimentation in establishing Smart cinema as a category upon which these discursive processes act, however loosely that category might be constituted.

The tendency also exists, as Thomas Austin points out, for film theory to focus on the results of the moment of viewing, without adequately contextualising the manner in which “patterns of reception are anticipated by the industry and feed back...into financing, production, and marketing decisions; and how practices of consumption are informed, but never simply determined, by such strategies.” (Austin, 2002, 2) For Austin, putting film production (and indeed film theory) in a context which acknowledges the inter-discursive nature of the industry, and triangulates the relationships between texts, the contexts in which those texts are produced, and audiences, results in acknowledging the “industrially motivated hybridity” (ibid., 114) of the contemporary film text.⁹² Therefore, to regard Smart cinema as an industrial formation is to foreground the fact that its industrially hybrid form is *purposeful*; its industrial purpose is to siphon off the ‘small but significant’ audiences for art-house cinema, and also to act as something of a training arena for mainstream audiences willing to be nudged towards a wider variety of formal and thematic practice.

Here, Smart cinema becomes the textual expression of a recognised feature of the economics not just of Hollywood, but of any marketplace dominated by a few major players – after all, “product differentiation is an important strategy for monopolists and oligopolists to discourage new entry.” (Kawashima, 2011, 485) To link Austin and Perren in a more elaborated way, the notional characteristic of ‘indie/studio hybridity’ itself also becomes an important extra-textual referent, as part of both public discourse and the industrial power

dynamics which dictate production slates and marketing strategies. The notion of ‘independence’ or quasi-independence thereby becomes part of the intertextual relay, via “such apparatuses as advertising and promotional materials (posters, lobby cards, commercial tie-ins, etc.), motion picture magazines, review articles, and academic film criticism.” (Verevis, 1997, 12)

Conclusions

From a political economy perspective we can come close to what might constitute a definition of ‘Smart cinema’: an intersection of mainstream and independent American film that is, crucially, distributed by and exhibited within the mainstream. Whether produced by strictly independent production companies, by major-owned specialty film subsidiaries, or some combination thereof, it can be considered to have arisen and briefly flourished during the period 1990-2005. This group of films, illustrating an apparently paradoxical (during a period in which the action blockbuster dominated worldwide markets) tendency for the major studios to gravitate formally towards the margins as well as for the independent sector to move to the mainstream, was the result of a combination of a variety of factors.

First was the politically-motivated neoliberal deregulation of the wider media industry during the Reagan regime, resulting in a massive drive towards international conglomeration, and the unifying of previously stratified media production and delivery channels (cinema, television, internet, telecoms). This, combined with increasing economic and media globalisation (through international free trade agreements, the deregulation of capital and labour markets) produced wider, more internationalised markets which could be exploited – arguably monopolised⁹³ – via a variety of production strategies. Within this context, rising costs necessitated a drive towards market expansion, and a strategy of mobilising resources in service of product diversification has been utilised in order to achieve this. Major studios could appeal to broad, mass markets with big budget, dialogue-light action spectacles designed to easily cross borders. They could also diversify through low- to medium-budget production, with an emphasis on the ‘long tail’ of post-cinematic exhibition, thereby developing small, high-value niche audiences of the type likely to base purchasing decisions on notions of prestige, quality, and *impressions* of independence, auteurial creativity, stylistic

innovation, and even counter-cultural authenticity, regardless of whether these impressions were justified at an industrial level.

We may regard it as a hybrid form, industrially; produced and marketed in ways which indicate a kind of cohesiveness, but characterised also by a tension at the textual level, in how its formal elements adhere to or deviate from this industrial cohesion. Here it is the extent to which a film is marketed – or needs to be marketed to, in order to recoup higher production costs – to a broader rather than narrower audience, which most accurately determines the extent to which its textual features tend to be constrained within a matrix or discourse of ‘accessibility’. In the case of Smart cinema, then, we have an illustration of how market and industry factors (rising costs, increased star power, the rise of globalisation, changes in focus at a regulatory level, and an expanded range of delivery media) resulted in an agglomerated corporate structure which employed intensive marketing and promotion in a close-to monopolistic system⁹⁴ to expand into all markets, co-opting the ‘indie’ film, along with notions of ‘quality’ and ‘originality’ in order to corner substantial niche audiences. This set of circumstances was bolstered at a discursive level by a Hollywood-focused popular and industrial media itself intricately entwined with the self-same industrial structures, and keen, for its own purposes, to narrativise this process of market segmentation into the idea of a ‘New New Hollywood’. Here, industrial elements were parried into a story of innovative and revolutionary auteurs infiltrating or breaching the system from without, rather than one of the industry widening out to assimilate them in search of identifiable, small but significant, markets. Crucially, this narrative was seen as embodying particular values which the wider discourse of the 1980s, with its wide focus on spectacle, blockbuster, and mass audiences, had been seen to neglect. It is this quasi-auteurist perspective which I hope to unpack in my next chapter.

Chapter Four: Smart film, the auteur as commodity, and cult cinema

As a theoretical construct, while it has fallen out of academic fashion, auteurism (or more accurately its popular shadow) has, as seen in the previous chapter, steadily been co-opted by the film and associated entertainment industry over the past thirty years. In this sense it functions as a discursive element which can be harnessed for positioning purposes, in ways which help to reinforce the stratification of the industry and its products. Certainly, as John Caughie points out, while superseded in academic accounts by an almost archivist keenness to give filmmaking its institutional and collaborative due

the auteur is everywhere else – in publicity, in journalistic reviews, in television programmes, in film retrospectives, in the marketing of cinema. Sometime around the point at which Film Studies began to be embarrassed by its affiliation to the author, the film industry and its subsidiaries began to discover with renewed enthusiasm the value of authorial branding for both marketing and reputation. (Caughie, 2008, 409)

This can particularly be seen in the manner in which, while certain films are discursively (by which I mean not just in industry publications, but also in popular publications and in public dialogue) judged by the contemporary obsession with box-office figures⁹⁵ others play on the concept of the auteur as a sales tool; one reaching beyond simple marketing, and well into audience conceptions of what kind of films are ‘for them’. In essence, the idea of auteurism serves to frame film texts and the work of individual filmmakers in the way it permeates through multi-faceted engagements with, and relationships between, the media industries (not simply the studios, but also the press), the audience, filmmakers, the academy, and texts themselves.

Auteuristic framings traditionally functioned to add complexity to questions of genre and, in a quasi-Romantic sense, recuperate film work from its institutional ownership and into a field defined as more clearly personal and ‘artistic’. They still do so, and in a way that affects discussion of Smart filmmakers, in that one element frequently called upon in discursive references to them is the classical auteuristic position that it is in “the transcendence, not the comfortable inhabitation, of genre that marked the auteur” (Langford, 2005, 10). This of course also links, modally, Smart cinema with the art film, an interpretation which privileges the perspective that sees Smart films as located outside of the mainstream. Therefore,

auteurism in this context works to elide industrial considerations, and harnesses the discourse of prestige – in service of films themselves and for their producers – in a manner which supports Smart’s claims of distinction even as it negates the (often strictly commercial) territory within which it operates.

Additionally, references to auteurism are used to disguise generic play; the implication being that where a filmmaker’s body of work – or even a single film – cannot be easily categorised in generic terms, auteurism can be (explicitly or implicitly) evoked as a kind of default, a catch-all categorical reference. Therefore, auteurism is a term that is not used to complicate questions of text and genre, but to avoid them entirely – to remove genre from the field of discussion, whether for journalistic ‘shorthand’ purposes in conveying to potential audiences that less generically-accessible work is under discussion, or to co-opt the often unspoken link popularly made between auteurism and prestige. The larger question here is, of course, “in what service are these discourses of auteurism mobilized?”, particularly in the context of restriction implied by King’s assertion that “Hollywood is willing to embrace only a limited quota of genuine novelty, and then only when underwritten by the guarantee provided by a ‘star’ director’s name, or by the stars attracted by the presence of such figures” (King, 2005, 262).

I contend that auteurism, as a discursively-constructed idea (distinct from the academic framework of ‘auteur theory’), performs a variety of roles, and serves a number of industrial positioning functions, within the context of Smart cinema. The point here is not to search for ways of classifying or excluding filmmakers on the basis of ‘auteuristic’ attributes or tendencies, but to look at the way in which the notion of the auteur functions in constructions and interpretations of the Smart corpus, and the filmmakers which produce it. The first element of interest relates to how I have conceptualised the idea of genre here, as a ‘gateway’ or identificatory trope for audiences looking to orient themselves in a media environment characterised by a proliferation of options, and to self-position their consumption and engagement practices along a continuum running from work discursively located as ‘independent’ to that identified as ‘mainstream’.

Within this context, the *idea* – the accumulated cultural accretion – of auteurism functions as a kind of stand-in or placeholder for genre, in cases where generic classifications for specific

texts are elusive or unhelpfully broad. This would be the case with, for example, the generically hybrid but tonally distinct quality of Wes Anderson's work; or where the relative cultural position of the generic references which offer themselves for comparison presents complications relating to prestige, as with Paul Thomas Anderson's evocation of 'unfashionable' generic tropes (family melodrama, pornography – see Chapter Six). Auteurism can also be used to mitigate specific instances of – industrial or cultural – boundary-transgression, as is the case with David Fincher's *Fight Club* and Todd Solondz' *Happiness*, which I discuss in Chapter Eight. For the former, quasi-auteuristic framings (some created and perpetuated by the paratexts Fincher himself had a hand in generating) of Fincher as uncompromising creative visionary, facing off against a cowardly conglomerate ('too radical for the studios') drew attention away from the film as a box office failure and towards its later discursive position as a cult favourite. In the case of the latter, sympathetic framings of *Happiness* as a serious art film, and Solondz as its auteur by association, converted what might have been a (relatively) simple distinction of 'taste' into something of a *cause célèbre* in the field of artistic censorship.

Here, that fluid mythic construct 'the auteur' may be invoked in order to encircle Smart films within a theoretical perimeter – often linked to, or created by, paratexts as much as by texts themselves – of cultural legitimation. The cumulative effect is to produce a kind of industrial-cultural category we might describe as 'the auteur film', but this should not be seen as automatically synonymous with 'art cinema'. While theories of art cinema do lean on conceptions of auteurism, my conviction is that, although Smart cinema may adopt some of its strategic approaches, textually it tends not to adopt art cinema's 'sincerity' or earnestness of perspective, and industrially it tends not to be positioned as 'art'. However, similarities of approach do occur, in ways which blur the boundaries, and in particular, ideas of prestige and quality are most likely to be drawn upon. This blurring can be seen in the process by which, throughout the 1990s, Smart films began to infiltrate festival culture outside of the US, where considerations of cinema *as art* have traditionally been foregrounded.

Secondly, the idea of auteurism now clearly functions not simply as a cultural category, but as a positioning and branding tool: both for texts themselves, and for their creators, as per Adrian Martin who asserts that "this is the era of the auteur as commodity, as brand name." (Martin, 2004, 95), or Claire Perkins, who points out that

[the] ‘celebrity’ auteur figure necessarily changes auteurism as a process insofar as the practice of decipherment is entirely eluded: directors now openly reveal their ‘desire’ in interviews, profiles, DVD commentaries, trailers, and advertisements. The commerce of auteurism has meant that auteurs are now hyperaware of themselves as an abbreviated image. (Perkins, 2008, 19-20)

This tendency, then, actively supports and facilitates the reading – for filmmakers themselves and within the industry, as much as for audiences and the wider media – of Smart cinema through a lens which views it as part of a narrative of creative succession. In this way, the emergence of Smart filmmakers is distanced from industrially-based historical analysis, and instead naturalised as an inevitable, irrepressible creative invasion, embedded within a mythic structure which hides its industrial underpinnings.

This of course greatly minimises the extent to which Smart cinema constitutes a recouping of independent stylistic and creative frameworks by and for the dominant Hollywood studios, by creating a ‘narrative of succession’ in which, for example, the likes of Tarantino, Fincher, Jonze, and the Andersons are viewed as successors to the presumed cultural inheritance of Scorsese, Robert Altman, Sidney Lumet or John Cassavetes. This is not simply a matter of generational decay and renewal, but points directly to the way in which, as Shyon Baumann (2007) emphasises, during the period of the 1960s and 1970s, the Hollywood industry began to offer more conceptual space to directors keen to think of themselves as ‘fine artists’. The transition of the classical studio system into a rather more post-Fordist ‘New Hollywood’ incarnation instituted not just a material and productive shift of great magnitude, but also discursively solidified the impression of the maverick or countercultural auteur.⁹⁶

The replication of this impression in the 1990s did not simply, therefore, attempt to secure legitimacy for contemporary texts and filmmakers, but also worked to retrospectively convey a kind of historically-based legitimacy on ‘Hollywood’ itself in its function as a creative institution as well as an industrial one. To be able to discursively narrativise the emergence of the Smart filmmakers as the passing-on of an imagined ‘historical burden’ of creativity, an assumed inheritance of cultural significance, facilitated the viewing of ‘Hollywood’ – at this point more globalised than ever, following merger after international merger – as retaining a certain degree of control over its own historical narrative or image, and as culturally relevant beyond the multiplex. In short, positioning the filmmakers of the 1990s and 2000s as part of a narrative-historical through-line, as inheritors of the cultural mantle of the ‘great’ American

directors of the 1960s and 1970s,⁹⁷ allowed Hollywood to extend and reinforce the mythological aspects of its own history (itself a powerful positioning and marketing tool), as well as to manufacture prestige.

Although he does not specifically link his work to national cinema, Adrian Martin may have inadvertently identified another factor when he writes “[u]ltimately, I suspect that the doubt implicit in ‘looking for the auteur’ is symptomatic of a larger shift or problem in global film culture...When world cinema is in a flux...then the auteur becomes obscured, lost, uncertain, put into question.” (Martin, 2004, 96) Smart cinema’s emergence may also relate to the ways in which auteurism and national cinema can be strongly linked (see Elsaesser, 2005; Perkins, 2008). If, for example, as in Elsaesser’s example, Ingmar Bergman comes to exemplify Swedish cinema, or more specifically the international identity of Swedish cinema, for several decades (Elsaesser, 2005, 15)⁹⁸ then it is equally consistent to posit that Smart cinema – or at least the work of those who incline more easily towards ‘indie auteur’ interpretations – may function as a kind of *de facto* American national cinema. This aligns with Newman’s contention that “indie cinema in the United States has functioned as an alternative American national cinema.....indie culture is to some significant extent a national culture, even if it is not essentially concerned with thematizing national identity.” (Newman, 2011, 16-17)

This perspective is coloured by Newman’s thesis that indie cinema is legitimised through institutions of American culture such as film festivals and the urban social networks of the art-house, in the same way that the products of other national cinemas tend to be in their own countries. However he fails to point out the internationalised tensions at work: it is the global dominance of the American studio film in those markets, too, which may have the effect of restricting exhibition of national cinema to festivals and arthouses. In addition, at various points Smart cinema – in its most transgressive moments, formally or thematically – appears to function visibly as an oppositional practice: however, it must be remembered that it is rarely *industrially* resistant even where it is so textually. Therefore the sense in which indie cinema appears to function ‘as’ a national cinema is paradoxically due to the globalised nature of the American studio system, rather than due to any intrinsically oppositional characteristics of it. That the appearance of oppositionality is so easily conflated with its actuality is as a result of the international dominance of the studio system.

The American film industry as exemplified by the Hollywood blockbuster is transnational, as much by virtue of its patterns of capital and production as its model of international exhibition. While its cultural trappings and the texts it produces are almost always distinctively American,⁹⁹ there is no sense in which it can be seen as accommodating America ‘itself’; there are many ‘missing Americas’ from which the big-budget Hollywood film can be seen as alienated. To explore this idea would require more space than can be allocated here, but if we acknowledge that national cinema is often associated with auteurism and prestige, international cinephilia and film festival culture¹⁰⁰ and not necessarily with alternative visions of a nation, we can see some of the ways in which the concept of Smart film mobilises these ideas in some of its characteristics. This allows Smart to be positioned – when viewed deliberately through the narrow prism of the Hollywood industry, and excluding the body of actual independent American film which really should be characterised as ‘American national cinema’ – as a kind of unconscious or symbolic American national cinema. Seen to work in opposition to ‘American cinema’ as defined by bigger-budget work, and linked to the auteurs of the New Hollywood through assumptions of cultural inheritance which play on the fluidity of boundaries between high and low culture during Smart’s evolutionary period,¹⁰¹ these assumptions link to the perception that the Smart filmmakers are a particular generational grouping, sharing a background of popular culture heritage, in order to depict them as a more or less unified group.

This turn towards prestige (as exemplified here by the fetishisation of the auteur) was prompted by a number of different factors which I discuss elsewhere, including the industrial drive to resolve the bifurcation of the marketplace by colonising previously under-exploited niches, demographic changes, the radical restructuring of viewing channels and opportunities, and so on. However an additional element may have been the symbolic ‘de-auteuring’ of the industry in the 1980s. By this, I mean the (albeit simplistic) perception that post-classical Hollywood was focused to such an extent on the spectacle of the high concept blockbuster – including the industrial spectacle of spiralling costs and mammoth box office returns – that work which privileged ‘adult’ themes, formal experimentation, and narrative play had become antithetical. However, certainly by the 1990s, auteurism as a framing device had returned, if (as per Caughie) more in a popular context than an academic one.

Certainly, for the industry, this shadow of auteurism serves a variety of functions, not all of which are related to the accrual of prestige. It can be used as shorthand to communicate a variety of sales messages about upcoming releases to potential audiences, whose almost-guaranteed media immersion in the prior history of cultural auteurism means that they *believe* they can know immediately what “a Woody Allen film”, “a James Cameron film” or, indeed, “a Quentin Tarantino film” will involve (whether the filmmaker reinforces their own auteur image with this work is of course a separate question). In certain cases, the discourse of auteurism can almost serve as a replacement for a marketing budget, as can be seen in the strategic placement of lower-budget Smart films at festivals, where “auteur status is the fuel in the workings, the clearest power source for the entire machinery.” (Andrews, 2012, 48) While this deserves further separate study, I think it conceivable that the renewed importance of auteurism has a link with the relative ‘uncontrollability’ of contemporary media (particularly internet) life, as symbolic control of texts moves away from the filmmaker and studio and into the grasp of audiences themselves, whose various fandoms and textual manipulations reduce the ability for the industry to ‘systematise’ the intellectual reach of their products.¹⁰²

The discourse of popular auteurism also functions in service of filmmakers themselves, whose reputation as such is a frangible thing, dependent on a tenuous circuit of critical approbation and definition as much as the texts themselves. Philip Drake underlines the importance of what he describes as “reputational capital”, a fluctuating condition that “depends upon an individual’s performance in the business, critical and commercial reception as well as their embeddedness within key industrial, institutional and social networks” (Drake, 2013, 145). He distinguishes it from academic auteurism in its lack of attention to textual intentionality, but notes particularly that “[r]eputation, it seems, is important to maintaining creative independence.” (ibid., 150) Here, the circuit in which auteurism is embedded functions not simply to create reputational credit for a Smart filmmaker, but to increase the likelihood that this credit will enable them to create similar work in the future; either that, or to parlay it into a move towards work of a different nature – most frequently, a move towards the mainstream.

As Tim Corrigan says, “auteurs and theories and practices of auteurism have never been a consistent or stable way of talking about movies.....auteurism has been bound up with

changes in industrial desires, technological opportunities, and marketing strategies.” (Corrigan, 1999, 40) Indeed, the career trajectories of Smart filmmakers illustrate the apparent tendency within the industry not just to view small-to-medium-budget works of the sort under discussion as ‘training investments’, to be recouped at a later date via other means, but also to utilise the cross-training of directors as a means of broadening audiences for even the most popular genres. In this sense, by engaging with auteurist discourses and combining them with larger ‘franchising’ considerations, Hollywood harnesses the dual drivers of prestige and populist appeal, in a manner which recuperates the (periodically regarded as wasted, debased, undervalued or exhausted) blockbuster form.

So, for example, we see Christopher Nolan move from Smart-inflected medium-sized (budgets of under \$50 million) precision pieces *Insomnia* (2002) and *The Prestige* (2006) to the behemoth Batman franchise which would provide *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), with budgets ranging from an estimated \$150 million to \$285 million.¹⁰³ Nothing illustrates so well as this the transition of Smart filmmakers from the fringes to the mainstream, whether retaining their Smart perspective or not. Nolan, in light of the temporally complex and yet wildly popular *Inception* (2011), critically lauded and grossing \$825 million internationally, has perhaps been the most successful at maintaining a certain continuity of approach, while still fulfilling the very particular requirements of franchise blockbuster production. Similarly, Sam Mendes moved from the \$15 million *American Beauty* to the \$80 million *Road to Perdition* (2002).¹⁰⁴

Interestingly, 2009’s *Away We Go* was the kind of small character-based drama one might associate with the earlier Mendes, and although it failed, with box-office takings of \$9 million to show for its \$17 million cost, this has been no barrier to his engagement as director of the most recent instalment of the Bond franchise, the \$200 million *Skyfall* (2012). In this sense, Smart’s primary legacy to filmmakers within the studio system may not have been the introduction of quasi-independent production practices or textual strategies, but rather, an increase in the instance of creative *mobility* for filmmakers, particularly those at the higher-value end of the market. Therefore, the extent to which the practitioners of Smart cinema have become embedded within the mainstream cannot be underestimated. While at one time involvement with independent or quasi-independent film might have been seen as an indication of limited horizons, it has come – via this assimilatory process – to function as a

means of producing cultural legitimacy for a creative practitioner, while simultaneously demonstrating their professional capability and economic bankability.¹⁰⁵

While the last two characteristics would, logically, be the minimum requirement for ‘graduation’ to the ranks of blockbuster filmmaker – the sums of money involved being too vast to entrust to anything other than proven talent – the element of ‘cultural legitimacy’ also serves a particular function outside the narrow confines of the Smart arena. It would appear that certain kinds of prestige associated with middlebrow-to-high culture (in the form of awards and critical acclaim), and conferred upon a filmmaker by the intersection of popular and industry discourses, can be successfully parlayed into a more mainstream career. This, I believe, can be seen as directly connected to genre and generic play, as, via the persona of a Nolan or a Mendes, attempts are made to revitalize a genre or franchise – one could argue in a sense that Batman and Bond are each big enough brands to constitute ‘their own genre’ – by way of producing an impression of, or association with, ‘quality’, itself facilitating the mobilisation of rhetoric designed to foreground novelty, and position the latest franchise episode as ‘a new departure’ or new direction.¹⁰⁶ In this way, genre and prestige can be linked through the mechanism of auteurist framing, without being seen to compromise populist (or cult) appeal.

Relevant too is the extent to which filmmakers have become implicated in the cultural circuit that is celebrity culture; Corrigan’s description of Tarantino as “the quintessential 1990s’ American auteur.....from one point of view, a confrontational individual succeeding in Hollywood despite an uncompromising trash-art vision, and, from another, a showman quickly cashing in on an image that may be gone tomorrow” (Corrigan, 1999, 39) refers to but does not explore the extent to which auteurism is enfolded within celebrity culture. This culture itself forms a paratext or commentary on film, and one which reinforces the mystique of the auteur even as it minimises the work which produces such designations: Rennett’s designation of Tarantino as ‘the director as DJ’ (2012) may have more resonance in its evocation of the figure of solitary celebrity ‘bricoleur’, centre stage in front of his audience, than in its textual analysis.

Discursive references to ‘the new Tarantino’ or ‘the next Tarantino’ have abounded in the period following since that director’s emergence. The phrase calls upon assumed links

between novelty, innovation, and creativity, as well as the way in which Tarantino's flamboyant public persona complicates and even erodes distinctions between filmmaker and star: the phrase's persistence implies that 'Tarantino' has become a signifier in and of himself – a synecdoche for the industrial and structural processes which facilitated his emergence, and one which obscures the manner in which these processes frame production practices. This extends beyond Tarantino's own work: the use of the phrase 'Tarantinoesque' in describing a film, for example, signifies that the presence of certain kinds of textual practice – such as the deployment of violence in a highly ironised fashion – can frame a text itself as having claims to Smartness *or* produce the effect of a condemnation of it as derivative; either way, it retrospectively claims Tarantino as an auteur.

Charlie Kaufman as auteur

Clearly this functions in different ways for different filmmakers. The contemporary cultural obsession with not just media products, but the workings of the media industries themselves, has been well documented, for example by Desmond Hesmondhalgh (see Curran (ed.), 2010). It also includes the way in which auteuristic framings have impact at a wider level for filmmakers. Charlie Kaufman – who as King points out has not just cultivated a level of recognition (perhaps even notoriety) unusual for a screenwriter, but has also parlayed this into an unusual degree of creative autonomy (King, 2009, 47-91) – constitutes an interesting case study of auteuristic positioning. Looking at the manner in which Kaufman's presumed relationship to his work is represented within the quasi-public discourse highlights the contradictory perspective that characterises the liminal (or, to be glib, almost subliminal) marketing/anti-marketing of Smart cinema; at times it seems to resemble a perpetual motion machine, resting on the paradoxical strategy of utilising an anti-Hollywood position to sell Hollywood films.

Kaufman is a useful example, particularly in that, while a casually auteuristic approach is common to many media accounts of films in which prestige is mobilised as an element of discourse (in contrast with mass-appeal films, where talk of financial returns dominates), the film's director is usually identified as the auteur. By contrast, the conventional cultural status of a screenwriter is lower, their position often made invisible; the 'elevation' of Kaufman to

auteur, at the level of media discourse, renders this rhetoric transparent. King, for example, describes Kaufman's attitude in interviews and promotional work as one of keenness to avoid being seen to create 'a product' or attract a specific demographic – indeed, tropes of 'real' vs. 'ersatz' creative process feature prominently in his films. However, the symbiosis of industry and media is such that discussions of Kaufman as an 'individual' are in their own way indivisible from promotion of Kaufman as a 'brand', and as a constitutive element of the work he produces.

By virtue of the manner in which he writes himself into his work, he is a material part of the fabric of Smart cinema; but he also has multiple locations within the discourse. 'Kaufman' (making a distinction between Kaufman as figure and as individual seems both theoretically appropriate, and textually apposite, given his tendency to write himself into his films) acts as a floating signifier for a particular kind of quasi-experimental narrative film. He also functions as an interactive sales tool which seeks to guarantee the prestige of the particular text being sold, emphasising the qualities of independence, innovation, and creative transgression which supposedly create a distinction between his work and the work of the putative mainstream: even where both share the same industrial (major studio-funded) origins.

Kaufman disavows this relationship, as for example noting that "I can recognize that [his work is different] without thinking of myself as a brand." (Tucker, 2008, 45) This disavowal may be personally sincere; however it has no power to derail the discursive meaning of 'Kaufman', but reinforces his supposed status as maverick, and theoretical guarantor of independence from the 'Hollywood system.' Because the communicative norms of mass media tend towards narrativisation and limited psychological characterisation, it is easy to see how attractive 'Kaufman' is as a signifier, in the way his behaviour is offered as an easy link to the texts with which he is associated. Descriptions of him (Lyman, 2000a; Luscombe, 2002; Leigh, 2003; O'Hagan, 2003; Tucker, 2008; Ide, 2008; Young, 2009) emphasise particular behaviours – alone, out walking, declining to pose for pictures, failing to be recognised or served by waiters, declining to confirm what variety of car he drives – and presume particular emotional states – nervous, melancholy, quirky, awkward, idiosyncratic, uncomfortable, shy, offbeat, reclusive, opaque, obsessive, mysterious. Many or most of these are clearly interpretations made by writers themselves, and may or may not bear the slightest

relation to the reality of being Charlie Kaufman. And yet, the desire to construct an acceptably eccentric ‘Kaufman’ is sufficiently strong, that even behaviour *challenging* the constructed image is framed within a context which continues to reinforce it.¹⁰⁷

Separately from big-budget advertising and promotional campaigns, the strategic placement of auteurial figures within the public discourse encourages a self-selecting audience to constitute themselves as a kind of paradoxical ‘non-audience’, or even ‘anti-audience’, who are presumed to self-define as resistant to more conventional strategies of commercial engagement. It is the auteur’s self-avowed disengagement from the Hollywood system which is being sold to the public as a marker of his films’ quality and innovation.¹⁰⁸ And yet, the extent to which Focus Features sought to emphasise the more orthodox features of his work in many contexts – placing greater emphasis on Jim Carrey than Kaufman in their advertising plans, for example – indicates that these are niche films which are still expected to function like mainstream texts. As Jack Foley, at the time head of distribution for Focus indicated, their strategy for *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* enfolded the Kaufman brand with play on the equally ‘edgy’ director Michel Gondry’s work in innovative music video, and with a focus on Jim Carrey as “the most influential comedian in America right now” (King, 2009, 83). He notes, vitally, that “we looked at where America is in its willingness to access smart films...Jim brought a sort of commercial accessibility to the film that spoke outside of the confines of the Charlie Kaufman brand” (ibid.). However, at the level of assessments of distinction and prestige, these appear to accrue to Kaufman and Gondry, rather than Carrey, a marker perhaps of which has been the lasting position.¹⁰⁹

Here, the thrusting-forward of Kaufman is both a gesture of explication as regards his (admittedly complex) creative work – allowing him to take prominence within the discourse in order to clarify it, or at least mystify it in an intriguing manner, for potential viewers – and a form of subtle marketing of what King calls “an idealized notion of both the artist and the discriminating viewer as free individual subjects, untrammelled – or resistant to being trammelled – by the marketing/packaging system dominant in Hollywood and increasingly applied to parts of the indie sector since the mid-1990s.” (King, 2009, 56) It is, so, the discourses of marketing – promotional interviews being nothing other than marketing, for all that they are not (always) paid for – which are employed to, by invoking the spectre of

auteurism, tacitly constitute Smart cinema as a genre in an almost oppositional manner, by calling upon its specific audience to self-position.

Wes Anderson as auteur

The early anointment of Wes Anderson as an ‘auteur director’ is more straightforward, in that the tonal and stylistic register he employs emerged quite early as a distinctive element. As I argue in Chapter Six, Anderson’s framing as an auteur is also related to the elusive nature of his use of genre, particularly when compared with his intense focus on *mise-en-scène*; comparisons have been made between his work and that of Powell and Pressburger, Jim Jarmusch (McMahon, 2009, 23-24), or Preston Sturges (Olson, 1999, 12). McDowell, whose work on the notion of ‘quirky’ (2010, 2013) is useful in its emphasis on sensibility and tone, but limited by its focus on comedy, describes his work as “the most consistent, as well as probably the most extreme, embodiment of the quirky sensibility.” (McDowell, 2010, 4)

Orgeron places Anderson’s industrial persona in relation to that of Truffaut’s (or perhaps Hitchcock’s) in its meticulously ‘constructed’ nature and the intricate way it is imbricated within Anderson’s films (Orgeron, 2007). Regardless of his supposed auteurial heritage, certainly Anderson’s idiosyncratic style appears to have crystallised by the time of *Rushmore* (1998), just his second feature, followed by *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), and *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou* (2004).¹¹⁰ Using a kind of deadpan heightened realism (McMahon, 2009), privileging cinematic stillness, particularly in the use of *tableaux vivants* (ibid.; Gooch, 2007), an emphasis on the materiality and symbolic agency of objects (Baschiera, 2012), and camera angles which assume a ‘God’s-eye’ framing (Zoller Seitz 2009)¹¹¹ Anderson cultivates a distinctive visual style, which can be positioned either within the irony-centred framework common to readings of Smart cinema, or, contradictorily, as unusually un-ironic in comparison with his contemporaries (Olsen, 1999).¹¹²

Recurring motifs in his work include nostalgia (Baschiera, 2012); family and fatherhood (ibid.; Gooch, 2007); the auteur as character (Dorey, 2012; Orgeron 2007), and the role of the – fictional and real – auteur within the community (ibid.). A motif that is rarely interrogated or problematised by him, the mechanics and function of class and racial privilege, is also

quite dominant – Rachel Dean-Rusicka scathingly critiques Anderson’s representational approach, noting that “[i]n a culture where people often disavow the continuing existence of racism Anderson’s films are the perfect example of how white privilege is reinscribed at the expense of others.” (Dean-Rusicka, 2013, 28)¹¹³ This is consistent with accusations that Smart cinema is fundamentally the cinema of the white middle classes, and indeed with Anderson’s own privileged background. This focus on the auteur as character is of particular interest, illustrating the extent to which, and manner by which, discourses of auteurism are mobilised both textually and paratextually to position Anderson’s work.

Dorey and Orgeron provide comprehensive accounts of the ways in which Anderson’s auteurial persona is constructed. The former highlights the emphasis in paratextual materials such as DVD commentaries on Anderson’s tight or even ‘fanatical’ control over the production process,¹¹⁴ which becomes a marker of prestige within the discourse of auteurship, a token of Anderson as ‘exacting, single-minded visionary’. This can then be mobilised at will in different contexts – print advertising, web content, trailers and videos, both in industry and public media – to construct a strong and saleable auteurial image, within “a sort of spectrum along lines of assumed audience engagement, the amount of information about the film transmitted and the audience’s interactivity with the material.” (Dorey, 2012, 173)¹¹⁵

While public audiences may differ from industrial audiences there is little practical difference between the highlighting of Anderson’s ‘dictatorial’ control within a context of technical and professional evaluation, and the way in which it is constructed, for example, within the Anderson fan community.¹¹⁶ Largely, this is a question of prestige, and the way in which what we might describe as ‘the technology of auteurism’ is simultaneously ‘the technology of prestige’. By this I mean the manner in which paratextual materials such as DVDs and their related commentaries and interviews, ‘director’s cut’ releases, reviews and media reports, and so on, function: not simply to promote, contextualise, or convey ‘added value’ to a text, but to construct an auteur-image, and to confer a degree of assumed credibility on that image which engages it with the ‘culture of prestige’ in ways which may or may not bear material relation to the text itself. This is as outlined in the example of Anderson’s involvement with the Criterion DVD collection, to which both Dorey and Orgeron refer.

Within the American context, the Criterion Collection catalogue occupies a privileged position in the canon-formation process (see Kendrick, 2001; Schauer and Arosteguy, 2005) and plays a major role in legitimizing the work of particular contemporary filmmakers, of which Anderson is one,¹¹⁷ and in legitimizing the consumption of film as art. As Orgeron points out,

Anderson's Criterion Editions are 'loaded'. They contain tome-like and lionizing essays. Both *The Royal Tenenbaums* and *The Life Aquatic* contain documentaries by Albert Maysles on Anderson and company at work. They always include a variety of interviews and are full of 'extras', as they have been designated by the menus. They are, in other words, appealingly packaged books to be judged, purchased, and coveted on the basis of their covers. (Orgeron, 2007, 58-59)

In addition, in his paratextual involvement, Anderson himself engages in play on the idea of auteurism, and/or 'credibility'; a fluid construction which has a complex relationship with notions of prestige and authenticity (see Newman, 2009). For example, Anderson has created 'fake' television interviews for his most recent Criterion Editions, which as Orgeron points out both "creates an at least public spectacle of Anderson's own authorial scepticism...[and] is also, however, perhaps the most deeply authorial move he might make." (ibid., 60)¹¹⁸

Here, auteurism is constructed, via paratexts as much as through texts themselves, to produce the effect of an imagined 'relationship' with the auteur, through a technologically-facilitated culture of auteurism, which has evoked in audiences an "unparalleled faith in the *authority* of their directors" (ibid., 58, italics author's own). The auteurial image is not confined to specifically filmic texts and paratexts, however; one fascinating example is the way in which one of Anderson's television adverts, one of a series for American Express,¹¹⁹ simultaneously invokes and parodies ideas of Anderson as auteur. In doing so, even as it emphasises the communal aspects of filmmaking¹²⁰ (Anderson has historically worked with a small pool of collaborators) it clearly presents Anderson as the all-guiding hand, the cumulative effect being to locate the director as a cultural leader – an identifiably 'authentic' creator within a potentially treacherous world of ironic consumption, where ideas of celebrity, creativity, power and authenticity are inextricably linked.

Smart film and cult cinema

If auteurist discourse serves to orient audiences – critical, academic, and public – in relation to these films, so too does the idea of ‘cult’ cinema. We might presume that there are a variety of reasons, professional and personal, why a filmmaker – voluntarily or otherwise – might move more into the mainstream, resist opportunities to make more than infrequent incursions into ‘Hollywood’, or choose to work exclusively within an industrial model which precludes real engagement with the mainstream. Filmmakers who choose the range of activities implied by the second two categories often find the word ‘cult’ employed to describe their practices, and the term ‘cult cinema’ has often been casually employed as a placeholder for Smart film (see Bal et al, 2003; Lawrenson, 2005; Amsden, 2007; Martin, 2009). However, while ‘difference from the mainstream’ is one characteristic which both Smart and cult cinema are assumed to share, another is the tendency to elide questions of industrial origin. It is interesting to note that Sconce has written on both paracinema and Smart film (Sconce, 1995; Sconce, 2002), and sees in both a search for subcultural capital: one which rests on audiences’ self-identification as distinctive, marginal, perhaps marginalised, without directly interrogating the (industrial) nature of the texts’ origins.

Jancovich is clearer on the structural genesis of the term, asserting that “cult movie fandom emerged not as a reaction against the market or the academy, but rather through their historical development” (Jancovich, 2002, 306), and “while cult audiences often present themselves in direct opposition to both the academy and the market, the emergence and development of cult movie fandom is intimately related to both” (Jancovich, 2003, 3). However, while he acknowledges that industrially, terms such as ‘mainstream’ are indistinct and sometimes even contradictory, Jancovich ultimately locates the definition in the moment of consumption, via the cult audiences who “confer value upon both themselves and the films around which they congregate.” (ibid., 2) There are clearly issues of bourgeois taste, power and cultural authority at play for both the Smart and the cult film, and they share a common history, which is evident for all that ‘cult’ covers an even wider range of formal and thematic variations than ‘Smart’ does.¹²¹

Mark Betz (2002) convincingly argues in his analysis of the American marketing of the European art film of 1950s and 1960s – an antecedent of the Smart film – as an alternative to

the more classical exploitation film. He cites the 1960s-1970s 'levelling' of ground (within the academy and public discourse) between ideas of high and low culture, and argues that they experienced an 'inversion' during this period; he also notes that film historiography, if it deals with art cinema of the period outside of national cinema or auteur contexts, "has generally considered and represented its object as a heroic, modernist response to Hollywood global domination in economic and/or aesthetic terms" (Betz, 2002, 203) and emphasises stylistic differences without looking at the manner in which these were being incorporated into American film. In short, for Betz, the academic tendency in exploring the ground between art cinema and mainstream film has been to emphasise difference, and most particularly stylistic difference, over similarity.

In similar ways, the perception that cult film is primarily centred on extreme, excessive, or actively 'bad' film, has obscured some of the parallels between it, as a mode, and Smart cinema, which might usefully be regarded as an attempted modelling of cult characteristics (via textual and structural practices as well as industrial ones such as marketing and distribution) within a resolutely mainstreamed industrial context – one which allows enough interpretive space for consumers to experience the cult-like thrill of discovery of something outside of the mainstream, but without the kind of commitment to subaltern position-taking that appears to characterise the serious cultist. We can perhaps best view Smart, then, as a kind of mirror image of cult film; one where the definitional moment lies within the production context rather than that of audience consumption. This relies to a certain extent on the audience reading the text as if it were 'authentically' cult, or independent – relying on audiences assuming an oppositional positioning which largely cannot be substantiated by the texts themselves, in their industrial contexts.

In this, the Smart film is, industrially, double coded as both mainstream and marginal. 'Othering' the notion of mainstream, insofar as the texts themselves adopt the formal and stylistic techniques of the margins, it can do so only partially, given that the Smart film is usually marketed, distributed, and exhibited by 'the mainstream': however as a discursive construct, that 'otherness' can be prevailed upon as needed. Where cult privileges a kind of active repurposing, redemption from obscurity, or critical re-evaluation of texts, and with sub-culturally-motivated self-definition a frequent related factor, Smart could be, harshly, viewed as constituting a kind of lazily corporatized alternative. In this framing, Smart would

have to be regarded as an industrial mobilisation of a set of ideas around non-conformity,¹²² for audiences which may self-define as marginalised (whether from the ‘elitism’ of art-house cinema, the ‘brutalism’ of mainstream cinema, or both) but for whom the highly codified and hierarchic – or, indeed, overwhelmingly masculinised – cult communities do not appeal.

Access, then, and the fact that access has a relationship with status that is often characterised by diminishing returns, also pertains. ‘Cult’ implies commitment – perhaps to a particular worldview, to a specific genre, to the amassing of trivia used to demonstrate (often gendered) mastery, and often to the seeking-out of related materials, obscure references, and vanished texts. While that commitment is not antithetical to mainstream film audiences – although perhaps availability of information is what distinguishes ‘fandom’ from ‘cult’ – it is less likely to be characteristic of what John Fiske has described, awkwardly, as “more ‘normal’ popular audiences” (Fiske, 1992, 30). The amendment of what we might understand as cult, or indeed its dilution by virtue of the increased accessibility of once-rare texts, has placed cultists in something of a dilemma as regards subcultural capital; while this is now less likely to be gained through tracking down obscure film work, the sense of cultural community once realized only through cult fanzines or fan conventions is now easily attained by means of internet forums. For those audiences who stand somewhere between the cultists and the classical mainstream, access to information – and particularly the availability of the text – will not necessarily result in a loss of status or cultural capital; what may result in a gain in cultural capital is the sense of *discovery* rather than mastery; of being a cultural ‘early adopter’.

In the sense in which genre can be regarded as the intersection of text, audience and industry, it is therefore perhaps the development of a newly-amorphous, in the light of more easily available texts and paratexts, audience territory somewhere between ‘cult’ and ‘mainstream’ which allowed Smart to emerge as an industrial category during the period in question. Indeed some writers on cult regard the term as being very specifically historical in nature; Jeffrey Sconce notes that to the extent cult can be described as a constitutive unit of cinema, it “was very specific to a finite window in the history of cinephilia and exhibition. ‘Cult’ thrived when film culture itself was growing in the 1970s/’80s and yet access to certain films remained somewhat limited.” (Sconce, 2008, 48) From this perspective, Smart emerges as cult’s corporatized offspring, repackaged and repositioned for an audience no longer overtly

concerned with achieving access through effort and subsequent mastery, so much as with ease of availability; a kind of ‘convenience cult’.

The question arises too as to whether, in the context of the industrial history of conglomeration and vertical as well as horizontal expansion, it may have been almost inevitable. Here, then, we can see Smart as part of a (conscious or otherwise) strategy of expansion of industrial control of the cinema market in its widest sense. If the cult text is a text ‘out of control’ by virtue of the fact that its distinctiveness and perceived cultural power lie in the hands of the specific audiences which valorise it, one can see within the logic of late capitalism that there must also exist a strong institutional urge to reintegrate that very distinctiveness into the system as a centre of profitability. However, rarity and distinction are sociocultural markers for both cult and Smart film; industrial attempts to systematically produce these characteristics are fraught with representational difficulty for text and industry alike (as can be seen in the case of *Fight Club*, and the ease with which ‘innovation’ becomes cliché).¹²³

As Joe Bob Briggs points out, “[by] the time Quentin Tarantino made *Reservoir Dogs*, being a cult auteur was a ticket to fame and stardom.” (Briggs et al, 2008, 43), a remark which indicates the extent to which auteurism and stardom have become linked, as well as the extent to which these can be and are employed as vital components of the positioning matrix surrounding any text. If fans of any cult film are an explicitly self-defining group, we might perhaps argue that Smart fans are a group encouraged (or pushed) towards self-definition as much by the studios, through their marketing, distribution and exhibition strategies, as by the films themselves – as part of the process through which, argues Damien Love

[t]he surface tics and exploitation excesses of old cult movies are commodified, have any dangerous edges knocked off, and get resold in the mainstream in much the same way as has always gone on in the music industry. (ibid., 2008, 45)¹²⁴

I also see Smart’s emergence as being influenced by the discursive contexts of the period, in particular the growing legitimization of cult cinema through the 1980s and 1990s, by the academy, and by mainstream and film-fan press – as Jancovich points out, “cult movie fandom and academic film studies have often walked hand in hand and successive waves of ‘radicalization’ within the discipline have been directly related to transformations in cult

movie fandom.” (Jancovich, 2003, 3), and critics have a vested interest in the maintenance of their own critical reputation. This can be enhanced or damaged by positions taken on specific texts; indeed the critic legitimates their professional practice and future reputation through the text. As Ernest Mathijs indicates, how a film is discussed by critics within the discourse matters, and is part of the process by which that discourse reinforces its own boundaries, as well as contextualising the film for audiences: “[b]y helping *Shivers* [(David Cronenberg, 1975)] receive a cult reputation, these critics secured their own relevance.” (Mathijs, 2003, 122) This is with the caveat that, by ‘relevance’, Mathijs essentially means ‘relevance to cult film fans’ rather than anyone else.

This brings us to the most significant difference between cult cinema and Smart cinema (all the while acknowledging that some Smart cinema has itself become cult cinema for specific audiences, such as *Fight Club* or – as noted by Hoberman (Briggs et al 2008, 44) – *Donnie Darko*), which is that the perceived discursive and cultural worth of each is constructed in a different manner. While both modes are associated with niche markets, and to a certain extent with fandom, Smart is, industrially, an attempt to combine the potentially transgressive, ‘cool’ underground appeal of cult cinema with – the key difference – a call to ideas of high culture and artistic status which can be related to both the art-house tradition and the middlebrow. Here, the aura or image of alternative culture is appropriated by way of thematic transgressiveness or formal experimentation, becoming not quite an empty signifier, but close to; always (unlike, necessarily, cult cinema) just within the bounds of ‘taste’, and continually subject to the “[n]egation and denial [which] are especially likely when indie culture treads too closely to mainstream media.” (Newman, 2013, 79)

Transgression, as in the case of *Happiness*, *American Beauty*, *Pulp Fiction*, or *Boogie Nights*, may be signalled within a framework of black comedy, overdetermined sincerity, playful irony, or unsettlingly blank tone, but it is highly unlikely to be framed by any of the crassness, extremity, campness, exploitation, or excess which tend to characterise cult. Smart operates in a much more liminal field; a given text may produce tonal, structural or stylistic appeals to, variously and simultaneously, mainstream critics, niche or specialist critics, niche or cult audiences, but it does so with the allied promise of mainstream accessibility through its generic drivers. These are the direct result of its embeddedness (in the case of the studio

films) or structural indebtedness to (for the more independent-produced works) the mainstream industry.

In addition, as Mathijs and Sexton have argued of cult cinema,

[c]ult films largely stand outside what James English (2005) has called ‘the economy of prestige’: the framework of valuation through award [sic], ceremonies, and prizes.....Because it occupies a marginal position within the market of official culture, [cult film] mostly falls outside of the economy of prestige. (Mathijs and Sexton, 2012, 36)

whereas the Smart film is deeply embedded within that very economy, located between the art cinema and festival circuit, and the edge of mainstream taste cultures. The media hysteria, for example, which greeted Tarantino’s 1994 Palme D’Or win could not have existed without both a strong emphasis on the assumed value and merit of such cultural awards, and a sense that such awards are generally outside the boundaries of what would be expected for a film like *Pulp Fiction*; this illustrates the liminal, part art-cinema, part genre-pic nature of Smart film.

Despite counter-currents which may question the value of such awards, or equate them with ‘selling out’, the use of these systems of validation as cultural markers which are then explicitly converted into revenue, and even their self-inscription as a celebrity-filled meta-discourse all of their own, means that awards continue to serve as “the most bankable, fungible assets in the cultural economy.” (English, 2005, 22) Smart is therefore differentiated from cult by being confined within an overall rhetoric of cultural prestige and academic or quasi-academic validation, often signalled by an emphasis on auteuristic concerns within the discourse around the film, for more explicitly bourgeois or middlebrow niche audiences. It is this element of prestige – sought for, constructed, and dispensed to producers and audiences in a circuit of self-referentiality via the text – which is an important industrial characteristic of Smart film, and emblematic of the disproportional level of cultural capital enjoyed by middle-class audiences.¹²⁵

Conclusions

Auteurist discourse serves to unify the contradictions implied by Smart's position as simultaneously 'indie' and mainstream, by containing it within an overarching narrative of creative innovation which often evacuates generic framings, and works to provide frameworks of critical legitimation for texts and for the critics who produce them. Where individual texts contain thematic, stylistic or structural elements which can be positioned at, and interpreted along, a variety of loci on the continuum from mainstream to independent, the discourse of auteurism forms a framing mechanism which obscures their sometimes contradictory industrial underpinnings, and which calls to ideas of prestige. In addition, comparisons with earlier filmmakers provide a social-temporal reference point, allocating the Smart filmmakers a position or role within an assumed generational grouping. This is not presented as 'simply' coincidentally age-related, but linked through presumed shared socio-cultural experiences, and through the overlaying of a presumed shared creative perspective, or even the presence of a wider or more coherent cultural movement.

This serves not only to construct or reinforce the discourse of auteurism, but to provide cultural legitimation for Hollywood, implying that this strand of American cinema is part of a wider retrospective cultural inheritance, and that it is both directly produced from, and evocative of, a notional *zeitgeist*. At a time of industrial flux, auteurist discourse constituted a branding and positioning tool both for individual texts and their directors (particularly for those films at the lower-budget end of the market), and relocated the locus of symbolic and ideological power regarding them, to within the industry itself. This also worked to obscure the industrial origins of Smart cinema by mobilising discourses around 'national cinema', itself conceived of as theoretically 'oppositional'. Auteurist discourse also operates in service of the creation of reputational credit, which may be gained in the arena of Smart film but is frequently further mobilised in service of the putative revitalisation of 'exhausted' mainstream genres or franchises. This practice continues and extends the manufacture of cultural legitimacy for filmmaker and industry into more mainstream production arenas, with Smart cinema here taking the form of a 'training ground.'

Similarly, the mobilisation of notions of 'cult' works to create a sense of distinction for Smart cinema, again eliding more industrial interpretations. Here, while textual similarities can be

drawn, the tendency of Smart to shy away from the extremes (textually and in audience terms) adopted by cult film facilitates framing Smart more as a parallel form: one which calls upon audiences to view themselves as consumers of a less-than-mainstream form, but which by remaining generically fundamentally accessible, does not call attention to textual or industrial characteristics which contradict this mode of viewing. The cultural capital gained is a dilute version of that which is so vital to cult audiences, and one which appeals to ideas of discovery rather than of textual mastery or subcultural intimacy. As with auteurism, ideas of distinction here entwine with the industrial urge to activate new seams of textual 'innovation' as profit centres: this is linked with what I would see as the most significant difference between cult and Smart, which is the way in which the cultural value of each is constructed. Where both are associated with market niches (and fandoms), and where cult predicates itself on theoretical (and sometimes physical) inaccessibility, Smart cinema's fundamental basis of generic accessibility and mainstream-industrial embeddedness means that attempts to combine cult appeals with references to cultural prestige are always grounded in a bourgeois sensibility. This wider notion of 'prestige', and the way in which it manifests in and through evaluative mechanisms such as awards, is one to which I turn in my next chapter.

Chapter Five: The Smart film, prestige, and 'indie' culture

One element that recurs throughout accounts of the rise of the Smart sector is that of 'prestige' (see King 2005 and 2009, Biskind 2005, Sconce 2002, Tzioumakis 2006, Levy 1999). However, academics working within the field of economics argue that frequently, 'commonsense' expectations of how (or even if) prestige results in corresponding financial success are thwarted by "problematic data and unexpected empirical findings." (Holbrook and Addis, 2008, 88) To this extent, although one may try to quantify the value that prestige, measured in awards and reviewer approval, may benefit a film commercially, modelling it explicitly remains challenging. Beyond acknowledging that, regardless of the specific branch of the culture industries involved, artistic prestige is "a system of hierarchies of agreed-upon social value...it is a *quality* that people confer upon others but it is also a *system* inextricably bound up with that conferral" (Van Laar and Diepeveen, 2012, 1) it is in the field of cultural economics that much of the research in this area is to be found.

Holbrook and Addis reviewed the field just after the height of the Smart period, sampling a wide range of work on the area.¹²⁶ Outlining a 'two-path model', their assessment of the statistics available suggests that

reviewer-and-consumer evaluations and buzz respond differently to a film's marketing clout (production budget, opening screens, and opening box office) and that these audience responses contribute independently to a film's industry recognition and market performance along two separable paths. (Holbrook and Addis, 2007, 87)

The marketing and positioning of a film has a direct impact on how the film performs along two evaluative pathways, the first that of 'commercial success' (the commerce path) and the other being 'artistic success' (the art-related path). While the manner in which a studio positions and markets a film may affect both audience responses *and* industry evaluations of success (as measured through awards and ratings), it does not do so in the same manner for all films.¹²⁷ Not only that, but the interplay of the elements of 'critical recognition' and 'popular buzz' may function in a contradictory way (at a commercial level) for different types of films, despite the fact that the two paths are by nature 'uncorrelated' and as such, no automatic relationship can be inferred. They note in particular, that the more elevated the

spending on marketing, regardless of ‘buzz’ along the commerce path, the less likely the film is to be evaluated highly along the artistic path.

While the correlation of these two elements suggest further research is needed, the implications for Smart cinema are striking, suggesting that lower-budget independent-produced films such as *Pi*, *Donnie Darko*, *Brick*, *Memento*, *Happiness*, and (to a much lesser extent, *Pulp Fiction*) may to a certain extent avail of favourable critical judgements as a result of their industrial positioning. My contention is that their positioning (as low-budget films possessed of non-mainstream generic or stylistic features, and marketed more through critical discourse and word of mouth than extensive paid-for advertising, characteristics then mobilised into tokens of quality) feeds the kind of ‘David and Goliath’ mythology which creates prestige-in-opposition. That is, individual films may be valorised for their apparent breach of the supposedly monolithic industrial practices of the Hollywood industry, as much as for their textual strategies.

Alisa Perren analyses this tendency in her analysis of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Joel Zwick, 2002), stating that media discourse around that film positioned it as an independent film ‘beating the odds’ to become massively successful within the mainstream marketplace. This representation reinforced conceptions of the film industry as inherently monolithic, and restricted the way in the marketing and positioning techniques used to promote the film (themselves the direct result of studio involvement) were viewed, as “the ideological power of journalistic discourses [around texts] can sometimes be as potent as the ideologies of the media texts themselves.” (Perren, 2004, 29) Additionally, these discourses not only construct partial narratives about individual films, but

reinforced a number of inaccuracies and misperceptions about the operations of the contemporary media industries. These stories have had the effect of constructing – and reinforcing – certain mythologies about the dichotomies between ‘Hollywood’ and ‘independent’ films (ibid., 18).

In this frame, the likes of *Lost in Translation*, *Ghost World*, *Being John Malkovich*, *Sideways*, *Huckabees*, *Eternal Sunshine*, and *American Beauty* – essentially low- to mid-budget studio productions – represent a means by which these mythologies can be harnessed productively, in order to colonise ‘independentness’ (that is, a set of *perceptions* of independence, rather

than a material condition of industrial independence) in service of box office returns and market share. Here, the continued conglomeration of the media industries is disguised by discursive interventions privileging a binary opposition. The film she discusses is notable for its highly conventional generic and formal attributes, and I would argue that this limits the way in which discourse around it can be framed, unlike Smart films, which also call upon ideas of innovation, transgression, or quality. As a bigger-budget Smart film with dominant (conventional) generic features, *The Matrix* by contrast mobilises not discourses of opposition, but of generic mastery and technical innovation (Maslin, 1999a; Ansen, 1999; Bradshaw, 1999), being limited within the prescribed terms of its science fiction and action foundations; *Fight Club* forms a curious liminal case, for the way in which as Fox's industrial experiences led them to position it as a straightforward action film, when adopting a more oppositional stance might have been more fruitful.

Holbrook and Addis also argue that “the relationship between evaluative judgements of excellence and aspects of popular appeal in the case of motion pictures tends to be significant-but-weak, typically accounting for less than 10% of the variance in popularity or market performance” (Holbrook and Addis, 2007, 87) although they recognise that part of the confusion relates to the presence of a multiplicity of potential answers to the question of what ‘success’ might constitute within the culture industries. They conclude that “evaluations of excellence by reviewers and consumers influence industry recognition in ways that are essentially independent from the manner in which critical and popular buzz contributes to market performance.” (ibid., 101) The “paradoxes of using market forces as a measure of cultural value” (Williams, 2001, 9) notwithstanding, there can be considerable differences in terms of the extent to which individual researchers assign statistical significance to the nature and number of reviews for given films, and these should not be neglected.

However, Holbrook and Addis' work would appear to indicate that the *nature* of studio attention – particularly in marketing and release strategy – to a small-to-medium-sized budget film (similar to many of the Smart films I discuss) is deeply influential, both in setting the audience's expectations, and predisposing it towards being assessed within a particular framework of ‘quality’ and its close companion, prestige, in ways which may only sometimes, or only tangentially, be related to market performance.¹²⁸ Not only that, but their conclusion that favourable high evaluations along an artistic spectrum cannot be directly

correlated with commercial success suggests that other, less concrete, motives exist for studios' pursuit of critical and creative endorsement, as much related to individual and institutional cultural status as to financial return.

Intangible though the notion of prestige may be, it has been a consistent factor in the production and positioning of films from the industry's earliest days. Tino Balio (1995) points out that for the emerging studios, product differentiation became a key economic factor, most crucially "at the highest level, where a studio stood the chance of gaining (or losing) the most money." (Balio, 1995, 11) Balio's account of the emergence of 'the prestige picture' of the early studio period, which he argues was the most important and popular production trend of the 1930s, is illustrative when compared with the modern context. The prestige picture cycle of the early classical period constituted a set of middlebrow films which were often adaptations of literary classics (nineteenth century novels, the works of Shakespeare) and 'socially sanctioned' contemporary work (Broadway plays, adapted novels by Nobel or Pulitzer prizewinners), but could encompass "different genres, several motion-picture styles and other production trends – musicals, biopics, historical dramas, women's films, and even horror films." (ibid., 180) In fact, they could take almost any generic form – including upscale comedy, war picture, melodrama, or western – although in terms of shared characteristics, they tended to be black and white (due to the expense of colour production), to be longer than more workaday productions, to be made with considerably larger budgets, to be marketed extensively, and exhibited via roadshow.¹²⁹

To that end, clearly the prestige picture should be regarded as an industrial formation rather than a necessarily textual one, in that the term "designates production values and promotion treatment....typically a big-budget special based on a presold property, often as not a 'classic,' and tailored for top stars." (ibid., 179) Importantly, the prestige picture was proportionally highly significant in revenue terms – but not valuable purely for its financial contribution. As Balio says, "[c]ompared to the total output of the majors, prestige pictures accounted for a small percentage, but compared to the total production budgets, they accounted for a lion's share. *Moreover, prestige pictures played a crucial role in defining the public image of a company.*" (ibid., 179, italics mine) Here, then, we see a role beyond the immediate financial gain signified by box office returns, and one implying that 'intangible' attributes like prestige may be significant at a wider level, beyond the provision of free

publicity via reviews. I would suggest too that not much has changed tremendously – that ‘prestige’ is still defined and allocated via the quasi-industrial discursive contexts within which the text operates, as much as or more than by audience approbation – when one considers Douglas Gomery’s note that “[i]n 1925 product prestige can be thought of as the extent to which the films of a studio are perceived to be of ‘quality’ by the contemporary moulders of public opinion about films – commentators and critics in the trade and the general press.” (Gomery, 2005, 39)

Obviously the ‘prestige cinema’ of the 1930s is not the same type of cinema, formally, as the Smart film, calling more to mind what the Nouvelle Vague critics would have described disparagingly as ‘cinéma du papa’. The contemporary equivalent of these sorts of film are still financially bankable, and indeed still frequently garner awards from within the system, but I believe the status of the *type* of prestige they carry has, semiotically speaking, altered with the contemporary proliferation of evaluative mechanisms (see English, 2005) and in particular the increased prevalence of niche awards: awards for accomplishment in specific genre, for technical skills, and the use of awards schemes by an increasing variety of art-house, independent and international festivals. The traditional prestige film, positioned as solid, mainstream mass entertainment, still holds a certain middlebrow standing – often related, as with the prestige film of the 1930s, to links with historical events or persons, or fiction from the literary canon – but is rarely regarded as holding the type of status associated with innovation or creativity.¹³⁰ That is not to say that the model does not ever encroach upon the Smart world, as can be seen from Geoff King’s (2009) exploration of *Shakespeare in Love*, which functioned as a kind of play on the prestige film, upholding its status (and the status of its subject) even as it poked fun at the conventions of historical representation.

However my case is that a variety of models for attributing prestige to texts can be seen to apply, in different contexts, and to different types of film – as we have seen, for example, applying the framework ‘cult cinema’ around a text creates a specific context within which judgements are made. In part, as previously discussed, this is due to the economic imperatives which dominate Hollywood cinema as a commercial enterprise, in particular the requirement for increasingly wide variation within the cinematic product line. This would be, for example, clearly in line with Kawashima’s (2011) contention that profitability is related to

scope, or Nicholas Garnham's more wide-ranging explanation for the continued persistence of wide variation within the film market, that:

survival depends upon economies of scope, the spreading of risk across a range of products, to ensure the 10 percent or so chance of the hit that will provide a viable average return. Sustainably viable industries are impossible without the level of concentration that enables these economies of scope. At the same time, this economic model positively requires diversity. Indeed, for this reason there is a constant tendency to overproduction. (Garnham, 2011, 50)

In this context, Smart itself functions as a kind of 'overproduction', a proliferation (under, in its essentially low- to mid-budget nature, the conditions of 'acceptable risk') of broadly non-classical work within the industry that fulfils the need for product variation as well as the industry's drive for legitimacy through prestige.

Smart cinema's 'methods' of acquiring prestige are also of interest. Smart's growth strongly parallels the growth of film festival culture in the US and internationally during the 1990s and after,¹³¹ particularly those festivals identifying themselves as for, or at least open to, independent-framed work (see Tzioumakis, 2013, 35, or Newman, 2011), a growth which forms part of the general proliferation of cultural prizes English identifies (English, 2005). Their function is not exclusively to bestow markers of prestige and acclaim – they are industrial networking events featuring complex sets of power relations, sites of deal-making, public cultural events, and serve a variety of purposes “at the intersection of art, commerce, technology, culture, identity, power, politics and ideology” (Rüling & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2010, 319), and at which “symbolic capital accrued from participation in a competition program [tends] to be directly capitalized at the market taking place next door.” (de Valck & Soeteman, 2010, 294) However, they often involve the ritualised conferral of prestige in the form of awards, which then forms an element within the intertextual relay producing discourse around film texts. Similarly, dedicated awards systems (such as the Academy Awards) function both as entertainment-based events, and as relays of industrially-grounded approbation.

I do not at this point wish to engage in an extended investigation of the nature of prestige in the discourses of cinema, for all that this is a fascinating topic and one which warrants more extensive research. I here limit myself to noting that prestige in the form of festival

participation and awards constitutes a basis both for reinforcing industrial norms, and for facilitating the extension of those, according to the texts available – rewarding adherence to particular kinds of filmic paradigm, such as the manner in which the evaluative mechanism of a science fiction awards system simultaneously reinforces the generic structures which ‘contain’ science fiction, and extends them by incorporating new texts in each year’s selection. Certainly awards function to not only provide for the possibility of the accrual of box-office benefits, but also “as a signal to competitors.....[and] function as a means of certification...directed towards other actors in the value system, such as distributors and, of course final consumer, and also to other certifiers.” (Wijnberg, 2003, 83)

As an attempt to tentatively explore the ways in which awards prestige have constructed Smart cinema, and in an effort to establish whether or not the prestige industry functions to ‘segregate’ Smart, integrate it into the mainstream more explicitly, or ‘hive it off’ in interpretational silos, I have conducted a brief survey of the awards and nominations for each of the texts I discuss in more detail elsewhere.¹³² For each of these films, the *type* of awarding body most likely to bestow prestige is significant; an aggregation of the type of awards received reveals material data about theoretical positioning. That is, awards systems provide real information in terms of how films’ individual textual strategies are perceived in this quasi-industrial – and sometimes public – context: awards form a symbolic ‘bridge’ between the industrial, the textual, and the public.

However, I contend that while awards systems serve broadly discursive *and* strictly commercial functions, the manner in which these intertwine is not statistically stable or easily predictable,¹³³ and different types of award may be seen casually to reward different modes and styles of film. There is also an inherent complication here which must be addressed: that is, while interesting patterns may emerge from exploring how films are rewarded for their adherence to specific categories, it is that very adherence which performs a pre-selecting ‘narrowing’ of options prior to any selections being made from those categories. Therefore while I may speak of, for example, *Welcome to the Dollhouse* being rewarded *by* an art-house/independent awards framework, its very selection *for* participation in that framework is an indication of the extent to which it is seen to adhere to prescribed selection criteria. Therefore I have chosen to include nominations as well as awards won.

Table 1: Arthouse/independent prestige

Film	Generic keys	Mainstream	Arthouse	Cult	Prestige mode	Awards
Reservoir Dogs (Quentin Tarantino, 1992)	Heist; Action; Thriller; Crime	Action; violence as display; suspense; humour; male bonding	Complex narrative; visual stylisation; awards/festivals	Violence as transgressive pleasure; language; dialogue; black comedy; 'new talent discovered'	Arthouse/independent	Avignon, Independent Spirit, Sitges-Catalonia, Stockholm, Sundance, Toronto International
Welcome to the Dollhouse (Todd Solondz, 1995)	Drama; Black Comedy; Teen; Coming-of age	Teen; comedy; coming-of-age	Transgressive paedophilia; gender relations; awards/festivals	Black comedy	Arthouse/independent	Berlin, Deauville, Independent Spirit, Stockholm, Sundance, Valladolid
Safe (Todd Haynes, 1995)	Drama; Mystery	Mystery; drama; emotional engagement	Paranoia; crisis; opaque style; awards/festivals; auteurism; mental instability; cult groups	Haynes as subcultural auteur	Arthouse/independent	Independent Spirit, Rotterdam, Seattle, Sitges-Catalonia
Happiness (Todd Solondz, 1998)	Drama; Black comedy; Family drama	Comedy; melodrama; possibility of emotional engagement	Paedophilia; awards/festivals; interlocking structure; mental instability; auteurism	Sexual transgression; black comedy	Arthouse/independent	BIFA, Cannes (FIPRESCI Prize), Golden Globe, Independent Spirit, Stockholm, Sao Paulo, Toronto International
Pi (Darren Aronofsky, 1998)	Sci-fi; Drama; Thriller; Experimental	Action; uncertainty; mystery; protagonist in danger;	Black and white form; religion; mathematics; low-fi production; insanity	Narrative complexity; lo-fi; conspiracy; 'new talent discovered'	Arthouse/independent	Deauville, Gijon, Gotham, Independent Spirit, Sundance, Thessaloniki
Donnie Darko (Richard Kelly, 2001)	Drama; Mystery; Teen; Sci-fi	Teen; coming-of-age; humour; mystery; romance; sci-fi	Hallucinations; mental illness; complex narrative; unreliable narrator; mathematics; philosophy; unstable reality; misfit; suburban anomie; paedophilia; destruction	Ironic retro; need for repeated viewing; anti-conformist; teen; coming-of-age;	Hybrid indie/arthouse	Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror, Independent Spirit, SFX, Sitges-Catalonia, Sundance
Primer (Shane Carruth, 2004)	Sci-fi; Action; Thriller; Experimental	Action; suspense; sci-fi; thriller;	Formal experimentation; complex narrative structure; suburban; unreliable narrator?	New talent discovered'; need for repeated viewing; complex narrative plus action/suspense	Arthouse/independent	Fantasporto, Gotham, Independent Spirit, Sitges-Catalonia, Sundance
Brick (Rian Johnson, 2005)	Teen; Noir; Drama; Crime; Mystery	Teen; coming-of-age; romance; crime; mystery; suspense;	Formal subversion; self-referential; self-conscious references to film history canon; formal experimentation	New talent discovered'; nostalgia; irony; humour; play with form; parody; unexpected juxtaposition of form; teen	Arthouse/independent	BFI, Deauville, Empire, Independent Spirit, Sitges-Catalonia, Sundance

Eight of the films (*Reservoir Dogs*, *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, *Safe*, *Happiness*, *Pi*, *Primer*, *Donnie Darko*, and *Brick*) present themselves with what I would describe as an ‘art-house/independent’ set of evaluations. All of the awards here are from international festivals associated with art-house or strongly independent production, with Sundance featuring heavily among them, indicating its (at least theoretically) strong emphasis on American cinema of a particular type. Here, the while the desire of studios to acquire a ‘breakout hit’ has implications for the way in which these festivals function as a marketplace, the stylistic characteristics associated with the films militates towards the art cinema end, and the values celebrated are those of production context – that is, that these films have been produced ‘outside of the system’. When ranked by number of awards and nominations each has collected, the minority status of the films is also borne out, the ranking of each placing them largely at the bottom end of popular attention. This evaluation is borne out by their actual production context (all of these films, regardless of their distribution arrangements, having been made independently). These are, therefore, the films with greatest material distance from the studios in terms of their practical (financial) involvement with them; it should be noted that this is a pre-selection criterion for many festivals which concentrate on independent cinema, which necessarily skews any analysis.

Here, the presence at, and valuations performed through, these festivals can be seen to reinforce perceptions of independent work as ‘auteuristic’ in nature, as does the presence of explicitly non-mainstream content, whether in the form of subject material (*Happiness*), tone – including an oblique, distanced or blank approach (*Dollhouse*, *Safe*), complex narrative (*Pi*, *Primer*, *Donnie Darko*), transgressive performativity (the violence of *Reservoir Dogs*) or potentially-alienating generic play (*Brick*). In these cases, while more mainstream generic drivers do exist (most strongly for *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pi*) they are seen to be outweighed by textual elements which privilege the supposedly inaccessible, the self-consciously transgressive, and the classically ‘artistic’. I would note, too, that this tranche is heavily weighted towards the earlier part of the period under discussion, with five out of the eight films dating to the 1990s, and the three from the 2000s, receiving only a very limited initial release; this illustrates the sense in which Smart cinema was still largely considered a ‘marginal’ form at this point, and had yet to move further into the mainstream from a prestige (or indeed audience access) perspective.

Table 2: Indie/mainstream prestige

Film	Generic keys	Mainstream	Arthouse	Cult	Prestige mode	Awards
Rushmore (Wes Anderson, 1998)	Comedy; Drama; Teen; Coming-of-age	Comedy; emotional engagement; personal growth; coming-of-age	Black comedy; suburban anomie; irony	Black comedy; subculture; offbeat; 'quirky'; 'new talent discovered'	Hybrid indie/mainstream	BFI, Golden Globe, Independent Spirit, Teen Choice
Election (Alexander Payne, 1999)	Comedy; Teen; Coming-of-age	comedy; teen; coming-of-age; star power;	Underage/transgressive sexuality; satire	Underage/transgressive sexuality; black comedy; homosexuality; irony; satire;	Hybrid indie/mainstream	Oscar, ACE, GLAAD, Independent Spirit, Teen Choice, Writers Guild
Fight Club (David Fincher, 1999)	Action; Drama; Thriller; Conspiracy	Violence as display; sex; action; thriller; star power; SFX; high production values; male bonding; politics of masculinity	Unstable reality; unreliable narrator; split personality; philosophy; insanity; anti-conformist	Anti-conformism; gender politics; violence; action; philosophy; need for repeated viewing	Hybrid indie/mainstream	Oscar, Brit, Empire, MTV, Political Film Society
The Royal Tenenbaums (Wes Anderson, 2001)	Comedy; Drama; Black Comedy	Comedy; family; drama; classical emotional engagement;	Black comedy; incest; depression; terminal illness; tone; dysfunctional family	cult star; black comedy; language/dialogue; dysfunctional family; 'quirky'; ironic retro	Hybrid indie/mainstream	American Film Institute, Oscar, Bafta, Berlin, Golden Globe, Writers Guild
Ghost World (Terry Zwigoff, 2001)	Drama; Teen; Coming-of-age; Black comedy	Teen; coming-of-age; romance; humour;	Suburban anomie; dialogue; ironic retro; misfit; anti-conformist	Based on cult source; ironic retro; teen angst; coming of age	Hybrid indie/mainstream	American Film Institute, Oscar, Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror, BIFA, Deauville, Empire, Golden Globe, Independent Spirit, MTV, PEN, Writers Guild
Adaptation (Spike Jonze, 2002)	Drama; Comedy; Crime; Thriller	Action; romance; crime; star power; comedy; thriller	Complex structure; auteurism; formal play; interiority exposed; casting against type; awards/festivals	humour; casting against type; formal play; need for repeated viewing; casting against type	Hybrid indie/mainstream	American Film Institute, Oscar, Bafta, Berlin, Golden Globe, PEN, SAG, Writers Guild
Lost In Translation (Sofia Coppola, 2003)	Drama; Comedy; Drama; Fish-out-of-water	Humour; star power; fish-out-of-water; coming-of-age; emotional engagement	Cross-cultural exploration; tone; uncertainty; reticent/withdrawn style; philosophical or identity crisis; uncertain resolution; auteurism	Humour; romance; cult casting	Hybrid indie/mainstream	American Film Institute, Oscar, Bafta, Cesar, DGA, Golden Globe, Independent Spirit, MTV, SAG, Teen Choice, Venice, Writers Guild
The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou (Wes Anderson, 2004)	Comedy; Drama; Adventure	Humour; action; adventure; conventional emotional engagement; male bonding	Auteurism; formal experimentation; irony; formal unpredictability	Cult casting; quirky; humour; casting against type; auteurism;	Hybrid indie/mainstream	Art Directors Guild, Berlin, Broadcast Film Critics Association
I ♥ Huckabees (David O. Russell, 2004)	Comedy; Drama; Mystery; Action	Star power; comedy;	Absurdity; philosophy; formal experimentation; personal crisis; playfulness	Formal playfulness; humour; casting against type; need for repeated viewing; 'quirky'	Hybrid indie/mainstream	Gotham, Golden Trailer, Satellite, Chlotrudis

The second set of films also comprises eight films, and I describe it as the ‘hybrid indie/mainstream’ set. This encompasses all of Wes Anderson’s films, *Election*, *Fight Club*, *Ghost World*, *Adaptation*, *Lost In Translation*, and *I ♥ Huckabees*. The awards systems here are more or less equally balanced between the more independent-leaning (such as the Independent Spirit awards) and the much more strongly bourgeois or mainstream ones, such as the Academy Awards, Golden Globes, and BAFTAs. I contend that this set of evaluations indicates the transitional nature of the Smart mode over this period, in that it describes a process of infiltration into the popular consciousness, while limited as regards the extent to which it is embedded within the mainstream. This perhaps too is reflected in the wide span of the *degree* of critical attention paid; *Lost In Translation* is ranked third out of all the films I discuss in terms of the number of awards won and nominated for (something which, speculatively, may reflect the tendency to regard Coppola as an ‘inheritor’ auteur as much as its high degree of audience reach) and *Adaptation* fifth; *Huckabees* is last.¹³⁴ It is notable too that the primary generic driver for each is comedy (for all that this takes a variety of different forms), indicating for me that this transition into the mainstream was strongly influenced by the increasing adoption of these texts by audiences for whom work more strongly coded as ‘art-house’ might tend to be inaccessible, and the stronger likelihood of comedic elements to cross over.

While mainstream generic drivers dominate, another element that arises is the extent to which the youth-oriented or youth-referencing films also feature here (*Rushmore*, *Election*, *Ghost World*, and to a much lesser extent *Lost in Translation*), all of which were honoured by awards I would regard as strongly mainstream (in that they are access-dependent): the MTV and Teen Choice Awards. *Fight Club* also forms a particular case here: most of its on-release mainstream awards and nominations were in technical categories; costume design, sound editing and so on (although it would later win many awards for its DVD release, reflecting its particular place in the form’s evolution) or those popularly regarded as technical ‘consolation prizes’. I include it in this category primarily because of its MTV and Premiere nominations, combined with the fact that its other nominations were primarily technical. To me this suggests that the youth audience may form a strong constituency of the early adopters of Smart cinema, although clearly this requires further research. Not only that, but here we find a preponderance of the work which MacDowell would recognise as ‘quirky’, suggesting that while this work constitutes a marginal appeal in one sense – MacDowell (2010, 2013) and

Newman both strongly associate this mode with the ‘hipster’ (2009, 2013) – it is still positioned to avail of mainstream prestige mechanisms. All but one of these films was produced by or in conjunction with a major studio, and the bulk of these films come from the early- to mid-2000s, which I see as evidence of a (not necessarily coherent) industrial strategy, or desire to capitalise on expanding niche markets.

Table 3: Mainstream/bourgeois prestige

Film	Generic keys	Mainstream	Arthouse	Cult	Prestige mode	Awards
Boogie Nights (P.T. Anderson, 1997)	Drama; Melodrama; Period; Biopic; Crime	Sex; celebrity; drugs; crime; empathy for protagonist; politics of masculinity	Transgressive sex; sex industry presented neutrally	Sex; comedy; glamour; subculture; nostalgia/irony	Bourgeois/mainstream	Oscars, SAG, MTV, Golden Globe, BAFTA, BFI, PEN, Toronto International
Magnolia (P.T. Anderson, 1999)	Drama; Melodrama; Family drama	Character-centred; romance; comedy; family; revelations; stars; emotions; politics of masculinity	Complex interlocking structures; auteurism; awards/festivals	Casting against type; 'epic' scope may call for repeated viewing; mutable reality (not strictly realist)	Bourgeois/mainstream	Oscars, Berlin, Blockbuster, Empire, Golden Globe, San Sebastian, Toronto International, Writers Guild
American Beauty (Sam Mendes, 1999)	Drama; Melodrama; Family drama; Comedy; Coming-of-age	Suburban drama; prestige; star power; personal growth; emotional engagement; politics of masculinity	Homophobia; homosexuality; underage/transgressive sexuality; rejection of societal norms; suburban anomie; awards/festivals	New talent discovered'	Bourgeois/mainstream	Oscar, Bafta, Blockbuster, DGA, Empire, Golden Globe, MTV, SAG, Teen Choice, Toronto International, Writers Guild, Young Hollywood
Sideways (Alexander Payne, 2004)	Comedy; Drama; Fish-out-of-water; Melodrama; Romance; Road Trip	Comedy; drama; romance; road trip; male bonding; fish out of water;	Avoids conventional character empathy (unlikeable); philosophical or identity crisis; mid-life/bourgeois crisis	Humour; character study; 'failure' celebrated	Bourgeois/mainstream	American Film Institute, Oscar, ACE, Bafta, DGA, Golden Globe, Independent Spirit, SAG, Writers Guild

The third group – the ‘bourgeois/mainstream’ films – is the set of films which most strongly represents the supposed ‘annus mirabilis’ of quasi-independent film, 1999. This selection comprises *Boogie Nights*, *Magnolia*, *American Beauty*, and *Sideways*, the last two of which were respectively the highest and second-highest ranked for overall award recognition. Here, the Academy Awards features most strongly, indicating the extent to which these films could have been regarded as embraced by the mainstream. They are also the films which most minimise cult or art-house associations – they could be described as the ‘least Smart’ – and strongly privilege classical formal constructions (all can be straightforwardly or casually described as ‘drama’), an ‘epic’ scope (in particular P.T. Anderson’s work), the melodramatic, and the mid-life crisis (*American Beauty*, *Sideways*); in addition, all of them engage with the politics of male sexuality. Therefore I would regard this grouping as a strong example of the way in which mainstream prestige mechanisms privilege the bourgeois, the middle-class, and the masculinist, and award most prestige to those films which least transgress formal classical expectations.

All of these films are also budgeted at the higher end of the scale (although not the highest) and come from studios which were attempting most strongly to colonise territory during the period; New Line diversifying from its niche genre comedies and horrors, Fox Searchlight working to consolidate its position as dominant producer within the quasi-independent arena, and Dreamworks SKG attempting to establish itself outside of the animation field. In this sense, the high degree of approval shown for these films relates not just to critical approbation or box office performance, but also represents prestige granted within the industry, by the structural institution that is Hollywood, perhaps as recognition for the solidification of its own interventions within the quasi-independent field.

Table 4: Generic/cult/technical prestige

Film	Generic keys	Mainstream	Arthouse	Cult	Prestige mode	Awards
Dark City (Alex Proyas, 1998)	Sci-fi; Mystery; Noir	Sci-fi; action; production values; romance; mystery	Postmodern architecture; unstable reality; unreliable narrator; ironic noir	Noir pastiche; irony; nostalgia; unstable reality; conspiracy; fascist kitsch; failure at box office; need for repeated viewing; Proyas himself	Cult/generic/technical	Saturn, Bram Stoker, BIFFF, Hugo, Int. Horror Guild
The Matrix (A. Wachowski and L. Wachowski, 1999)	Sci-fi; Action; Adventure	Action; violence; martial arts; male bonding; star power	Philosophy; unstable reality; position within film history (i.e. references other styles/Asian cinema etc.); innovative style (bullet time - has particular status within innovation context	Unstable reality; heavy stylisation; action/martial arts; need for repeated viewing; anti-conformist; 'new talent discovered'	Cult/generic/technical	Oscar, Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror, Bafta, Blockbuster, Empire, Hugo, MTV, Nebula

Two films – *The Matrix* and *Dark City* – are notable for the way in which the prestige they are granted through awards mechanisms almost entirely reflects their generic drivers. *The Matrix*'s Academy Award and BAFTA nods are all in technical categories (editing, visual effects and sound), which to me illustrates the tendency of bourgeois awards systems to, where generic drivers are specifically embedded in 'lower-status' models such as action and to a lesser extent sci-fi, endow credit in technical categories rather than in higher-prestige 'creative' categories. In this context, the drive to produce an industrial acknowledgement of the film's financial success is in conflict with generic drivers which reduce its perceived prestige, therefore a kind of 'compromise agreement' is produced. This is not the case for more populist evaluative mechanisms such as the Blockbuster Entertainment and Empire awards, voted for by the public. Similarly, *Dark City*'s awards were exclusively generated within the more 'cult' arena of science and speculative fiction evaluative mechanisms, reflecting both the film's limited box office appeal and the intensity of its generic imperatives, which worked to obscure the tonal and thematic markers of Smartness which it employs. I would argue, additionally, that it appears here as if the dominance of perceptions of science fiction as an explicitly popular (or even low-prestige) genre has militated against interpretations of the films as being of a 'quality' nature; in this sense, their Smartness is *obscured* by genre.

Table 5: Strongly hybrid prestige

Film	Generic keys	Mainstream	Arthouse	Cult	Prestige mode	Awards
Pulp Fiction (Quentin Tarantino, 1994)	Crime; Thriller; Gangster; Buddy	Action; violence; comedy; glamour; male bonding	Unreliable narration; unconventional structure; auteurism; awards/festivals	Violence; language; dialogue; black comedy	Strongly hybrid - all represented	Oscar, Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror, Bafta, Palme D'Or Cannes, Cesar, DGA, Edgar Allen Poe, Golden Globe, Independent Spirit, MTV, SAG
Being John Malkovich (Spike Jonze, 1999)	Comedy; Drama; Fantasy	Comedy; star power;	Unstable reality; interiority; auteurism; complex narrative; casting against type; awards/festivals	Unstable reality; complex narrative; comedy; casting against type; need for repeated viewing; 'new talent discovered'	Strongly hybrid - all represented	Oscar, Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror, Bafta, Cesar, Deauville, DGA, Empire, GLAAD, Golden Globe, Hugo, Independent Spirit, MTV, SAG, SFFWA, Teen Choice, Venice (FIPRESCI Award), Writers Guild
Memento (Christopher Nolan, 2000)	Mystery; Thriller; Drama	Action; murder; thriller; mystery; star power;	Unreliable narrator; fractured narrative structure; paranoia; awards/festivals	Mystery; violence; complexity; need for repeated viewing; 'new talent discovered'	Strongly hybrid - all represented	American Film Institute, Oscar, Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror, ASA, Bram Stoker, BIFA, Deauville, DGA, Poe, Empire, Golden Globe, Independent Spirit, MTV, Sundance
Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (Michel Gondry, 2004)	Romance; Comedy; Drama; Sci-fi	Comedy; romance; star power; sci-fi	Formal experimentation; complex narrative structure; suburban anomie; unreliable narrator; auteurism;	Romance; quirky; casting; against type; 'new talent discovered'; comedy; need for repeated viewing	Strongly hybrid - all represented	American Film Institute, Oscar, Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror, Bafta, Bram Stoker, Cesar, Empire, Golden Globe, Hugo, People's Choice, SAG, Writers Guild

The final group is of the films which demonstrated a strongly hybridised tendency to garner prestige in the form of awards and nominations across all of the categories I have so far described. These are, *Pulp Fiction*, *Being John Malkovich*, *Memento*, and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. For these, the wide range of awards involved – from Teen Choice and MTV, to Oscars, to Independent Spirit, to those bestowed by high-status international festivals like Cannes and Deauville – demonstrates several things. The first is that clearly each of these films demonstrated an ability to appeal to multiple audience constituencies (inside and outside of the film industry as an institution) simultaneously. The second is that each tended to harness formal characteristics – narrative experimentation, shifts in the nature of diegetic ‘reality’, and temporal play – traditionally seen as associated with ‘high art’ values.

The third is that for each, those experimental formal characteristics were based in strongly classical generic frameworks, featuring ‘star’ actors, which I would argue militated against the reading of that formal experimentation as unfamiliar, providing instead a comparatively reassuring base from which to experience those features. In addition, all but *Eternal Sunshine* – which itself cost a comparatively low \$20 million – came from the lower-budget end of the spectrum, and all bar *Memento* came from the quasi-independent sector rather than the independent. *Pulp Fiction*’s presence here, as the most formally conventional of the four, might seem oddly juxtaposed with three other such strongly boundary-breaching texts; however to me this – and certainly its somewhat unexpected receipt of the Palme D’Or at Cannes – suggests that its quasi-mythological discursive place as the first breakout Smart hit, or first emergence of it as marker of an industrial and audience *zeitgeist*, is perhaps justifiable.

Interestingly this grouping also incorporates what for me might mark the last fully Smart breakout, *Eternal Sunshine*, as the films following it were either released on a much smaller scale (*Primer*, *Brick*), were box office failures (*Huckabees*, *Zissou*), or are so marked by classical tendencies that they appear right at the ‘mainstream’ end of the continuum (*Sideways*). Textually and industrially these four films are what must be regarded as ‘breakout hits’, able to transcend apparently contradictory formal bases – functioning as strongly art-house, and simultaneously as strongly mainstream – in order to appeal to multiple audiences. They also constitute the group of films which combines in most equal measure that combination of sophisticated narrative-textual ambition, clear generic drive,

idiosyncratic tonal play, call to auteurist mythologies, and impression of textual novelty, which seems to me to most clearly define the field.

From this (of necessity limited) study, I would make a several conclusions. The first is that the type of prestige awarded comes in a variety of forms, each strongly embedded within formal-generic-economic contexts, and the dominance of any one form governs the type of prestige bestowed. Secondly, awards prestige constitutes a call for internal industry recognition as much as public recognition. Related to this, the industrial origins of an individual text appear to have an impact on the type of prestige awarded, as the more industrially independent films are more likely to be valourised by the independent and art-house festivals and awards into which they are ‘channelled’ than the more mainstream evaluative systems. Thirdly Smart films avail of prestige in ways which illustrate the manner in which ‘Smartness’ operates along a continuum from independent (including here, art-house) to mainstream. The kind of prestige bestowed strongly reflects the nature both of an individual film’s generic-structural-thematic preoccupations, *and* the esteem within which those strands are individually held by a specific evaluative system; at its most dynamic and expansive, Smart can appeal to a multiplicity of them simultaneously.

Historically, amended contemporary conceptions of prestige might be regarded as linked with sociocultural changes over the past fifty years; the societal upheaval of 1960s and the decades that followed radically altered the perspectives from and through which ideas like ‘prestige’ and ‘quality’ could be evaluated. Successive struggles for women’s, black and gay rights, the increasing centrality of popular culture to academia and journalism, the sense of subcultures – or simply the fashionable trappings of subcultural practices – moving to the mainstream, the commodification of niche styles, the increasing accessibility of cultural and aesthetic models from European art-house to manga to punk chic, have all contributed to a shifting of the grounds from which evaluative decisions can be made.

This is of course, all underpinned by the drive of late capitalism to identify, isolate, and monetize niche practices and cultural outputs. John Hartley, in citing how the (at one time socially marginal) tastes of baby boomer subcultures moved to the mainstream, notes that “in the turbulence and churn of identity formation in the commercialized public sphere there have clearly arisen business opportunities. They are most pronounced where personal and

consumer tastes have led to new publics.” (Hartley, 2005, 108) This can be seen in the way in which European art cinema of the 1960s ‘produced’ audiences for the New Hollywood of the same period, as much as it can be seen in the way Smart calls to new or newly-mobilised audiences: the way in which some Smart texts draw upon cult tropes, others to art cinema values, and some seem designed for Newman’s ‘hipsters’, whose focus is on “the fashioning of idiosyncratic personal identity within a subcultural milieu.” (Newman, 2013, 80).

A few particular elements may be relevant in the case of the period under discussion, from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s. I believe it is important to consider how the concept of ‘the culture industries’ encompasses the socio-cultural environment which gives rise to the work under discussion, as well as more strictly economic factors. Many writers discussing the concept of prestige and quality in the field of Smart, quasi-independent, or niche cinema invoke Bourdieu (King, 2005 and 2009; Sconce, 2002; Berra 2008; Mathijs and Sexton 2011; Wilinsky 2001) and hence focus their attentions at the level of audience consumption and textual interpretation, as opposed to production itself.¹³⁵ If “Bourdieu argues that cultural production (and consumption) are influenced by a struggle between groups and institutions over recognition, reputation and financial reward...[and sees] cultural work as being strongly shaped by the wider environment.” (Curran and Morley, 2006, 195) then we must also take into account that the ‘wider environment’ encompasses the ebb and flow of position-taking on the meaning and nature of cinema – and cinematic prestige – within the studios.

I concur broadly with King’s 2005 statement that

[a]ssociation with ‘quality’, arty, edgy or ‘cool’/alternative features is good for the image; that of individual executives with pretensions to something more than noisy blockbuster productions, and that of branches of large corporations often subject to criticism for their business practices and much of their not-so-creative output. (King, 2005, 46)

something he reaffirmed in 2009, saying that studios “sought from the 1990s to buy into some of the currency gained by the term ‘independent’ at a time when it had come to signify something of greater cultural worth than what was usually associated with the Hollywood mainstream.” (King, 2009, 8) A combination of factors led to the impetus to colonise ideas of independence, the identification (or creation, one might argue) of this specific gap in the market, and the realisation that one could ‘work both ends’, as Harvey Weinstein phrased it.

(ibid., 94) The idea of ‘working both ends’ essentially means that producers could issue presumptive appeals to different audiences simultaneously on behalf of a single text, even where these were logically contradictory (something my analysis of awards above appears to bear out).

For example, Miramax could emphasise the supposedly socially-transgressive violence of Quentin Tarantino’s work while saluting the institutionally-canonised solidity of his reputation as a new auteur; Focus could centre discourse on the ‘maverick’ formal experimentation of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* while simultaneously selling it as a romantic comedy. This multiple-positioning tendency also includes adopting an ambivalent, loose, or ‘free-flowing’ attitude to studio branding, as with *American Beauty*, which was positioned as a small indie pic, complete with hybrid/platform release, despite being the pet project of senior DreamWorks executives.¹³⁶ It is also illustrated in the manner in which the largely audience-generated positioning of *Fight Club* – as an anti-establishment industrial aberration, rather than the big-budget studio film that it actually was – prevails within popular discourse, an interesting reversal of the film’s original positioning as a bare-knuckle-fighting action movie.¹³⁷

These strategies are largely related to what one might describe as the ‘self-image’ of studios, given that ‘Hollywood’ functions as an evaluative construct at a discursive level not only to those who consume its products, but also to those engaged in it, as well an industrial location and presumptive mode of production. There is something of a risk here of ‘anthropomorphizing’ what is, after all, a set of competing multinational conglomerates. However, as I have mentioned elsewhere, Hollywood is an organizational network, and one that works as a powerful lobbying group in its own interests, whether through the MPAA, MPA, or more informally. In that sense, we can in some circumstances write of Hollywood as if it were a single entity; we can also note that ‘it’, that is separate studios acting together in their own interests, or acting singly but along parallel lines, can act in ways which have lasting impacts for all – as when Douglas Gomery notes that the major studios of the classical period “worked closely together to keep out competitors. But the majors did not want to appear to be monopolists, so they always tolerated minor studios operating on the margins.” (Gomery, 2005, 2)

Here, a focus on quality or prestige can be seen at some points as converting into financial success, but I believe is also engaged at the site of production as a partial end in itself; in a somewhat self-aggrandising search for the cultural prestige of being seen to produce more ‘elevated’ work than had become considered the norm, at a more public level. This constitutes itself as a drive to construct a modern canon of Hollywood films which can be read as establishing a creative legacy, while simultaneously achieving financial success and professional power and dominance. This is broadly in line, given the nature of ‘Hollywood’ as a highly networked industrial society, with the argument made by Levy that the pursuit of awards has much to do with the sociological concept “cumulative advantage” (Levy, 2003, 307). By this he means – and he refers particularly to the Academy Awards – that the awards system “creates and maintains inequality within the film industry...the rich and famous get richer and more famous.” (ibid.)

The 1960s and 1970s loom large here, too: not just from a simple generational perspective, in the sense that many of the figures within and outside of the studios during this period were likely to have had their formative cinematic experiences within this period, but because the concept of ‘New Hollywood’ became a structuring mythology. Here I believe, the internal drive to mitigate accusations of the trivialisation and shallow spectacularisation of studio cinema became inextricably linked with the idea that a ‘New New Hollywood’ could be created; one which, even if it did not always reward financially, would exonerate all involved of being party to a progressive decline in quality, however that might be measured.¹³⁸

Therefore, while awards form part of the industry’s publicity machinery, they also constitute an important part of a highly codified set of dominance displays; vitally important, too, when looked at as part of the *social* nature of the industrial network. This also recalls Bourdieu’s (1993, 1996) emphasis on legitimation struggles; the position-taking and – often antagonistic – power dynamics within the networks which form the field of cultural production – the “sociological struggles over position, power and prestige that underpin the production of textual forms and reputations, and how the specific networks of power relations orient the strategies of artists.” (Negus, 2006, 205) While some of this struggle for creative legacy is centred on box office figures¹³⁹ and some around the classical pleasures provided by the kind of solid, middlebrow films which a 1930s audience would broadly recognise as ‘prestige’ pictures, another portion of it is linked to the effort to seek legitimation by being seen to

produce work of innovation, or work of creativity defined as unusual in its relationship to the (assumed to be of less creative distinction) set of mainstream films.

Changes within the television industry during the same period provide a useful analogy or model for changes in practice, whereby television companies, faced with similar challenges to those at the studios, ‘unpacked’ at an industrial and economic level the potential value of ‘cult’ television, which might be regarded as broadly analogous to the Smart film. In scholarship on television we also encounter a range of theoretical perspectives which can help elucidate some of the issues which surround the discursive positioning of Smart cinema generally. In their exploration of American ‘must see television’¹⁴⁰ of the 1990s, Jancovich and Lyons set out some clear parallels with cinema viewing and how both audiences were courted by the conglomerates:

during the emergence of ‘must see’ television, the networks that produced these shows were going through a crisis in audience demographics not dissimilar to that which resulted in the production strategies of ‘post-classical’ Hollywood film-making. In other words, these shows emerged at the very moment when network audiences were declining. In this sense, these shows might be understood as akin to the blockbuster ‘event’ movies to which Hollywood turned (Jancovich and Lyons, 2003, 2)

Yet there is a significant difference here. While television may have been seen to turn ‘big’, the bifurcation appearing in film markets meant that on the one hand, the blockbuster may have been dominant, but on the other, a new perspective was appearing: the idea of ‘more’, in audience terms, as being constituted from ‘less, but in more diverse areas’ – both geographically (in terms of increasing globalism) and in terms of the range of cultural tastes and practices being appealed to: cumulatively, the process of industrial colonisation implied in David Linde’s phrase “specific but pretty substantial audiences” (Rooney, 2003, 11).

Here again, in the light of the decline in network audiences (for which we might possibly read in cinematic terms ‘the blockbuster audience’¹⁴¹) Jancovich and Lyons discuss the turn away from mass audiences, and instead towards attracting “the most valuable audiences...affluent, highly educated consumers who value the literary qualities of these programmes.....[and an] overwhelming preoccupation with the white, affluent, urban middle classes.” (ibid., 3)¹⁴² This seems to me to parallel the focus which the mainstream

film industry similarly placed on co-opting the industrial practices, textual attributes, and more general socio-cultural trappings of what we would previously have termed ‘independent film’ via their infiltration of the independent studios, or their establishment of quasi-indie subsidiary divisions. It is also important to note that the industrial underpinnings of television broadcasting – its increasing globalisation and conglomeration – closely align with the same process within cinema, specifically because of the manner in which buyouts and mergers have gradually elided almost all distinctions between the two institutions.¹⁴³

The process by which television has been ‘rehabilitated’ from devalued mass entertainment to its contemporary position as a middlebrow cultural pursuit¹⁴⁴ parallels the equivalent journey by which the Smart niche has established itself, and which King refers to extensively, invoking the work of Janice Radway (King, 2009, 267-269). This also complicates any potential argument that Smart (or indiewood) is *always* an industrial aberration, or corporate corruption of purist notions of ‘true independence, as this

can have the effect of denying the extent to which indie/independent is itself subject to its own forms of institutionalization and commercialization, shading into, rather than being entirely separable from, Indiewood. Such articulations can also be viewed as part of a process of defensive distinction-maintenance on the part of those who wish to associate themselves with the qualities ascribed to independent cinema” (ibid., 268-269)

King’s notion of “defensive distinction-maintenance” is useful for translating how the HBO example relates to the production and reception of Smart cinema. It arises most clearly in relation to cult audiences, where we can see it as a kind of psychological praxis, or pattern of cultural behaviour in which audiences use their cultural consumption habits as a means of establishing identity. However, we can also see it illustrated in *industrial* behaviours, where studios utilise textual markers or impressions of distinction, and simultaneously obscure references to a film’s industrial origins, thereby creating reputational capital.¹⁴⁵

Both quality television and Smart cinema seek to distinguish themselves from their respective mainstreams by staking textual claims for ‘quality’, which they link strongly to ideas of audience superiority.¹⁴⁶ Both have been historical beneficiaries of, and active agents within, a broader cultural re-definition of what quality means in these contexts, particularly as regards positioning ‘transgressive’ elements (graphic sex, extreme violence, dark or socially-

problematic themes) as *de facto* signifiers of credibility; this is the case regardless of whether the mode of credibility being called to is one of social realism, playfully postmodern nihilism, or simply of ‘authentic’ maverick creativity.¹⁴⁷ These are used as elements of a market positioning strategy for which the ultimate goal is a kind of systematic self-replicability, where potential customers can be relied upon to make evaluative judgements about a text from its position within the discourse by virtue of their previous experience with similar texts, as well as discursive cues. In this sense, and this is the point I wish to emphasise most strongly, it is the combination of textual choice (i.e. production decisions) *and* marketing, publicity, and discursive framing of the text or set of texts, which is directed at cuing both media tastemakers and potential audiences into particular responses within a pre-determined framework of ‘quality’.

The key difference, and one which I believe merits further research, is that by virtue of its containment within specific television channels (for all that this mode is continually extending its reach), compared with the more industrially-scattered Smart mode, quality television forms its own self-reinforcing circuit of branding and positioning. While a single channel (like HBO) can create, extend, manage, control, and amplify its identity, each new Smart film must take a singular – and expensive – industrial approach to positioning and performance. Without a casually-accepted discursive category – as, after all ‘Smart’ is a term of the academy rather than of the public – available into which to ‘drop’ the text, promotional efforts must be by their nature more diffuse, and their results more unpredictable. In the absence of this category, and in an effort to maintain a kind of industrial continuity in practices of defensive distinction-maintenance, we frequently find that attempts are made to link distinction and difference to another pre-existing discursive category: auteurism (see Chapter Four).

An additional category to which Smart is linked is that of ‘indie’ (as distinct from ‘independent’, which I conceive of more as an industrial term). While this is a term which lacks clear definition more now, in the light of industrial tendencies to co-opt its forms, than perhaps at any point in the last few decades, it continues to form a popular discursive category through which many of these films are casually framed. In Newman’s conception of ‘indie’,¹⁴⁸ as “a buzzword, a term whose meanings — alternative, hip, edgy, uncompromising — far exceed the literal designation of media products that are made

independently of major firms.” (Newman, 2009, 16), the movement of what can be termed indie culture from fringe to mainstream, via the kind of industrial agglomeration and integration I have discussed above, didn’t *dissolve* the idea of indie, as might have been feared, but amplified its impact.

Essentially, as the mainstream moved into satisfying impulses towards ‘alternativeness’¹⁴⁹ – the “overproduction” to which Garnham refers above – it simultaneously enabled greater access to ‘indie’ culture, and closed off or restricted the market by producing a proliferation of non-independent choices. Therefore, ‘indie’ is a highly complex and contradictory notion, which must be held in continuous tension, and performs multiple roles – functioning both as a potentially oppositional culture which holds power to challenge the *status quo*, and as a taste culture of the privileged elite.¹⁵⁰ To regard indie culture as a simple oppositional construction – in which ‘the mainstream’ is constructed as an industrial-cultural monolith, and ‘indie culture’ as the set of creative forms and practices which challenges its hegemony by virtue of their very existence – would be an inappropriately binary way in which to approach a complex field of play.

Indeed, Newman points out that there is a danger, for example, of regarding a particular kind of low-budget ‘look’ within independent cinema as intrinsically oppositional, when it is simply being utilised fetishistically, as a purely aesthetic approach. Here, it becomes a stylistic choice among many, easily reproduced outside of the independent setting, and I believe while the excessively ‘grimy’ urban settings of *The Matrix*, *Fight Club* and *Dark City* – some of the biggest-budget work I discuss – are primarily derived from noir, to a certain extent they are influenced by the desire to reproduce elements of a low-budget aesthetic, in an effort to claim a more ‘indie’ status, as is the gloomy, cold lighting of parts of *Eternal Sunshine*. While these visual elements may be to a certain extent buried under the various generic strategies and (in particular) special effects, I believe they are, again, part of a strategic displacement of ‘straightforward’ generic expectations and a tendency to obscure the industrial origins of these films.

This is in contrast to the strategic reversal we see in the aesthetic of some of the (lower-budget) suburban satires; *Election*’s sunny schoolyards, the glossy sheen of *American Beauty*, *Donnie Darko*’s lush prosperity, and the clashing pastels of *Happiness* partly form an ironic

commentary on the darkness beneath. Either way, the visual aesthetics work to position each film along the continuum which runs from ‘indie’ to ‘mainstream’ and through which audiences position themselves in relation to their own expectations of the film. It is worth noting that this has been complicated somewhat by the increasing sophistication of lower-end camera equipment, as can be seen by the difference in relative aesthetic approaches of 1998’s *Pi*, and *Primer*, just six years later. While Aronofsky’s decision to film in black and white reversal was a creative rather than a budgetary one,¹⁵¹ the final effect makes strong appeals to the idea of a low-budget aesthetic *as* creative intervention, and was referred to continually in media discourse about the film (Petrovic, 1999; Weinraub, 1999; Phipps, 1999; Maslin, 1998a); Ryan, 1998). By contrast, while *Primer* (costing almost ten times less) is frequently accurately referred to as a “no-budget film” (Muir, 2013; Hoffman, 2013; Porteous, 2012; O’Neill, 2006; Romney, 2005; Bernard, 2004), little or no attention (at the time or in subsequent mentions, such as in discussion of Carruth’s follow-up) is paid to its understated visual aesthetic. This, I would argue is due to its strong grounding in a highly realist framework: the aesthetic elements are subsumed beneath its generic appeals, narrative logic-games, the repeated framing of Carruth as an auteur, and the film’s status as a prize-winner at Sundance and nominee at the Independent Spirit awards.

One can regard independent production as a *de facto* oppositional practice, or (as I have explored elsewhere) as an apprenticeship leading to the mainstream; Newman uses the term ‘credibility’ in relation to creative practitioners in a very similar manner to that in which I use the term ‘prestige’ in relation to creative objects. That is, not as a casual or tokenistic term of approbation, but as a signifier for a complex system of evaluative judgements which encompasses industrial, textual, and sociological perspectives. All of this is partially dependent on an audience’s approach to position-taking in relation to the text, but also depends on the manner in which ideas of credibility can be mobilised (positioned, juggled, or even manufactured). The traditional perspective¹⁵² has been to consider credibility and popularity mutually exclusive, but as Newman points out, the notion of ‘selling out’ was reworked dramatically during the 1990s.¹⁵³

As the indie and mainstream industrial worlds became increasingly intertwined, movement into the mainstream was reframed within the discourse as an

infiltration of the establishment [which] recuperates the credibility of the indie artist. Note that this recuperation of the notion of selling out does not challenge the construction of indie as anti-mainstream. Rather, it challenges the construction of mainstream as anti-indie. (Newman, 2009, 22)

This works, in socio-cultural terms, to explain some of the inherent slipperiness of Smart as a concept; it ‘slides’ between mainstream and independent modes without causing particular cognitive dissonance, often in the same manner in which individual filmmakers themselves move between independent and mainstream production environments; they are enveloped within a rhetoric which lauds this as industrial, cultural or artistic flexibility and adaptability – not so much ‘hitting the big time’ as occasionally occupying it for a temporary and strategic purpose¹⁵⁴ – rather than one which regards their industrial mobility as a form of ‘selling out’.

Newman does not explore the specific reasons for this transition in wider perspective, although my view is that again we come back to a combination of a) the increasing consolidation of industrial power within the hands of a small set of major conglomerates which could afford to both ‘be their own competition’ and as such were alert to new product opportunities and market niches, to seek new talents with which to populate them, and to provide a varied set of appropriate distribution channels for them, and b) a (perhaps generational) reaction in which the first wave of new cultural distribution channels (music TV, specialised radio stations, cable television, music- and video-sharing technology, and later the internet) had, at least temporarily, blurred the ways in which distinction could be hierarchised between ‘independent’ and ‘mainstream’ pleasures.

In this sense, perceptions of what constituted ‘credibility’ from an indie perspective were amended along with this movement towards the mainstream; again, as Newman points out “the reality (as opposed to the myth) of indie culture is that despite the rhetoric of opposition, there is no real divorce between mainstream and alternative forms of media.” (ibid., 21); how could there be, when audiences consume both, and in both ‘innocent’ and ‘ironic’ fashion? I do not agree fully with his assessment – the industrial cooption of the rhetoric of opposition does not in itself erase actual opposition, or elements of it, even from within the industrial system, for all that it may obscure it – but would link this instead to his later assertion that “[i]ndie hipsterism is...a culture of appropriation.” (Newman, 2013, 75) This allows the recuperation of ‘selling out’, which thereby becomes de-centred from the circuit of defensive

distinction-maintenance, allowing for an even greater visibility of quasi-indie texts, insofar as it encourages access to ‘mainstream indie’ texts by both those who would previously have regarded them as ‘too mainstream’ *and* those who would have been alienated by texts perceived as too difficult, or elitist in their marginality. However, the binary construction of ‘the indie world vs. the mainstream’ is too powerful a mythological construction to abandon, not least because it provides ideal conditions for industrial markets performing their *own* self-segmentation on behalf of producers, while simultaneously concealing the true narrowness of the field of mass culture.

Distinction is, of course, a key element within the construction of the indie trope, and primarily it can be seen in the way that distinction has traditionally come directly from indie’s status as self-proclaimed oppositional practice. Newman takes the view that

[t]he oppositional stance that defines indie culture is one key to its status as a source of distinction, a means by which its audience asserts its superior taste. By seeing independent cinema as the alternative to Hollywood films, the indie audiences makes authenticity and autonomy into aesthetic virtues that can be used to distinguish a common mass culture from a more refined, elite one. Techniques employed in sustaining the indie/mainstream binary operate on the level not only of production, then, but also of consumption. (ibid., 22)

While broadly he is historically correct, there is an unexplored contradiction implied in the presentation of the quasi-indie text as possessed of the qualities ‘authenticity’ and ‘autonomy’ which sustain this binary opposition, and the idea that in the contemporary context, ‘selling out’ has lost its power as a cornerstone of that same opposition. Rather, from an industrial perspective, we should focus on the phrase ‘aesthetic virtues’, as Newman has identified a key factor in the mobilisation of ‘indie’ as a kind of generic identity in its own right, shared across different media. This is the *aestheticisation* of a particular kind of industrial output (in this case, the Smart film), a set of stylistic strategies which obscure the fact that a Smart text’s very presence within mainstream exhibition structures militates against the possibility of describing it as either oppositional, or independent.

Instead, certain formal and narrative traits which originated within independent and avant-garde cinema have been aestheticised to the point at which, in combination with the industrial double-coding which allows any of these texts to be positioned as either more or less

mainstream depending on the audience targeted, it is often no longer possible to distinguish between ‘authenticity and autonomy’ as actual markers of independence, and formal strategies designed to produce the impression of such. The fact that there is no great clamour to identify the difference between them is related to the loss of significance, culturally, of ideas of ‘selling out’, replaced with those of ‘opting in,’ and the increased accessibility of a wide variety of different texts.

However it is also related to the manner in which these films are engaged with at the level of cultural capital. If Newman is correct in identifying indie fans *and* producers as fundamentally the middle-class white male bourgeoisie, who utilise taste cultures as cultural capital in order to mobilise social difference and perpetuate privilege (ibid., 22-23), then the question must be asked whether Smart cinema possesses any capacity to be truly oppositional? Perhaps not, but it can still serve the useful function of challenging dominant frames of reference and conventional modes of representation from within the Hollywood matrix, albeit in a limited capacity and one which depends for its ‘reach’ on the manner in which any individual text is presented to its potential audience.

Conclusions

From both my secondary readings and primary research into the way in which evaluative mechanisms manifest themselves in practice, my conclusion is that the wider body of Smart cinema encompasses a variety of different categories, which are themselves perceived in different ways by the prestige industry. The ‘art-house/independent’ films are rewarded less for their generic qualities than for their adherence to textual strategies of the non-mainstream variety, and for their production contexts (i.e. that they have been produced outside of the studio system, regardless of their distribution arrangements): this is also the category where the prestige industry is most closely entwined with economic contexts, where festivals also function as textual marketplaces. That the earlier films are most represented in this category may illustrate a subsequent movement from the margins to the mainstream. For the ‘hybrid indie/mainstream’ films, I believe the balance between different types of evaluative mechanism illustrates the transitional nature (i.e. moving towards the mainstream) of the Smart mode during the early 2000s, something also perhaps indicated in the dominance of the

‘accessible’ comedy genre, and in particular the ‘quirky’ variety. Prestige bestowed by youth audiences also features strongly here, perhaps indicating their function as ‘early adopters’. Most of these films were studio-linked, indicating a tendency for studios to court expanding niche markets.

The ‘bourgeois/mainstream’ films illustrate Smart’s movement into the more mainstream cinematic framework. These films minimise cult and art-house associations and foreground classical structures and strong generic drivers, as well as displaying a preoccupation with strongly bourgeois, middle-class thematics. These originate from within the studio system, and for me the prestige bestowed represents an institutional ‘ring-fencing’ of studio interventions in the quasi-independent field. Two films avail only of ‘cult/technical/genre’ prestige and popular prestige (audience-awarded), which indicates the extent to which generic drivers and box-office response can dominate discursive representations of Smart films, effectively obscuring tonal, structural and thematic markers of Smartness. One ‘strongly hybridised’ group of films crosses all prestige categories, demonstrating their ability to appeal to multiple audiences. Here, tendencies towards non-classical form were mitigated by strong generic foundations and star presence, producing the ‘crossover hit’ so sought by the studio subsidiaries from which they came. Concluding that the bestowal of prestige is determined within formal-generic-economic contexts, and that awards systems function as relays of industrially-grounded approbation, I illustrate here the manner in which Smart exists and operates along a continuum, as much for industrial-institutional mechanisms as for audiences.

I conclude that Smart cinema, in particular in the way it makes appeals to discursive conceptions of quality and prestige, is strongly linked to the importance of industrial image. Smart cinema functions as part of a drive not just to establish market dominance, but also to be seen as establishing a creative legacy, and to reinforce the structural mythologies which privilege ‘Hollywood’ as a site of creative as well as economic power. This is complicated by the way in which corporate strategies simultaneously produce texts, and obscure or deny the industrial contexts from which they originate. Smart cinema represents a means by which perceptions of creativity, innovation, transgression and quality can be harnessed in service of market colonisation and reputational capital. I conclude that regardless of its industrial status, Smart cinema tends to draw upon tacit appeals to ideas of ‘independentness’ (again, as

I emphasise, not the quality of industrial independence, but the perception that a work is free of an assumed set of industrial/structural restrictions (casually thought to *limit* creativity) and indeed the discursive construct ‘indie’.

Smart therefore forms part of an economic-historical process which has recuperated the idea of ‘selling out’, and reframed it as industrial flexibility or versatility, a process which may have led to the increased penetration of Smart as a mode within the mainstream, but simultaneously a process to which the industry is reluctant to draw explicit attention. In that sense, binary constructions of ‘independent’ and ‘mainstream’ are seen to fail, particularly when we view the aestheticisation of ‘the low-budget’ and its opposite, the introduction or fetishisation of the ‘low-budget aesthetic’ in large-scale studio projects. This leaves us with a body of Smart cinema in which style choices function to strategically displace or complicate generic expectations, and to simultaneously obscure the industrial origins of texts, leaving audiences to self-position in relation to structural aesthetics and generic drivers rather than industrial contexts. In order to explore in more detail the ways in which industrial, structural and cultural concerns intersect at the textual level, my next chapter will investigate the industrial underpinnings of some of these texts.

Chapter Six: Smart cinema and industrial categorisations

To regard the studio industry as monolithic and in all cases hostile to more marginal production is to oversimplify work created in its interstices, and to neglect the impact that individuals can have within the system, as “[a]cknowledgement of the potential existence of such space, however limited it might be, is important to our understanding of contemporary Hollywood as something other than an entirely seamless monolith of impersonal heteronomous business practices. The studios are run by individuals” (King, 2009, 227).¹⁵⁵ In that sense, industrial decisions are rarely made as mechanistically as it might sometimes appear from ‘straight’ readings of budgets and box office figures. However, exploring the economic origins of individual films within the Smart ‘canon’ can add to the understanding of them as industrial products.

In this chapter, I divide my selection of Smart films into two groups, the first those films with budgets of above \$10 million, the second those films with budgets below. It is notable that the sums involved are generally speaking still, even at the higher end of the budgetary spectrum, significantly lower than the costs for more ‘mainstream’ studio films. While I acknowledge that the borderline of \$10 million forms an arbitrary, somewhat mechanistic division, it serves to provide a context in which to explore individual works, and to decouple the texts from the sense in which ‘independent’, ‘low-budget’ and ‘Smart’ aspects are sometimes conflated. Within these two groupings, too, there is a tremendous disparity between budgets: even the lower range here runs from a miniscule \$7,000 (*Primer*) to more than a thousand times that figure, but averaging at \$3.5-3.9 million, and to provide a full reckoning of the ways in which budget and text are linked would require more attention to, for example, microbudgeting practices, than can be devoted in this work. Regardless, here I explore some of the industrial production and reception contexts of those films, and examine the ways in which these interact with generic and formal strategies within the texts themselves.

Figure 6. The ‘big-budget’ Smart film

Film	Final budget	Major studio involved		Film	Final budget	Major studio involved
<i>Boogie Nights</i> (P.T. Anderson, 1997)	\$15 million	New Line Cinema		<i>Fight Club</i> (David Fincher, 1999)	\$67 million	Fox 2000 (later Fox Searchlight)
<i>Rushmore</i> (Wes Anderson, 1998)	\$10-20 million ¹⁵⁶	Touchstone Pictures		<i>The Royal Tenenbaums</i> (Wes Anderson, 2001)	\$21 million	Touchstone Pictures
<i>Dark City</i> (Alex Proyas, 1998)	\$27 million	New Line Cinema		<i>Sideways</i> (Alexander Payne, 2004)	\$12 million	Fox Searchlight Productions
<i>Magnolia</i> (P.T. Anderson, 1999)	\$37 million	New Line Cinema		<i>Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind</i> (Michel Gondry, 2004)	\$20 million	Focus Features
<i>American Beauty</i> (Sam Mendes, 1999)	\$15 million	Dreamworks SKG		<i>I ♥ Huckabees</i> (David O. Rusell, 2004)	\$22 million	Fox Searchlight Productions
<i>The Matrix</i> (A. Wachowski and L. Wachowski, 1999)	\$63 million	Warner Bros. Pictures		<i>The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou</i> (Wes Anderson, 2004)	\$50 million	Touchstone Pictures

Figures have been compiled from a variety of sources including www.imdb.com, www.the-numbers.com and www.boxofficemojo.com and crosschecked with industry sources (including *Variety*, *Hollywood Reporter*, and *Screen International*) where possible, as well as industry-adjacent accounts such as those of: Levy, 1999; Tzioumakis, 2006; Mottram, 2006; Waxman, 2005. Each figure has been confirmed by a minimum of three different sources. All figures are estimated, and where any conflict arises between different sources, I have noted this where the difference appears significant in the context of my research.

For example, looking at the production backgrounds of the films concerned would suggest that they fall into roughly three groups. The first – accounting for a full twelve of the films selected for examination here – is those films which have been produced with major studio involvement (by which I mean at an investment, production, and/or distribution stage), and with a ‘large’ budget by independent standards, of over \$10 million. By way of context, the variation in budget among these films is tremendous, as those films with an intensive focus on special effects, such as *The Matrix* (comparatively inexpensive, given its technical innovations, at \$63 million), or with star involvement, like *Fight Club* (\$67million) are costlier than those which tend more towards contemporary settings (*Rushmore*, \$10-20 million or *Sideways*, \$12 million). In exploring production contexts as I do here, in terms of my desire to examine these films within their industrial setting, several themes emerge from the research.

The first is that the films with strongest tendency towards the classic action blockbuster form are present in this group. Sci-fi films *The Matrix* and (to a significantly lesser extent, given its more subdued qualities) *Dark City*, and dystopic action thriller *Fight Club* (see separate case study in Chapter Eight) are the films with both the highest overall associated costs, and the highest degree of global mainstream appeal in their generic attributes.¹⁵⁷ Certainly, these cannot be associated with any conventional definition of ‘indie’ production, based on the scale of financial outlay involved, and these films have the clearest apparent mainstream positioning hooks; star presence, and action sequences. However, it is worth noting that when compared with broadly generically-related films of the same period, they were produced remarkably cheaply, and in some cases constituted extremely good value. *Dark City* may have hardly broken even (\$27.2 million returned on costs of \$27 million)¹⁵⁸ but its budget was dwarfed by other sci-fi films in 1998; for comparison, we have *Armageddon* (\$100 million), *Deep Impact* (an estimated \$75 million) and *Lost in Space* (\$80 million, also a New Line production).

While *Fight Club* struggled initially to make its costs, *The Matrix* was, at \$63 million, a comparatively low-budget piece in the context of, for example, the same year’s *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* (\$100 million) or *End of Days* (\$80-100m estimated). While its returns – \$460 million worldwide – might imply that it had always been positioned as a tentpole attraction, its budget suggests otherwise, on the basis that it is cost, not text, which

dictates marketing strategy and reach. Therefore, I posit that the studios were here proceeding cautiously, assuming only modest risks, and anticipating mid-range success, with a focus as much on deferred profits (see King, 2009, 31) as on immediate box office returns. This is also illustrated by the way in which Warner Bros., in the same year, invested \$170 million dollars in *Wild Wild West*, considering it their blockbuster platform for the year: its budget places *The Matrix* squarely among Warners' more solidly mid-range, or their 'prestige' work, with similar costs, such as *Eyes Wide Shut*, *The Green Mile*, or *Any Given Sunday*.

In this sense, an international success like *The Matrix*, despite its extravagant profits, still fits into the Smart industrial model. Rather than following in the mould of the post-*Jaws* blockbuster, this is what I would regard as a Smart 'breakout' hit in the old-fashioned sense of the term. Here its novelty gains from the fact that its textual characteristics are innovative *relative* to its form; that, is, its relative narrative intricacy and intra-diegetic play are somewhat unexpected within the context of a sci-fi action movie. The work which, in a positioning sense, can be explicated most easily to a mainstream audience, and therefore can be considered only moderately risky from a studio perspective, also tends to feature in this sector. In this I include *American Beauty* and *Sideways*, which are strikingly similar in a variety of ways, including industrially. Both are masculinist fables of midlife melodrama centred on suburban or provincial anomie. Both feature moderately well-known actors with respected reputations rather than 'stars', and both have very similar – large, within the context of this specific sample, but still very small from a studio perspective – budgets (of \$15 million and \$12 million respectively).

Both were strongly positioned within a framework of quality and prestige, and heavily reliant on representations of their director as 'coming of age' in their respective discursive roles as, respectively, trans-media wunderkind (Sam Mendes) and promising filmmaker finally reaching maturity (Alexander Payne). Of the films chosen, these are the two which rank highest in terms of numbers of awards bestowed¹⁵⁹ – and which, perhaps not coincidentally, possess the least in terms of formal innovation, representing as they do the aspect of Smart film that is expressed in tone rather than structure. Their proportional return on investment for each is also extremely high, with *American Beauty* returning around \$350 million, and *Sideways* in the region of \$110 million.

The formally experimental *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *I ♥ Huckabees* would at first glance appear to figure in contrast to these, their textual elements and market positioning giving the impression of ‘marginality’ in a way that the more classically-oriented texts above do not. However, each has a comparatively large budget, at \$20 million and \$22 million respectively. In this sense, the discursive construction of *Eternal Sunshine* (initially bought by Propaganda Films following a bidding war, which itself became part of USA Films) works in a contradictory manner, where positioning de-prioritises production spend, and privileges instead a ‘handmade’ aesthetic which it links to perceptions of quality, authenticity, and independence. However, *Eternal Sunshine* was opened in what could be described as a wide-release style – opening on a large number of screens, to steadily decrease – rather akin to that of a ‘tentpole’ film, and outside of the traditional awards season run-up (see King, 2009, 82-83). Here, capitalising on both its star presence in the form of Jim Carrey, and its relatively accessible romantic-comedy dimensions were clearly deemed of greater strategic importance than cultivating the kind of slow-build critical acclaim which tends to lead to award-based prestige and subsequent sales: for me, this is an indication that Focus were positioning it as a (proportionally) ‘big film’, and yet the framing of it as being of ‘indie style’ militates against such a reading, focusing on auteuristic and craft-oriented concerns.

For the blockbuster, a large budget and platform opening form a kind of theoretical indicator or promise of quality, where tacit cost-benefit assumptions are discursively relayed into an implied promise of more impressive special effects and greater spectacle. The diametric opposite applies here, where a kind of valoristic emphasis is given to in-camera effects over digital effects, as if this fetishisation of an aesthetic which gives the *appearance* of coming from a low budget (see Newman, 2009) can guarantee the autonomy of the text itself. We can see the immediate contrast between popular and academic accounts of the film (such as Kermode, 2004; Norris, 2004; Christopher, 2004; Covert, 2007) and the perspective given by a piece written in a professional technical journal (Feeny, 2004). In the former, the extent to which media representations privilege the ‘manual vs. digital’ representation of Gondry’s work, and associate this with an idea of independent-leaning ‘craft’ – and linked with Gondry’s past as a video director, itself presented in a ‘craft’ model, unlike the more auteuristic framing of film work – in assumed opposition to an ‘industrial’ studio model, is striking.¹⁶⁰ In the latter, although it is noted that digital work was post-production-based rather than fully integrated into the production process, we are given a detailed outline of the

digital work undertaken on the film, and one which largely contradicts the more popular and academic accounts of it.¹⁶¹

Gondry's history and 'manual' use of special effects is here seen to construct him as an outsider to the Hollywood system, regardless of the industrial facts. Along with the focus on Charlie Kaufman as auteur (see Chapter Four for a more detailed consideration of this factor), this works to frame the film within a context which elides industrial considerations, obscures the origins of the film – a product of Focus Features, itself a division of Universal Pictures – and embeds viewers and potential viewers in a discourse of marginality which directs them to view the picture as 'independent'. At the same time, the more conventional elements – star casting, and a degree of recognisability in terms of the classical emotional engagement and catharsis offered by its comedic and romantic aspects – were easily prevailed upon in marketing and positioning the piece at the intersection of mainstream and fringe audiences, as demonstrated by its eventual return of more than \$70 million.

I ♥ Huckabees appears to have a more fragmented, even confused, industrial identity. Following his low-budget Australian debut with *Spanking The Monkey* (1994), David O. Russell's career had travelled in a steadily more visible arc with *Flirting With Disaster* (1996) for Miramax Films, and his most recent work prior to *Huckabees* had been the Village Roadshow/Warner Bros.¹⁶² production *Three Kings* (1998). This had generated some controversy in its approach to the politics of America's involvement in the first Gulf War, but its take of more than \$100 million internationally seemed to have proved Russell's capability in regard to large-scale studio production. However, the response to *Huckabees* illustrates its intriguingly double-coded – but strongly polarising, this being a risk of the multiple-coding approach – nature. As pointed out, it is “surely the first Fox film marketed with the tagline ‘An Existential Comedy’” (Walters, 2004, 34), and yet the marketing in general strongly emphasises the more classical elements, placing the film's strongly philosophical (and occasionally difficult) content in a reassuring framework which implies ease of access.

For example, the cinematic trailer strongly emphasises the comedic elements, and in particular privileges slapstick, physical, sexual, and broad comedic elements over the film's sophisticated wordplay. Similarly, *Huckabees*' playful interrogation of societal norms and big ideas surrounding globalisation, capitalism, the environment, success, and gender, is

muted in favour of a focus on the supposed universality of human emotion and spiritual connection, set to a folksy acoustic soundtrack which again works to signify the piece as ‘homespun’ and uncomplicated. The trailer’s most resonant non-comedic lines, from Dustin Hoffman’s existential detective Bernard Jaffe, are equally universalised and reassuring: “Everything is connected and everything matters. Now isn’t that cool?... We are connected”: the film’s sprawling intellectual complexity and off-beat humour may have come as a surprise to viewers who based their ticket purchase on the marketing alone. Therefore, the text’s industrial positioning may have had a strongly alienating effect on those mainstream viewers who were not cued in by other elements within the discursive relay, such as knowledge of Russell’s previous work, or a general consciousness of the quasi-independent production context within which he tends to operate.

While many of the reviews and production-related accounts of the piece were favourable, and most note not just its complexity but also the strong links between it and the work of Gondry, Jonze, Payne and the Andersons (Bradshaw, 2004; Rooney, 2004b; Sarris, 2004; Smith, 2004; Walters, 2004; Travers, 2004),¹⁶³ others signal that it lies somewhere near or on a precarious imagined boundary between art-house and mainstream films; the implication in several cases is clearly that this marginality automatically assigns it a ‘cult’ status, in a pejorative rather than valorising way (Quinn, 2004; Rooney, 2004b; Romney, 2004). Here, as the film has been positioned – and budgeted for – as a mainstream text, its refusal to follow its perceived industrial ‘destiny’ and transcend to mainstream success constitutes it as a failure. And yet, the individual box office performance of the film – it eventually broke even, more or less – cannot, in the overall context of the somewhat esoteric niche it occupies textually, be seen to constitute an epic disaster, rather, merely a mid-range disappointment.¹⁶⁴

It is also possible that the response to *Huckabees* relates to its temporal position, coming as the film did right at the end of Smart’s most visible period of popularity. The context within which it does function as a ‘failure’ is that of the overall enfolding of a more intellectualised and formally-experimental aesthetic into the mainstream; *Huckabees* is essentially now memorable as the last studio Smart film of the period. Where *Eternal Sunshine* created a specific context through which to mediate audience expectations – largely, I believe, through the auteuristic discourse which clustered particular expectations around the work of Charlie Kaufman – the positioning of *Huckabees* privileged a broad comedic generic framing over its

more experimental leanings, thereby directing it towards a more mainstream potential audience somewhat in *contradiction* to its textual tendencies.

One particularly hostile review is interesting for the manner in which it points to this contradiction. Regarding it as pretentiously metropolitan and over-intellectualised, the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* describes the film as follows:

the movie is disjointed and pointless. But its biggest shortcoming is that it's not funny. At least, not in these parts. Perhaps quips about the eternal struggle between existential atheists and existential theists have 'em rolling in the aisles at the Los Angeles chapter of the Jean-Paul Sartre Fan Club. But the rest of us will be hard-pressed to work up a decent chuckle. (Strickler, 2004, 11)

A solitary quote is insufficient to ascribe some kind of generic exhaustion to film viewers, or some kind of intrinsic 'alienating quality' to Smart texts themselves. However it is worth noting; clearly the boundaries between the mainstream and the margins are not necessarily as permeable as the success of some other films would have it appear. And where this permeability exists, it is deployed as an aspect of the industrial matrix; as part of the rhetoric of 'independent intrusion' which functions both as an audience-positioning tool, and as a structural framework within which to – at both a popular and an academic level – contextualise the increasingly complex and intertwined relationship of 'independent' and 'mainstream' cinema during the period.¹⁶⁵

Some of the films play explicitly on auteurial constructions and considerations in their positioning, as can be seen when we look at the manner in which the persona of Charlie Kaufman is repeatedly figured not simply into the inter-textual relay surrounding his work, but also into the work itself. Where the films of the respective Andersons are concerned, a more classically-framed discourse of auteurism is mobilized outside of the text; that is, in the media-industrial discourse, in such a manner as to constitute a strategy of industrial positioning of its own, and one which is complicated by the sometimes nebulous or contradictory links between genre and auteurism. To momentarily extend the work of Paul Thomas Anderson as an example, even a casual survey of media (and some scholarly) accounts shows a clear tendency to discursively position his output as part of a kind of transcendently historicized evolutionary process, privileging not an 'indie breakthrough' perspective, but the ideas of singularity and mastery which accompany auteurist assumptions.

Comparisons are made with Quentin Tarantino (Corliss, 1997; Doherty, 1998; Mungo, 1998; French, 2000; Olsen, 2000; Wise, 2000), but these refer as much to Anderson's fixation on the emotional geography of the wider Los Angeles area, as they do to any assumed stylistic or narrative similarities. The over-arching comparisons made are between Anderson's work and that of Martin Scorsese (in particular for *Boogie Nights*) and Robert Altman (for *Magnolia*); all of the above-mentioned articles reference one or both, as do Udovitch (2000), Quinn (2000), Klawans (1997) and Maslin (1997, 1999b), and writers working outside of strictly review-based contexts, such as Levy (Levy, 1999, 116-140).¹⁶⁶ The question is why, lacking as his work does the distinctive visual style of a Tarantino, or the focus on metaphysical identity of a Kaufman, Anderson should be framed in such a manner. The process of generic double-coding may be more complex where work identified strongly with 'auteurism' is concerned, as the use of genre as a distinguishing factor may be less industrially vital in positioning a text in cases where a clearly-established auteuristic identity can serve to do so. However, I would argue that Anderson's early visual style is *not* in fact particularly distinctive,¹⁶⁷ in which case at a theoretical level we might expect genre to be employed – in marketing, as well as in media accounts – in a more prominent way in positioning his films.

My contention is that we fail to see a simple deployment of generic 'gateways' into these texts, not because Anderson was at the time working in impenetrable or hybridised genres – his work at this point constitutes relatively straightforward 'character-based drama', regardless of the narrative intricacy at play in *Magnolia* – but because his work is embedded within (at the time of release) historically unpopular and problematic generic contexts. Within these contexts, we see auteurist framings used to position his films, and generic cues utilised in comparatively complex ways to *de-problematise* the question of genre. This is most obviously the case with *Boogie Nights*, the setting of which – the pornographic filmmaking industry of the 1970s and 1980s – constitutes both a fictional world which promises transgressive excitement, *and* a problem of industrial positioning which needs to be 'solved'. In addition, it is a problem which has direct relevance to the film's industrial origins: *Boogie Nights* marked a further step in the continuing journey of New Line Cinema, long associated with exploitation film and cheap horror, but which from the beginning of the 1990s had been moving steadily towards the mainstream, through its acquisition by the Turner Broadcasting System in 1994 and merger with Time Warner in 1996.¹⁶⁸

The extent to which the film's setting may misdirect potential viewers – directing them to expect sexual titillation from a film which, by restrictive American standards, is quite explicit, but could be more accurately described as 'domestic drama' than pornography – is clearly addressed in, for example, the film's trailer, which attempts to move potential viewers through a range of generic positions, none of which specifically invoke pornography, and many of which contradict porn's narrative centrality to the film. Its introduction, with the voice of central character Dirk Diggler (Mark Wahlberg) intoning "Everyone's given one special thing...I want you to know I plan on being a star", invokes the mythology of the American Dream, as does the insistent non-diegetic voiceover – always a key tool in the industrial positioning of texts – which declares "In 1977, a kid from nowhere had a dream of getting somewhere".

In this reading, the generic code most clearly invoked is that of the biopic, or perhaps even the musical, an emphasis on the music of the era pervading the trailer as strongly as it does the film's soundtrack,¹⁶⁹ and Diggler's character is identified as strongly with the Disco scene as with the world of pornography. Puns aside, the phrase "A star is porn" is used in international press accounts of the film, including headlines and picture captions (see Bernard, 1997; Haysom, 1997; Corliss, 1997; LePetit & Huxley, 1998 for examples) in a manner which reflects the way in which Diggler is positioned. That is, his figure and persona are employed to explicitly reject the 'low culture' associations of pornography. The ascent (and later descent) of this 'talented ingénu' is not framed within the context of the screened commodification of sexuality, or socially-transgressive exploration of sexual norms and boundaries, but as a *cultural* event, one in which we see the mobilization of all available discourses of prestige within pornography as a 'culture industry', and which is seen to be parallel or analogous to the 'real' culture and economy of prestige. This can be seen in the way in which the mechanisms of cultural prestige are invoked, as when a section of the trailer is devoted to the reading-out of a porn review "Jack Horner has found something special in newcomer Dirk Diggler", or when the latter is feted for winning 'best newcomer' at the Adult Film Awards.

A humorous, nostalgic tone prevails – one reflecting distinctly 1990s anxieties about sex, leisure and economics in contrast with a time "when disco was king, sex was safe, pleasure was a business, and business was booming". However, pains are taken to emphasise

historical rather than sexual contexts here, presenting the film not as a prurient ‘replica’ of pornography, with orgasm displaced by scopophilia, but as a socio-cultural or industrial history, calling upon ideas of documentary as much as fiction. The trailer’s concluding voiceover strongly emphasises this, stating “New Line Cinema presents a portrait of two decades in the life of a business”. Similarly, the transition from the 1970s into the 1980s (again with music occupying a privileged position as narrative cue) illustrates the prominence of ‘history’ as a framing device. The phrase “the party was over” here is seen as ushering in a new era, identified with violence, personal and professional failure, and paranoia. All of this is designed to minimise the intrusion of what Linda Williams described as the seemingly gratuitous excess of body genres, like pornography, which is itself identified as, of all genres, “the lowest in cultural esteem” (Williams, 1991, 3), and to reinforce the extent to which the film can be read as ‘mainstream’.

In the case of *Magnolia*, the ‘auteur’ label having been solidly established through *Boogie Nights*, the task of positioning the film becomes less onerous. It is worth noting, however, that discursive comparisons with Robert Altman are significantly more pronounced for this film than with its predecessor. In part this is due to structural similarities between their work, in particular the entwined narrative. However, from a perspective which takes into account genre as well as auteur theory, it can also be interpreted as an acknowledgement that Anderson’s work in *Magnolia* tends towards the kind of self-conscious sprawling drama in which Altman had specialised, but which had become distinctly *unfashionable* over the preceding decade. From this viewpoint, positioning the work as part of a tradition of wider cinematic inheritance could (paradoxically, as one might expect calls to auteurism to figure prominently in art-house framing) maximise the potential for mainstream crossover by avoiding questions of generic unpopularity or indeed exhaustion, directing attention instead to matters of prestige, quality, and cultural inheritance. For each film, therefore, questions arise regarding the relative efficacy of the use of generic and auteurist framings in industrial positioning.

Where generic categorisations can be regarded as industrially ineffective because they are potentially misleading as to the nature of the text (in the case of *Boogie Nights*), or because they occur ‘out of time’ of the theoretical genre cycle, at a moment of unfashionability (as with *Magnolia*), the industrial and discursive tendency to rely on a generalised auteurism for

textual positioning is more strongly pronounced. If there is a ‘through-line’ in Anderson’s work, it is found in the dynamics of his narratives, where a kind of epic emotionalism dominates; these dynamics, however, would not have been immediately obvious in his early work. The most immediately-accessible classical generic labels needed to be rejected for both these films, in order to enable viewer positioning and textual comprehension, and most importantly in order to mobilise the required discourses of prestige. In service of this goal, Anderson’s work was instead wedged into an auteuristic frame, which could simultaneously allow potential viewers to ‘make sense of’ his work, and allow critical and discursive mechanisms to historically contextualise or ‘ennoble’ it *as* historical account.

Similarly, Wes Anderson’s output tends to be characterised even in more scholarly work as “one of the most original voices in contemporary American cinema.” (Tzioumakis, 2006, 6), an interpretation which leans heavily on auteurist ideas. Thematically, certain preoccupations – difficult family relationships, fatherhood, creative and interpersonal failure – emerge repeatedly, working to solidify the impression of his status as auteur (See Chapter Four for more on Anderson as auteur). At the same time, I believe this strongly auteurist framing is indivisible from the fact that Anderson’s work is what we might term ‘slippery’ as regards generic framings; while *Rushmore* (1998) can be argued for as a Smart addition to the teen film canon, the gently absurdist comedy drama (domestically-centred in the case of *Tenenbaums*, more adventure-based for *Zissou*) of Anderson’s films is less inclined to foreground itself than the stylistic strategies he uses to manifest or call tone into being. For all this, his pictures are directly rooted in the heart of the established studio system, coming as they do directly from Disney, through their Touchstone Pictures marque, and released through their Buena Vista distribution arm. Again, here the aesthetics function to position the work as ‘independent’ or marginal, evoking Leland’s description of hip as “the elevation of style and background as narrative and foreground” (Leland, 2004, 10) even where industrial circumstances directly contradict this.¹⁷⁰

Taken as a group, a few conclusions present themselves. The films with the largest budgets are in all cases produced through the involvement of a major studio, and cannot be described as ‘independent’ films, industrially, but as studio investments which present no more than a medium-sized risk.¹⁷¹ However, they do exhibit some of the same kind of generic play and thematic concerns as more industrially independent films, and are still inclined to call upon

ideas of independence and authenticity in their positioning, sometimes in ways which obscure their actual industrial underpinnings. Two strands emerge here: on the one side, those films which play with more broadly defined generic elements, such as action, sci-fi, romance, or comedy, where the focus tends to rest on genres and aesthetic strategies which seem likely to translate to wider (international) audiences, whether this in practice happened or not (*The Matrix, Dark City, Fight Club, Huckabees, Eternal Sunshine*). On the other, we see a strong fixation on tonal and prestige elements, in particular representation of middle-class crisis, and positioning which embeds work within the culture of auteurism, whether through bourgeois prestige culture of the mainstream awards systems, or more informal ‘hipster’ approval (*American Beauty, Sideways*, and the work of the respective Andersons’).

Figure 7. The ‘low-budget’ Smart film

Film	Final budget	Major studio involved		Film	Final budget	Major/independent studio involved (production or distribution)
<i>Pulp Fiction</i> (Quentin Tarantino, 1994)	\$8.5 million	Miramax		<i>Memento</i> (Christopher Nolan, 2000)	\$5-9 million ¹⁷²	Newmarket Films
<i>Welcome to the Dollhouse</i> (Todd Solondz, 1995)	\$800,000	Sony Pictures Classics		<i>Donnie Darko</i> (Richard Kelly, 2001)	\$4.5 million	Newmarket Films
<i>Safe</i> (Todd Haynes, 1995)	\$1 million	Sony Pictures Classics		<i>Ghost World</i> (Terry Zwigoff, 2001)	\$7 million	MGM/United Artists
<i>Pi</i> (Darren Aronofsky, 1998)	\$60,000	Live Entertainment		<i>Lost In Translation</i> (Sofia Coppola, 2003)	\$4 million	Focus Features
<i>Happiness</i> (Todd Solondz, 1998)	\$3 million	Good Machine Releasing		<i>Primer</i> (Shane Carruth, 2004)	\$7,000	Th!nkFilm
<i>Election</i> (Alexander Payne, 1999)	\$8.5 million	MTV Films/Paramount		<i>Brick</i> (Rian Johnson, 2005)	\$475,000	Focus Features

Figures have been compiled from a variety of sources including www.imdb.com, www.the-numbers.com and www.boxofficemojo.com and crosschecked with industry sources (including *Variety*, *Hollywood Reporter*, and *Screen International*) where possible, as well as industry-adjacent accounts such as those of: Levy, 1999; Tzioumakis, 2006; Mottram, 2006; Waxman, 2005. Each figure has been confirmed by a minimum of three different sources. All figures are estimated, and where any conflict arises between different sources, I have noted this where the difference appears significant in the context of my research.

The industrial aspects of this set of films – those produced for less than \$10 million – illustrate a different, but related, set of positioning and discursive concerns. Whether at the production or distribution end or both, almost all of the films involved again have strong links with major studios; not surprisingly, as a cinematic release of any magnitude is dependent on the structural relationships which dominate distribution and exhibition. However, these links provide a picture of the industrial environment of Smart over this period of “the successful integration of the independent film movement into the structures of global media and finance.” (Schamus, 2001, 254) *Pulp Fiction*, for example, comes from Miramax, whose ambitions during that period (to move from indie cinema to the mainstream, through a multi-pronged strategy of acquisitions, a risky and not always successful move into production, strategic partnerships, and its eventual sale to Disney), have been well-documented both within and outside of the academic sphere, most notably, respectively, by Perren, 2012 and Biskind, 2005.

Election was produced by MTV Films, founded in 1996: Viacom, who had bought MTV in 1985, and Paramount in 1993, appear to have seen MTV Films as a way of developing synergy between their different divisions (see Hindes, 1999). Although a controversial choice of project¹⁷³ and not a significant commercial success – a factor Holmlund (2005) attributes to Paramount’s lack of ability to handle a ‘small’ film – the strategic intent was clear in executive Van Toffler’s assertion at the time that

MTV’s core audience of 12- to 34-year-olds is 25%-30% more likely than the overall population to see any given movie. But they are 50% more likely to see a ‘non-mainstream’ movie, a term he says includes specialized, horror and black-themed pics, among others. (Hindes, 1999, 8)

Similarly aimed at teenage and post-adolescent audiences, *Ghost World* was a United Artists production on the MGM/UA label, and again serves a particular industrial function, as token of its new specialty studio ambitions: essentially dormant during the 1990s, MGM/UA had returned to production a year before (King, 2005, 41). This was a short-lived venture, however, the label absorbed into the Sony empire by 2006.

Welcome to the Dollhouse and *Safe* were both given limited release through Sony Pictures Classics, the earliest of the studio indie divisions of the era, established in 1992 by Sony (who had purchased Columbia Pictures just three years earlier) under former Orion Classics¹⁷⁴

heads Michael Barker, Tom Bernard, and Marcie Bloom.¹⁷⁵ Interestingly, it appears to have been the only studio indie division to significantly resist the tendency to move into production, as acquisition, distribution and marketing costs rocketed during the 1990s (King, 2009, 2013; Tzioumakis, 2013) and Sony Pictures Classics remains “the most autonomous and art-cinema oriented” (King, 2013, 44), a strategy which appears to have given the company more long-term stability than its contemporaries.¹⁷⁶ This was certainly the case in 1995, when marketing focused on traditionally art-house strategies, emphasising prestige through film festival positioning and critical response, using this to build from a limited release, and banking on attracting those small but significant audiences in opposition to crowds defined as ‘mainstream’, with *Dollhouse* opening against *Mission Impossible* on Memorial Day weekend (King, 2005, 27-28). In this sense, both films constituted not an industrial intervention as such, but part of a continuing corporate strategy to maintain a significant art-house presence in the market, and to position these films as art-house pieces, rather than aimed more broadly at transitional or mainstream markets.

Several of the films took more distinctly ‘indie’ routes to market; *Happiness* was eventually released through Good Machine (See Chapter Eight for a more detailed analysis); *Memento* and *Donnie Darko* both came from the small independent Newmarket Films, the former earning a remarkable \$40 million internationally, and which in 2005 would become part of Picturehouse, formed through its acquisition by New Line and HBO Films. In 2008 Picturehouse (along with Warner Independent Pictures, which it had joined following New Line’s consolidation into Warner Bros.) was shut down, although the company was revived in early 2013 following Bob and Jeanne Berney’s purchase of the trademark and logo from Warner (see Kay, 2013). *Pi* was released through Live Entertainment,¹⁷⁷ which purchased it in its first Sundance excursion under a new capitalisation plan from Bain Capital (Cox, 1998a, 48), and the intent of its positioning was indicated clearly with what Live co-president Amir Malin described as “a platform release...to counterprogram against all the mindless pictures...[with] a strong P&A commitment” (ibid.) although figures for the spend are not available.¹⁷⁸

Lost in Translation and *Brick* were both distributed by Focus Features.¹⁷⁹ The latter’s relative generic opacity and access-limiting dialogue militated towards strategically retaining its distinction as a marginal piece – it could not be sold as a straight ‘teenpic’, and its

purchase following the Sundance Film Festival at which it won a Special Jury Prize for Originality of Vision meant that it could be positioned more directly as an independent film, appealing to the attendant discourses of prestige and access which thereby could be seen to apply to it. *Lost in Translation* functions in almost precisely the opposite way, having several factors which make it available to more mainstream positioning strategies in a way that *Brick* does not. The first is the way that its mood and generic openness privilege both a tentatively romantic storyline, and comedic elements, in a setting which is simultaneously 'exotic' and clearly mediated for us by the experience of the Americans in it – despite its status as a Japanese-American co-production, it is a distinctly American piece of work, rather than a theoretical 'foreign film'.

The second is the way in which the film is embedded in a pre-existing narrative of Hollywood history and prestige. Sofia Coppola's unique position as both a genetic descendent of the 1970s New Hollywood and a member of the 'New New Hollywood' (her husband at the time was Spike Jonze) lent itself to publicity, and to that publicity positioning the text squarely within the Smart framework. This can be seen clearly in the media attention generated by the film even before its release, which steps outside the usual boundaries of film criticism and into the style pages (an effect intensified by the increasing media presence of Scarlett Johansson during the period). Mentions of the Coppola family (including Jason Schwartzman and Nicolas Cage) are parlayed into a dynastic narrative, and other semiotic markers of Coppola's work and life circumstances – Bruce Weber, The White Stripes, the Cassavetes family, Sonic Youth, *Vogue* shoots, Marc Jacobs, *Dazed and Confused* – are referred to in ways which place both her heredity and, sometimes almost secondarily, her work within a framework of 'hip' contemporary cultural life. In this sense, and it is one which is perhaps gendered as much as related to her comparative inexperience, it is Coppola *herself* who becomes the object of a celebrity narrative with auteuristic inflections within which her work features as a token of her celebrity, rather than the other way around (see Hirschberg, 2003; Punter, 2003; Waxman, 2003).

The casting of Bill Murray reinforces these threads; his work with Wes Anderson had both given him a new – and perhaps rather 'retro' – credibility, and reclaimed his (tangential) star status, while producing a narrative of rejuvenation. At the same time, his comedic persona is embedded within the texts and related material. This can be seen clearly in the poster for the

US release, where a rumpled Murray, his face somewhere between vulnerability and a wry smirk, sits in a dressing-gown on the edge of his bed, feet half-in his slippers, hands clasped, with Tokyo at night behind him. The effect is of displacement, yes – particularly with the tag line above his head, “Everyone wants to be found” – but in a more ‘mainstreamed’ reading, also of Murray’s comic persona being held in abeyance for action about to happen. Similarly the trailer emphasises the broadly comedic and movement-oriented over the still, contemplative tendencies which characterise the film, foregrounding elements of cultural misunderstanding – in particular the sexualised ‘lip my stocking’ moment – and action (Bob and Charlotte’s hand-in-hand sprint through Tokyo) in a way that recalls the mainstream buddy comedy, even where its dialogue suggests a more philosophical bent.

In stark contrast, *Primer*’s distance from the Hollywood industry was foregrounded in its release by Th!nkFilm, a small independent which had produced or distributed a variety of strongly art-house-oriented films from its inception in 2001, cultivating space in what seemed like vanishingly-small niches.¹⁸⁰ These smaller, independently distributed films were obliged to rely more on discursive positioning; without financing for extensive advertising, positive critical reviews and word of mouth counted for the vast proportion of the publicity available. Indeed, ‘media discourse’ in this context goes far beyond simple recommendation (in the form of a good/bad binary distinction), and produces a complex mesh of cues from and through which potential audiences position themselves. Taking *Pi* as an example, lacking as it did any significant advertising budget, a media strategy was required which emphasised its low budget credentials and art-house leanings through placement at film festivals, reviews, and interviews.

The materials generated in the mainstream press through this strategy perform in a manner which is illustrative of the kinds of positioning we find throughout the low-budget sector. Surveying a selection¹⁸¹ of English-language pieces on the film and its creator from the beginning of 1997 through to the end of 1999, a number of significant threads emerge. The first is the way in which the piece is located in the first set of articles referring to it, those which deal directly with the Sundance Festival. Of these, hybridised generic descriptions illustrating the tentative nature of these categorisations dominate the discourse: it is variously described as a “science fiction thriller” (Cox, 1998a) “semi-science-fiction” (McCarthy, 1998), “sci-fi, Kafkaesque B&W religio-mathematical thriller” (Harvey, 1998), “bizarre and

ingeniously mathematical paranoid thriller” (Maslin, 1998b), “dark, visually compelling psychological thriller” (Kehr, 1998a).

Few art cinema or auteurist references are made at this point; McCarthy is the first to note influences from Bunuel, Lynch and Kubrick, calling it a “personal, visionary, hermetic art film” announcing “the arrival of an exciting and potentially major new talent” (McCarthy, 1998); it is described as “brilliantly abstruse” (Maslin, 1998a); as “an artistic and edgy piece of mystification” (Turan, 1998). Similarly, few references are made to the film’s extremely low budget, but where they are, they refer rather to Aronofsky’s “Socialist” (Cox, 1998b) method of financing through friends and family. Only one piece (in industry paper *Variety*) speculates on *Pi*’s likely prospects, describing it as “limited in terms of narrative and emotional drive – not to mention commercial prospects – by dint of its very originality... Wide fest pickup and possible cult status are likelier than much theatrical play.” (Harvey, 1998, 67) Instead the focus is on placing the film within a wider industrial context, which emphasises the changing nature of the Sundance Film Festival itself, here framed as an event showcasing ever more commercially-orientated work (Maslin, 1998a; Horn, 1998; Turan, 1998; Murray, 1998; Jacobson, 1998). Here, *Pi* is presented as something of a minor attraction within a festival which has *itself* become the topic of discussion amid questions of marketplace over-heating and ‘selling out’.

The next phase of the film’s promotional and release schedule, through the summer of 1998, took in the Deauville, Montreal, Edinburgh, Karlovy Vary, Montreal, Edinburgh, and Fant-Asia (Toronto) film festivals (much of the coverage here is directly reporting on or refers to the film’s presence at these festivals), as well as the film’s release in selected American cities. Of the thirty-nine articles which chart this period, attempts to cue the film generically are again couched in hybridised and often tentative or contingent language: it is a “startling sci-fi thriller” (Johnston, 1998, 7); an “arcane thriller” (Klady, 1998) “the most intriguing thriller of the summer” (Holleman, 1998) a “science-fiction thriller with a metaphysical thrust” (Kehr, 1998b), “a downtown noir” (Rea, 1998); “billed as a sci-fi thriller” (Adams, 1998). References abound here, in establishing frames of comparison, to David Lynch (Caro, 1998; Rosen, 1998); Peter Greenaway (Ringel, 1998); *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Zibart, 1998); Kafka (Devlin, 1998; Rea, 1998) and Eco “this mix of Thomas Pynchon, Umberto Eco and Chaos Theory for beginners” (Romney, 1998).

Here, *Pi* is framed within a discourse which does not simply engage with the discourses of prestige – almost every piece makes reference to its festival credentials, most particularly its winning of the dramatic direction category at Sundance – but one which also points (as almost every piece does) to its ultra-low budget as if that, too, were a guarantee of quality: we are told “the filmmaker turns financial limitations into artistic inventiveness” (Ringel, 1998); “one of the most daring recent attempts to get the maximum kinetic charge out of next-to-no-budget resources” (Romney, 1998); “surprisingly cinematic for a \$60,000 art film about abstract mathematics” (Kempley, 1998). Links, too, are made between prestige, budget, and the film’s supposed singularity; the implication is that it is not ‘for everyone’, and that those towards whom it is directed are a culturally-educated, cerebral audience, of a particular generation.¹⁸²

We are told “it has a low-budget look that may not appeal to audiences used to more slickly produced Hollywood movies” (Rosen, 1998); “cyberpunk cinema [which] could only have been made by a film student in the age of ‘The X-Files’” (Zibart, 1998); it is “metaphysics for the cyber set” (Kempley, 1998). This sense of the film as a somewhat marginal niche prestige-based attraction is also tied to an implied – and sometimes explicit – critique of the wider Hollywood or mainstream system, “a small but most impressive victory of independent imagination over the mundane” (Maslin, 1998c); “a genuinely smart sci-fi movie that costs less than a studio executive’s sports car,” (Lacey, 1998); its “appeal will radiate toward the cerebral viewer...rises to a dimension of thought and illumination that is far beyond [film’s] usual pulp, bad-novel sources” (Byrge, 1998); one critic includes *Pi* as a high point of the year to date while championing “those who cherish art films as a refuge from the mind-numbing slate of blockbusters” (Ryan, 1998).

We can therefore see how the discursive representation of one film connects ideas of prestige and auteurism within a framework emphasising marginality of appeal – this appeal being explicitly defined as cerebral, and located within a wider art cinema and cinema history trajectory – and a perceived ‘uniqueness’. While there remains a strong focus on the attractions of genre, this is couched in tentative terms, and in language which foregrounds the idea of Aronofsky’s work as a highly distinctive, individual piece of work. This impression of singularity is also reinforced in the way in which financial elements – Aronofsky’s ‘socialist’ funding programme – are emphasised which not only place *Pi* in a wider industrial

environment, but explicitly construct it as part of a narrative where films of this type are defined as existing in strict opposition to, and outside of, the perceived mainstream of Hollywood cinema.

Conclusions

A picture here emerges of industrial flux across two decades; while the major studios move strongly into the distribution and production of independent-styled film, even those producers and distributors which start out as independent move gradually towards mainstream capitalisation and studio financing (although frequently with key personnel, such as James Schamus at Focus and Bob Shaye at New Line, left intact, whether this worked to limit accusations of lost autonomy or not¹⁸³) or stop trading, a trend that would intensify in the decade after the period of this study. During this process, which also strongly illustrates the globalised nature of modern film capitalisation and production, each of the emerging autonomous units utilised the increased availability of capital to push smaller films more intensively through to the mainstream from the fringes of distribution and exhibition, in a process of territorial market colonisation which effectively ‘squeezed out’ those smaller independents which could not compete on a financial basis, or which could not be absorbed. Here I concur with Tzioumakis in his conclusion that:

from the mid-1990s [studio-owned subsidiaries old and new] turned their attention primarily to production. By concentrating on the more conservative, star-led properties...these studio divisions privileged further the commercial elements that characterised indie film production for most of the 1990s. [Later years were] marked by the domination of the studio divisions and their increasing emphasis on film production. As subsidiaries of global entertainment conglomerates, these divisions are by definition integrated into the structures of global media and finance and therefore are fully equipped to play ‘the independent film game’ better than the traditional stand-alone distributors. (Tzioumakis, 2013, 37)

They did this through a variety of tactics including tactical releasing and strategic publicity generation, but primarily positioning was a function of the interplay between various (occasionally competing) discourses of prestige – particularly in the form of auteurism and the awards industry – and genre. The positioning and reception of texts either focused on

assumedly mainstream generic values (*The Matrix*, *Fight Club*); were embedded within strongly bourgeois prestige discourses (*American Beauty*, *Sideways*); availed of value judgements linking them with the 'hip' and contemporary (the work of Wes Anderson, *Lost In Translation*); or issued appeals to audiences on the basis of strongly art-house, occasionally transgressive values (*Happiness*, *Safe*, *Welcome to the Dollhouse*). Hybrid combinations also appear, which form a more complex picture: the work of Paul Thomas Anderson has generic, transgressive, prestige and auteurial framings; *Pi* is both a hipster attraction and an art-house film; *Eternal Sunshine* carries strongly mainstream and strongly art-house references, respectively softened and unified by the star presence of Jim Carrey and through the auteurial figure of Charlie Kaufman. Moving beyond industrial aspects, each of these films also mobilises particular structural and thematic preoccupations in its broader cultural field, and for this reason I turn in my next chapter to matters of textual analysis.

Chapter Seven: Double Coding and the Smart canon

Given my contention that Smart cinema functions as a trans-generic industrial mode, it is important to establish *how*, textually, it does so. This chapter explores a selection of Smart films, outlining how their attributes – thematics, structure, visual references, and more – create simultaneous calls to action to multiple audiences. Genre is a textual attribute often elided or taken as a ‘given’ of mainstream cinematic practice, and therefore tends to be evacuated from discussions of individual Smart texts which privilege a framework of ‘independence’. This is changing, as in Tzioumakis’ acknowledgement that over the 1990s “an increasing number of indie films did not hide their affinities with Hollywood cinema...[including] strong generic frameworks” (Tzioumakis, 2013, 35), however genre is rarely foregrounded. As an example of how this manifests in practice, Gallagher contends that *Pulp Fiction* aided in “industry acceptance of non-linearity in later genre films.” (Gallagher, 2013, 92), a perspective which points to the assimilatory capacity of the industry, but which neglects the ‘operational mechanics’ of genre.

Newman argues that “narratives like these might seem to be devoid of genre conventions such as those found in more recognizable popular entertainment forms...this lack of generic framework is a significant part of their appeal.” (Newman, 2011, 89), thus rendering genre invisible – as I demonstrate below, Smart is not characterised by a ‘lack’ of generic framework, but instead a desire to complicate and reconfigure generic expectations as an aspect of novelty or innovation. King takes a broader view, acknowledging that “more familiar models are most likely to be combined with departures from established mainstream convention.” (King, 2009, 265) but without specifically addressing genre at a more expansive theoretical level, for all that he explores individual manifestations of genre and generic play.¹⁸⁴ Perren points clearly to aesthetic and taste judgements made in this field by critics *and* academics, when she discusses the way in which discourses diverge when Miramax is related to its ‘lower-status’ Dimension label, stating that this

suggests a great deal about the ongoing attitudes toward film and popular culture at large. Both critics and scholars have remained unsure of how to categorize genre films, and thus (if discussing them at all) have placed them in a separate box – one that is almost always perceived to contain inferior product (Perren, 2012, 142).

However, for many of these films, the interplay between generic structures or references, and the way a certain degree of distinction is maintained from both ‘mainstream’ and ‘art cinema’, is key. Primarily, they draw on concepts such as ‘art cinema’, ‘cult’, and ‘prestige’ at varying positions along a theoretical continuum from ‘indie’ to ‘mainstream’. This is done at a textual level via a process of what I describe as ‘double-coding’ to ensure multiple generic ‘entry points’ for audiences; that is, ways into the text which attract divergent types of viewer. Where King (2009) uses the term largely in the context of Bourdieu’s ideas of habitus and distinction, I instead use it to unpack the more material elements of textual positioning. However, the process might more usefully be described as *multiple* coding: my central conviction is that Smart cinema utilises a multiplicity of generic codes and textual attributes, creating a spectrum or continuum, from those films which display extensive formal experimentation to those which privilege more classically-driven narrative, in order to create simultaneous calls to multiple audiences.¹⁸⁵

The function of this chapter is to assess the means by which individual films create a combination of generic appeals, and calls to notions of art-house, cult, and independent production. I have selected a range of films for analysis, which I discuss in chronological order; taken as a body, they illustrate a tentative trajectory, and one in which a degree of parallelism applies, given that independent producers and studios were both producing this type of work. *Pulp Fiction* in 1994 constitutes a particular coalescence of independent and studio industrial practices which intruded into the mainstream; *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, a year later, illustrates that Smart strategies were still largely the domain of the independent film. *Pi* and *Dark City* from 1998 mirror each other in focusing on the life of the mind, but come from distinct industrial positions: the former seen as exemplifying independent practice and the latter, from New Line, the product of a major independent which had only four years earlier been taken over by a studio, Warner. *Rushmore* represents the ‘quirky’ aesthetic as well as the gradual movement of studios into the field (through Disney’s Touchstone Pictures).

Three films written by Charlie Kaufman feature due to his overall significance, the earlier (and darker) *Being John Malkovich* alongside *Adaptation* and *Eternal Sunshine*. *American Beauty* and *The Matrix* constitute distinct studio interventions into the territory, and *Donnie Darko* is a cult favourite, displaying the tendency of Smart films to cultivate audiences in

their post-exhibition life. *Lost in Translation* and *I ♥ Huckabees* illustrate in their varying ways the continued prominence of the indie subsidiary during the period, and *Brick*, finally, marks something of a return to more marginal practices. My primary focus in analysing these films is to foreground the combination of generic deployments, thematic preoccupations, and narrative structure strategies which characterise them, and it is the distinction between Smart characteristics as *embedded in*, as opposed to *diverging from*, generic concerns which I most wish to emphasise.

Prefigured by *sex, lies and videotape* in 1989 and *Reservoir Dogs* in 1992, two films which illustrated the wider economic potential of independent cinema, and came to function as a kind of ‘origin myth’ for Smart cinema, *Pulp Fiction* in 1994 marks the real entry of Smart to the mainstream, and signalled Miramax’s ambitions of achieving major-studio status.

Quentin Tarantino’s dense, narratively-complex script and appropriational, bricolage style mean that at first sight, the film is characterised primarily by self-consciously ‘postmodern’ temporal generic games, where *Nouvelle Vague*, buddy-comedy, blaxploitation, noir, martial arts, western, action, and gangster elements rub together indiscriminately, ‘compressed’ over time. These temporal-generic games are tacitly referred to in one scene, at the ersatz 1950s diner Jackrabbit Slim’s, which gangster Vincent describes as “like a wax museum with a pulse”: the temporal collapse Vincent experiences¹⁸⁶ is emphasised by Tarantino’s swooping camera action – he is disorientated from heroin use, but also overwhelmed with the intensity of his experience.

However, the film’s stylistic and formal play is complex, refusing access through classical viewing strategies, in ways which position it more strongly within an art-house framework than its mainstream success would suggest. These include: an unconventionally-looped timeline; the ‘protagonist’s’ mid-narrative death; transitions which unsettle and distance the viewer from the text; deliberate incongruity (particularly in the use of music); repeated switching of the narrative’s point of view – sometimes mid-scene; self-consciously artificial, or dated, shot choices and special effects (incongruous fades, misalignment of voice and image or timeline, screen flares, intertitles, captions, 360° shots, unexpected periods of silence,¹⁸⁷ intrusions of graphic design, imaginary sequences). These are more than retro ‘period’ details or stylistic distractions. Instead, they form strategies through which the audience is embedded in a process of intellectual engagement, as well as a visceral

experience – *Pulp Fiction* provides a myriad of routes ‘in’, not least the distinctly art-house sense that it forms a kind of palimpsest upon which film history is gleefully (re)inscribed.

The flamboyant transgressiveness – and in particular graphic violence (including sexual violence) and explicit drug use – which gained the film much press attention can be coded both as art-house and as mainstream. The former is the case in its confrontation and destruction, through its combination of the playful and the grotesque, of the theoretical norms of on-screen ‘acceptability’. The latter is seen in the way that these aspects – such as Mia’s tensely comedic overdose, Marsellus’ rape by “hillbillies”, or the gory accidental death of Marvin and its humorous aftermath – are treated as points of (blackly comedic) spectacularised narrative engagement, and as elements of highly conventional cinematic male bonding rituals. Its use of racially-problematic language also marks it out as treading a complex line between the mainstream and the fringes: repeated use of terms such as ‘nigger’, ‘gook’, ‘slope’ and so on are made somewhat more complex by the strong formal relationship the film has with 1970s exploitation film, and the moral relativism – or enthusiastic nihilism – at play throughout. Captain Koons’ monologue to young Butch, outlining the history of his family as it relates to the gold watch he has come to deliver from Butch’s dead POW father, illustrates this. Moving from over-the-top tenderness to racist haranguing, Koons tells how Butch’s father would “be damned if any slopes were gonna put their greasy yellow hands on his boy’s birthright”. The problematically racist elements are immediately undercut by Koons’ presentation of Butch’s ‘inheritance’, both pompous and comedically scatological;¹⁸⁸ this does not render them non-racist, clearly, but focuses attention more on the remarks’ ‘eccentricity’.

These verbal flourishes are as much a Tarantinian trademark as his formal bricolage and *grand guignol* styling, and again provide multiple entry points to the film, through dense dialogue which repays repeated viewing – a factor which accounts strongly for the film’s cult success. Characters articulate their desires in complex ways, particularly hitman Jules, who uses his verbal dexterity as a weapon, admitting that he prizes the stylistic flamboyance of biblical passage Ezekial 25.17 over its meaning, a comment which forms meta-commentary on the film itself. The film’s many verbal set-pieces are florid, highly dextrous, and frequently irreverent, and even taciturn boxer Butch expresses his affection with an inventive variety of endearments.

Here we see an appealing reformulation of masculinity – where men interact emotionally, symbolically joust, engage with masculine heritage, and assess and exchange status through verbal as well as physical display – which also produces a symbolic sense of emotional grouping, or community, which contributes to its cult credentials. It is the textual density of the way in which these elements – art-house, mainstream, and cult – are intertwined which results in its strongly double-coded nature and attendant celebration as a prestige text, and its eruption into the mainstream marked the formal entry of Smart cinema as a mode. However, its transgressive elements are strongly embedded within generic codes which either minimise them (black comedy) or create a sense of generic verisimilitude within which they can be safely contained (gangster), creating as strong a drive towards accessibility as to distinction.

By contrast almost stereotypically ‘independent’ in its industrial aspects and the extent to which it seeks to mark itself out as transgressive, *Welcome To The Dollhouse* (Todd Solondz, 1995) points to the expropriation of indie structures and themes which would later become a hallmark of Smart. Stubborn, plain Dawn Wiener is marginalised both within her suburban family – sandwiched between brother Mark, focused on escape to college, and winsomely manipulative sister Missy – and at school, humiliated and abused by students and teachers. While its narrative structure is classically uncomplicated, and its comedic elements pronounced, it is the film’s generic concerns which strike the most mainstream note. It functions both as a coming-of-age drama, and a high school teen-pic of a particularly brutal kind – one which calls to mind that other Smart teen-pic of the period, the distinctly lighter in tone *Election*.

Here there is none of the solidarity-in-adversity which characterises many teen films; Dawn is excluded, taunted as “lesbian”,¹⁸⁹ “Ugly”, “Dogface” even by those whom she defends, tortured via spitballs and insults, all attempts at retaliation backfiring. Her powerlessness is emphasised at every turn, even as her mother angrily asks “Who ever told you to fight back?” after she is sent to the principal. The idea of teenagers constituting a separate social universe to that inhabited by adults, familiar from mainstream high school films like those of John Hughes, here takes on a more sinister aspect; threats of a blackened ‘college transcript’ mean nothing in the context of Dawn’s ongoing torture and invisibility to the adults around her. Where conventional teen-pic elements intrude, such as the exclusion of Dawn and disadvantaged delinquent Brandon from a party, they do so within a broader context of

humiliation and lack of autonomy which only emphasises the bleakness of Dawn's situation. That the film wrecks such black comedy from the horrors perpetrated on Dawn speaks, too, to its more cultish elements; while there is no sense of the 'triumph of the underdog', the film elicits a strong sense of empathy for her subordinated position, which seems to call to 'kindred spirits' – in many senses this is a film which foregrounds the apparently unspeakable and is transgressive primarily for its lack of conventional moralising.

However, its preoccupation with – and especially its treatment of, either in a tonally distanced fashion or as material for black comedy – 'transgressive' and problematic material such as adolescent sexuality, paedophilia, and the gendered dynamics of adolescent power, status, and violence, as well as its aggressively adult language, means that it is difficult to imagine the film having been made within the studio system. In this sense, *Dollhouse* leans most strongly towards the art-house form, with its deliberately downbeat ending,¹⁹⁰ and elevation of the trials of suburban life to a kind of epic status. The film becomes more 'Smart' in the manner in which it problematises its own art-house tendencies by taking a strongly ironic position on them. This can be seen, for example, in the way it uses music as a counterpoint to visual action to exaggerated effect, such as the use of determined, percussive guitar music to accompany Dawn's night-time Odyssey to New York, lounge-lizard vocals to emphasise Steve's naive posturing, or the sickly-sweet Tchaikovsky theme which reflects Missy's compliant charm.¹⁹¹

Its comedic but sophisticated treatment of complex gender issues and the pressure of gendered expectations forms the backbone of its art-house appeal. The confusion Dawn experiences regarding her emerging sexuality is complicated at every turn by the strongly gendered expectations governing sexual propriety. She becomes entwined in an abusive dynamic with Brandon, whose dysfunctional models for (controlling, violent) male sexual behaviour, and warped expectations of women, dictate his highly sexualised taunting of her, including threats of rape which turn to guarded affection. Her plaintive "Why do you hate me?" is responded to with a simple "Because you're ugly", revealing the gender issue which here forms one of the keys to Dawn's ongoing torment not just regarding boys, but also her relationship with the 'perfect' Missy: the idea that the only reason for women to exist is to be beautiful. This is echoed in the repeated implication that sexual predators only target the conventionally attractive:¹⁹² through the film's tone, which I would argue is not blank or

unsympathetic, but ironically distanced, in that it invites actions to ‘speak’ to the audience without interventionist commentary, we may read these as victim-blaming, or as evidence of cultural structures which insist on Dawn’s entrenched invisibility to all those *but* sexual predators.

Alternately aggressive and seductive, Brandon uses Dawn to play out fantasies of adult male violence and control. These seem rooted in his immediate role models – when Dawn goes to Brandon’s house she encounters his father who asks the clearly pubescent girl, semi-jokingly “Did he knock you up?” – but also mirror more broadly cultural patterns, such as when he, in a grotesque parody of romantic fiction, tells her “Get off of me. I’m the one that makes the first move”. It is Dawn’s acquiescence which is transgressive to mainstream cinematic norms here. Starved of attention and acceptance, and yet drawn to explore her nascent sexuality, she accepts his attentions in a compliant manner which complicates conventional cinematic identification. It also confounds the Madonna-whore construct which informs not just Brandon’s sexual development, as he frustratedly asks her “Why do you always have to be such a cunt?”, but also the structures of heterosexist representation in classical film narrative which tend to confine and contain female characters.

Similarly, Dawn’s crush on Mark’s popular, handsome bandmate Steve – whom Dawn first encounters while performing the symbolic act of sawing the head off a doll – is strongly informed by the weight of conventional gender expectations. Although their engagement remains innocent, Dawn quickly understands that the only way into Steve’s (limited) affections would be to trade sex for them, a route blocked to Dawn not because of her age but because of her lack of conventional feminine beauty and sexuality.¹⁹³ Instead, in a parody of gender expectations, she performs an ‘appropriate’ approximation of gendered servitude for him: serving him food and drinks which he eats gracelessly as she watches in adoration.¹⁹⁴ Here, sexuality is a contested site, characterised by fear, power, control, and battles for status, and it is Dawn’s invisibility within her family which makes her vulnerable to its darkest aspects; the real and symbolic sexual violence Dawn faces are ignored.¹⁹⁵ One of the darkest of the films, its complex interplay of comedy and dampened trauma, and bleak but sophisticated take on gender expectations, mark the film as inherently Smart. However, it is the embeddedness of these within familiar generic tropes – the teen comedy, the coming-of-

age drama – which facilitates its opening-out into a certain degree of wider audience accessibility.

Illustrating how the independent film was textually reconfigured to be more accessible for what we might describe as ‘the techno generation’, *Pi* (Darren Aronofsky, 1998) combines multiple generic drivers, a visual style closely associated with art-house or independent form, and a generationally significant soundtrack.¹⁹⁶ Several of the thematic concerns which would come to dominate *Smart*, notably those of identity crisis and collapse, and the search for meaning in a world characterised by uncontrollable, unknowable forces, also feature. The dominant generic driver here is that of the paranoid or surveillance thriller, but insistent noir elements also feature (not simply the use of black and white film stock), such as heavily skewed framing, strong tonal contrasts between stark whites and deep blacks, and the hardboiled tone of the voiceover. Thriller elements abound: all characters around number theorist Max Cohen, searching for a way to predict the fluctuations of the NYSE – for him an intellectual challenge, not a matter of greed – are equally treacherous.

Max, dependent on painkillers and anti-psychotics, is paranoid to an extent that makes his vision of the world unreliable and plays in to generic expectations: an elderly man on the subway appears to be following him; his landlady may be conspiring with sinister forces led by Marcy Dawson of stock market “predictive strategies” firm Lancet-Percy. His fears lead him to a (signalled as ‘classically’ thriller-orientated, with its banging soundtrack, dead ends and re-sightings) chase through the subway after which he threatens an innocent photography student. However, Max’s fears are not groundless; Dawson seeks to use his skills for financial advantage, and the exchange Max makes with her, of processing power in the form of a high-performance “Ming-Mecca chip” in exchange for information, forms an archetypal ‘bargain with the devil’, setting up oppositions and comparisons between God and Mammon which are developed throughout.

Gestures towards the thriller form recur throughout, in dialogue and incident. Max’s abduction by Marcy and two suited agents is accompanied by heavily genre-grounded language: “Let’s go for a ride, Max...We had a deal, Max. Now let’s get in the car...Didn’t your mother ever tell you not to play with matches?” Marcy reveals herself as a classical thriller antagonist, threatening him with a gun while saying “I only care about what’s in your

fucking head.” In a thriller-style character reversal, wisecracking Hasidic Jew Lenny, part of a group working to decode the Torah, appears to be Max’s saviour but is also looking for the numeric secret hidden in his brain. Here all is constructed of double bluffs and hidden intentions: even Max’s mentor, retired mathematician Sol, appears to wish for Max to lead a more rounded life, but is actually withholding information.

Science fiction and horror tropes feature prominently, in the film’s repeated emphasis on scientific method, such as the (albeit unreliable) ‘scientific log’ approach of Max’s own voiceover, and the visual evidence of his growing detachment from reality; he appears to find a human brain in the subway, and another in his bathroom sink. Socially-phobic Max is an archetypal ‘mad scientist’ figure, his dingy apartment/lab a Heath Robinson nightmare. The bizarre protrusion from his skull of a Hebrew letter which causes him renewed headaches is never explained; merely contained within the narrative as an element of body horror. The film posits knowledge, power, madness and death as inextricably linked, and the horror ending in which Max drills into his brain to relieve his agony here functions as a kind of triumph; if this thriller is an attempted heist of Max’s knowledge, he achieves victory by losing it for himself, but also denying it to others.

However, this is not simply a hybrid genre piece. At every turn the explicitness of its art-house and film history references seek to mark it out as possessed of a particular seriousness or artistic credibility. This is seen in its self-consciously experimental and hallucinatory qualities – human brains and strange men whose hands drip with blood erupt unpredictably into the diegesis – and black and white stock. It is also seen in the sense of the film as a palimpsest onto which notes, numbers and diagrams are inscribed, its undercranked tempo, disorientating and at times disruptive handheld camera, play with the synchronisation of sound and image, and abrupt shifts of pace from frenetic cut-and-paste sequences to long, uncannily slow shots: the cream in Max’s coffee, Lenny’s cigarette smoke swirling. References to other films seem calculated to intensify the sense of the film as an accretion of cultural references, through which viewer access (and cultural capital) may be granted, with visual and sonic references to *Eraserhead* (David Lynch, (1977), and the mythic *Arrival of a Train at a Station* (Auguste and Louis Lumière, 1895). Multiple references point to surrealist piece *Un Chien Andalou* (Luis Bunuel, 1928): the opening close-up on Max’s face, centring on his eye; the repeated use of iris effects and emphasis on doors and other barriers; the use

of stark bleached-out whites and flattened detail; the repeated intrusion of ants; and even the strong visual resemblance the wild-haired Max bears to Pierre Batcheff, its star. *Pi* wears its historical antecedents visibly, and emphasises its art-house leanings even where it is playing out more conventional generic concerns.

In its play with the larger themes of the power and place of religion and money as ‘competing systems’ forming irreconcilable opposites, and which inspire equally rabid devotion, and its emphasis on the mystificatory qualities of knowledge, *Pi* has much in common with Umberto Eco’s 1988 postmodern novel *Foucault’s Pendulum*. Here, maths functions as a universal language through which hypotheses can be made regarding the interconnectedness of things. Max states his assumptions: “One: mathematics is the language of nature. Two: everything around us can be represented and understood through numbers. Three: if you graph the numbers of any system, patterns emerge. Therefore there are patterns everywhere in nature.” For him this means that the “organism” of the stock market can therefore be predicted; it also means that for Max, apostasy is the act of abandoning the search for meaning through numbers, as Sol does. Where Sol, Daedalus to Max’s Icarus, emphasises the limitations of human ability, warning “As soon as you discard scientific rigour, you are no longer a mathematician. You are a numerologist” Max looks to history to rationalize his obsessional search for the 216-digit number he believes holds the key to all knowledge.

Max himself constitutes the territory in which most of the film’s concerns about identity and knowledge are played out, his mind figured as a site of disruption and contestation. Marked as an outsider by his mathematical skills – which he displays for a neighbour child in his only real moments of communication with others – as well as the headaches which have plagued him since a childhood incident in which he stared into the sun, the veracity of his experience is always at issue. An Icarus figure, Max is seduced by knowledge; he is “not interested in [Lancet-Percy’s] money. I’m looking for a way to understand our world.” Voiceover is our main access to Max’s interior state of chaos, primarily signified sonically, through the electrical static sounds and screeching industrial noise accompanying his headaches. In some ways, this links Max more strongly to the machine than the human world.

Rejecting imperfect humanity in favour of the precision of mathematics, he is something more or less than human, disgusted by the messy intrusion of nature in the shape of the ants

which invade his mainframe Euclid, and distanced further from others by the sexual noises which periodically disrupt his investigations. Eroticism and disgust are mixed here; the lovemaking of neighbours Devi and Farrouhk intrude as Euclid calculates; their generative noises accompany Euclid's attempts at creation, but Max's moan is not one of orgasm, rather of creative perfection or climax interrupted. Here, sex is linked with loss, death, madness, and oblivion, and the penetrative act of drilling into his own brain is what finally saves Max from his own obsession. These wide-ranging textual strategies, utilising art cinema stylistics and self-consciously intellectualised themes, while simultaneously grounding them in a strongly accessible generic framework, locate *Pi* within the Smart canon.

Dealing with similar thematic concerns but diametrically opposed industrially, in that it constitutes an interesting early studio intervention in the Smart canon, was New Line's uneven, ambitious, and financially largely unsuccessful *Dark City* (Alex Proyas, 1998). While science fiction tends towards self-conscious questioning of ideas of 'humanity', here sci-fi and mystery elements were fused with a deliberately chaotic noir aesthetic and occasional eruptions of action. Perhaps too abstract for initial cinema audiences, positive critical reception earned it a significant cult after-life on DVD, and while something of an aberration on release, in retrospect its links to succeeding films such as *Memento*, *The Matrix*, *Fight Club* and *Eternal Sunshine* seem clear. Key to the deliberate, labyrinthine strangeness of *Dark City* is the manner in which it links style and theme by foregrounding its major concerns – the fragility of identity, memory, and sanity – in a queasy neo-noir cityscape which references *Metropolis*, Edward Hopper, Jeunet and Caro, Terry Gilliam, and Nietzsche as much as *The Maltese Falcon*.

The purposeful artificiality of the set is dominated by low-tech mechanics¹⁹⁷ and fluid architecture; the city is physically mutable, amended each night as part of a grand social experiment by a hive-like alien species.¹⁹⁸ This is conducted on an artificial 'satellite', and only suspected serial killer John Murdoch appears resistant to the aliens' mind control. This sense of deliberate instability – of the city collapsing under Murdoch's feet – is mirrored in Murdoch's own confusion, as he struggles to solve the mystery that his identity has become. Awakening in a bathtub with amnesia, his fear that he may be a psychotic serial killer, and eventual discovery that his memory has been erased, constitutes the film not just as a variation on the metaphysical detective story, but one which "implicate[s] 'contingent

existence; as the culprit” (Swope, 2002, 222). The quest to recover (or create) ‘John Murdoch’ by dismantling the physical mechanisms which both support and disguise his true nature is ironically paralleled by that of his guide or mentor, Dr. Daniel Schreber, whose Lorre-esque cringing seems calculated to resist conventional identification. It is Schreber, whose own personality has been deleted by the ‘Strangers’ (with the exception of his technical skills), who posits what seems the film’s thematic conclusion, his assertion that “it is our capacity for individuality, our souls, that makes us different from them”; an assertion which also recuperates the film’s more uncanny elements into a more comfortably humanistic science fiction moral structure.

This reassuringly conventional affirmation of American-style individualism is one way in which the film makes multiple claims on what might be described as ‘mainstream’ values, essentialising as it does the fundamentally *enlightened* (as in, possessed of superior knowledge) humanity that is seen to invest John Murdoch with the assumed moral authority to remake the city. Other calls upon classical or mainstream values are more technologically or textually rooted than thematically: high production values (retro mechanical style notwithstanding); the presence of action elements, including a climactic battle of wills calling to mind manga classic *Akira*; references to the classical genre forms of noir mystery and sci-fi; the highly conventional subplot which relies not simply on heteronormative concepts of romantic love but also on stereotypical ‘good vs. bad girl’ constructs.¹⁹⁹ It also calls upon more art-house formal constituents – a complex narrative structure which necessitates close reading; a highly unstable diegetic reality; an unreliable narrator; a self-conscious generic hybridity which strategically prioritises formal play; a visual style which consciously invokes complex cultural references, such as debates on architectural postmodernism;²⁰⁰ and a strongly positive critical reaction.

Other aspects draw on elements of cult and prestige, and how audiences interact with these: the film’s box office failure providing a sense of discovery and ownership for home viewers; Proyas’ position on the cult spectrum as director of graphic novel adaptation *The Crow*²⁰¹ (1994); the complex narrative structure which repays repeated viewing; its intense generic hybridity; a strongly positive critical reception including multiple festival and award nominations; ‘ironic noir’ styling which produces a kind of ‘fascist kitsch’ effect, drawing as it does on 1930s and 1940s references; an overall tone of paranoid conspiracy which lends

itself to group or subcultural adoption. Fundamentally, *Dark City*'s strongly hybrid nature and grimy aesthetic may simply have been 'out of time' within its context as a big-budget studio piece, its Smartness too strange for its original intended audience: while it embeds its metaphysicality within classical generic framing – indeed the mixing of noir and science fiction is nothing new, with *Blade Runner* occupying a particularly canonical place in that field – the metaphysical tone is not accompanied by textual strategies designed to widen its appeal. In contrast, just a year later *The Matrix* would replace its lo-fi ironic noir with a high-octane mixture of martial arts and spectacular camera effects, to unprecedented box office success.

Just as science fiction forms a generic category broad enough to encompass wide internal variation, so does the teen picture. Playing with generic conventions and tone, rather than explicit stylistic or structural experimentation, in order to establish its Smart credentials, *Rushmore* (Wes Anderson, 1999) contains elements of downbeat comedy but is predominantly a classical school teen picture. It sites protagonist Max Fischer squarely within a world of private-school privilege and wealth, then transposes him into an unfamiliar (and to him, hostile) public school system, through which process he must achieve his coming-of-age. From a class²⁰² perspective a blue-collar outsider, lying about his barber father's career as a 'neurosurgeon', Max occupies a liminal space within the conventions of the teen film – both nerd *and* outsider, he satisfies neither stereotype. Intellectually under-achieving but not rebellious, Max is one of life's enthusiasts, intensely involved with the extra-curricular activities of the school,²⁰³ and although he aspires to the sophistication and independence of adulthood, he is primarily driven by his reluctance to move on from adolescence, identifying with his school to a personally stifling extent: being put on sudden-death academic probation (again a stock teen pic trope) and his subsequent expulsion from Rushmore are an intense shock to Max's identity. This crisis of identity is what drives the film, behind the crises of romance and masculinity which are narratively privileged.

In his relationships with the object of his romantic fantasies (Miss Cross), and industrialist Herman Blume, with whom he has both a father-son and a romantic-rival relationship, Max is, crucially, *performing* an ersatz version of adulthood. The film punctures this inflated vision by the end, restoring Max to what is seen as a more 'authentic' – and importantly, more limited – teenage identity. Max's ambivalent figure is embedded in a narrative enacting

generically-classic themes, but in a manner that is largely mutated by the quirky tonal perspective adopted. While the generic ‘gateway’ to the film is that of the teen picture, Anderson’s whimsical stylistic approach, where black comedy, irony, and winking nostalgia privilege the interpretation of an adult rather than teenaged audience, means that the film mobilises an adult perspective, both ridiculing Max and knowingly indulgent of the naivety beneath the veneer of his faux sophistication. Max is both legitimate generic protagonist, and a figure of psychological projection for adult audiences, who must view his self-conscious pretention through Anderson’s aesthetic framework, which simultaneously mocks and fetishises Max’s artifice, and thereby their own adolescent fumbling.

This nostalgia can also be seen as linking the film with classically-oriented teen cinema, particularly that of the 1980s: Max functions as the outsider²⁰⁴ who must be recuperated into adolescence by simultaneously accepting and transcending his position within the teenage hierarchy (his acceptance of Cross and Blume’s relationship marks victory for Max, in that it constitutes an acceptance of his temporary adolescent powerlessness). However, the almost heroic status imputed to Max’s stubbornness, precocious pretentiousness, and continual struggle for reinvention carries a strongly Smart-inflected link between identity, irony, and loss of innocence. Max’s romantic competitor Herman Blume (whose perspective is privileged equally to Max’s), occupies a similarly liminal position. Introduced to Max via a notably class-oriented speech,²⁰⁵ he is a working-class interloper within his own family, whose privileged state as an industrialist seems to provide him with no satisfaction. The self-loathing Blume adopts a number of conventional teen picture positions by turn; surrogate father, romantic rival, adult driven to ‘lower himself’ to petty revenge by the machinations of a (comedically) vengeful teen²⁰⁶ – and indeed the film links these at several points, as when Blume compliments the ingenuity of Max’s attempt on his life.

However, *Rushmore*’s emphasis on the limited (indeed, limiting) nature of adult autonomy, and the falsity of tokens of material achievement – emphasised in Blume’s misery, which he eventually assuages not just through romantic success with Miss Cross, but also by divesting himself of his suburban lifestyle, grasping and unfaithful wife, and children to whom he cannot relate²⁰⁷ – also shows links with the bourgeois self-scrutiny of *American Beauty*, *I ♥ Huckabees*, and *Fight Club*. Therefore, we see several recurrent Smart themes: a crisis of identity identified mainly as philosophical (but with elements of exploratory sexuality²⁰⁸ and

class) and linked to a liminal state or life-stage, here adolescence; and the adoption and abandonment of self-identification strategies in a search for personal ‘authenticity’.

Combined with the generic play also outlined, *Rushmore* problematises the conventions of teen film in a distinctly adult way, and for a distinctly Smart audience, willing to engage with tonal play and positional ambiguity.

Being John Malkovich (Spike Jonze, 1999) blends genre – incorporating science fiction, romantic comedy, and even thriller elements – in a much more complex way, complicating traditional expectations of realistic diegesis in a manner which foregrounds human identity – and the culture industry – as a location of instability and fluidity. It is particularly interesting for the way it melds play with genre with debates about the function of culture, using the body and persona of actor John Malkovich as a cipher. However, it certainly contains enough straightforwardly genre-based material to generate wider appeal. In some aspects it is a mystery, wherein underemployed puppeteer Craig Schwartz’s response to an enigmatic help-wanted ad finds him engaged in a surreal business enterprise, and in which each of the characters (Craig himself, his marginalised wife Lotte, romantic object/business partner Maxine, and boss Dr. Lester) withhold vital information – and their own motivations – in order to achieve their objectives.

Its primary plot device – Craig’s discovery of a portal into the brain of actor Malkovich, through which Dr. Lester/Captain Mertin has been moving from ‘vessel’ to vessel, effectively rendering himself immortal – is explicitly a science fiction trope, albeit one harnessed primarily for comedic effect. The language used, and the visual style of a book which Mertin at one point shows to Lotte, calls upon ‘retro’ sci-fi programmes such as *The Twilight Zone* or *The Outer Limits* and body-horror, with its vocabulary of “ripe” and “larval” vessels, and attendant biological diagrams. So too does the ending, in which Craig is trapped in the body of the next ‘larval vessel’, Lotte and Maxine’s daughter.

The film also contains ‘intrusions’ of thriller style throughout, in the language used (with Maxine²⁰⁹ describing the easily-manipulated Craig as her “man on the inside”) as well as the narrative action. Craig, infuriated by Lotte and Maxine’s relationship, ambushes his wife with a gun and subsequently cages and gags her, in a largely non-comedic scene which also introduces parodic thriller references; asked by Lotte “Is that [gun] real?” the self-entitled but

ineffectual Craig replies “And I don’t know how to use it very well, so don’t make any sudden moves”. There are several chase sequences, characterised by fast cutting and a tense soundtrack, with Malkovich stalking Maxine to discover the source of his unexpected sense that he is ‘not himself’, and Dr. Lester and Lotte’s kidnap of the heavily-pregnant Maxine, whose escape into Malkovich’s subconscious via the portal takes the form of a thrilling and occasionally dangerous chase set-piece.

Romantic elements also dominate, in the competition between Craig and Lotte for Maxine’s affections, and consequent betrayals by each of the other, here that the film finds itself in one sense at its most conventional. However, its willingness to at first complicate and then breach heteronormativity is one of the most transgressive elements, for all that its gender fluidity²¹⁰ is framed comedically. Maxine’s unexpected affection for Lotte constitutes both a queering of onscreen heteronormativity, and a deconstruction of the star system, in that Cameron Diaz’s ‘unattractive’ Lotte directly contradicts her sex symbol persona. This queering is played out more or less comically, with Lotte chiding Craig for “stand[ing] in the way of my actualisation as a man.”

The primary generic driver is comedic, the shambling Craig, with his aspirations to popularising puppetry as a serious art form, presented as a risible figure. So is the eccentric Lester, with his inappropriate sharing of pornographic fantasies and his resolute (and unfounded) insistence that he has a speech impediment as diagnosed by assistant Floris, with her “doctorate in speech impedimentology”. Along with the company orientation video’s grotesque faux-naive presentation of the 7½th floor’s supposed history – built for Captain Merton’s dwarf wife, as a place “where ye and yer cursed kind can live in peace”, this mild surrealism signals that Craig has found himself in a lunatic environment, outside of ‘normal’ boundaries of behaviour and in which phenomenological reasoning must be discarded – along with the viewer’s expectations of realist fiction.

The emphasis here is on comedy in absurdity and excess, whether in Malkovich’s performances of the character of himself as inhabited by the various other characters, Lotte’s collecting of animals, or the much-mentioned scene in which Malkovich goes through the portal, finishing up in his own brain. This scene – perhaps described as being meta-self-reflexive – is the apogee of the film’s surreal excesses, a restaurant in which every diner has

Malkovich's face, and every written or spoken word is his name; the comic aspects are reinforced by his response: "I have been to the dark side, I have seen a world that no man should see!" However, there is nothing simple about the way in which the film combines these elements of generic access for viewers.

One key to its status as a Smart film is the way in which it melds them with elements emphasising a more self-consciously high art framework: one referring not just to art cinema, but to the culture industries generally. From the opening sequence, where an orchestral score accompanies an operatic puppet ballet coded as serious, niche, or esoteric art (immediately contrasted with Craig's reality; drinking beer while 'playing' puppeteer at home), the film appeals to high culture perspectives repeatedly. These are figured in complex ways, some of which implicate the viewer themselves as complicit in the process of generating cultural capital, it is implied, for ersatz or 'inauthentic' art, and with a focus on its commercialisation that functions as an additional comment on Smart cinema itself. This emphasis on links and divisions between high art and commercialism recurs throughout, whether in Craig's jealousy of 'Derek Mantini' whose *Belle of Amherst*, complete with 60-foot Emily Dickinson has "thrilled onlookers", or the violent reception of his explicit "Abelard and Heloise, A Love Story".

It is in the figure of Malkovich that this emphasis, and in particular the question of what constitutes 'authentic' creativity, is most strong. Reciting lines from Chekov's *The Cherry Orchard*, or rehearsing *Richard III*, high culture is both valorised through him, and made ridiculous by the comedic context of the film. This is explicitly the case in two scenes. The first is where a post-coital Maxine requests that 'Malkovich', at this point inhabited and controlled by Craig, perform a puppet show. In this, he performs the same 'Dance of Despair and Disillusion' which introduced the film, but this time amusingly and perplexingly trebled by the combination of Craig and Malkovich performing precisely the same movements as his wooden puppet. The second is the pseudo-documentary of "American Arts & Culture Presents John Horatio Malkovich "Dance of Despair and Disillusionment". Complete with portentous voiceover on the "enigmatic" Malkovich, "the man who reinvented how we view puppeteering...the man above the strings, and the woman behind the man", this forms a satire on the vagaries of the culture industries.

Malkovich, now long-haired and dressed like C, spouts platitudes such as “There’s the truth and there are lies, and art always tells the truth, even when it’s lying”, as the documentary outlines Malkovich’s “rise to stardom” as a puppeteer, complete with scenes of ‘paying his dues’ to uninterested onlookers in the Catskills. From the puppetry master class he gives at Juilliard, to the over-the-top reception of his “Abelard & Heloise World Tour London Premiere”, the film presents the niche art of puppetry as having equal cultural valence with more established popular arts, and in a manner which deliberately complicates ideas of what ‘niche’ and ‘popular’ art might constitute. Mining clichés and myths around personal investment in creativity – in particular where ‘Malkovich’ berates a student with the words “You’re making him weep, but you yourself are not weeping. Don’t ever fuck with your audience”, moving an audience member to tears, the film reinforces that Craig has not changed, simply the context in which his work is received.

The implication is that Malkovich’s existing ‘embeddedness’ within the culture industries is what has made puppetry popular, not the work itself. The way in which celebrity and visibility are conflated with cultural value is approached most strongly through the Malkovich persona. The assertion that “Malkovich shows us a reflection of ourselves, our frailties, and our...desperate humanity. That’s what makes him one of the most relevant artists of our time” contrasts with the varying personae created by and for Malkovich. His niche status as a celebrity, and the bizarrely contingent nature of celebrity itself, is played on in the repeated misidentification of him as having played, variously “a jewel thief” and “a retard”. Craig’s response to Maxine’s uninterested “Who the fuck is John Malkovich?” may be “One of the great American actors of the twentieth century”, but we see him engaged in such humdrum activities as catalogue shopping and eating leftovers from the fridge.

The narrative’s playful disregard for him as an individual – exemplified in the ending, with Malkovich inhabited by Lester/Mertin and a host of elderly people – reinforces the sense that celebrities are primarily a projection of, or to use the film’s language, “vessels” for, the public’s personal concerns. The fictional friendship between Malkovich and Charlie Sheen (who greet each other as “Ma-Sheen” and “Malkatraz”) reinforces this; the idea that celebrity exists in a self-contained, self-referential universe. So too does the figure of Malkovich’s agent Larry, who greets Malkovich’s (or rather Craig’s) desire to make his name “synonymous with puppets” with the response “Sure, no problem, you’re a puppeteer. Let me

make a couple of calls.” The satirical effect is strong; the sense that creative power and visibility, access to culture, and texts themselves, are produced *industrially* rather than from a more auteurist ‘creative’ framework, is inescapable. In this sense, *Malkovich* functions as a satire of the fame industry and the kind of industrial ambiguity which produces Smart cinema itself: the film is at once distanced from and implicated in the processes of production, as is the Smart audience themselves, the film forces a consideration of the power structures underlying creative production.

Craig’s inhabitation of Malkovich positions the work for which he is lauded as inauthentic – the authentic puppetry is that which cannot be revealed, Craig’s invasion of Malkovich – but valorised through association with credibility and ‘the academy.’²¹¹ Malkovich’s work and its widespread acclaim are here framed as ludicrous pretention, through the faux-documentary: as the voiceover states, “To quote the Bard, he’s got the world on a string” – a pun not only clichéd but factually inaccurate;²¹² in order to elevate this work to the status of ‘high culture’ Shakespeare must be fictitiously invoked. Similarly, Malkovich’s misquotation of William Faulkner’s 1950 Nobel acceptance speech – which he attributes simply to “the poet” illustrates that one of the film’s key drivers is the satirical decoupling of material from its original context, rendering it ‘useless’, comedic, or ironic by this process.

Clearly, to interpret this material in this way implies a degree of cultural access or investment on the part of viewers in high (or arguably middlebrow) art, an assumption the film makes which places it strongly in an art-house framing. In this sense, the notion of cultural capital *itself* forms a means of access to the film on the part of the viewer, as much as any of the generic drivers. However, *Malkovich* implicates viewers in a doubled system of simultaneous appeal to, and condemnation of, their artistic interests. Performing at the American Ballet Theatre, his work is impressive – but compared to the dexterity of the human dancers, his puppet has a golem-like imposter quality. The audience’s response is half-baffled, half-bewitched; the question raised but left unanswered is whether the rapturous applause is genuinely felt, or merely a result of the placing of the work within a high art context – a case of the Emperor’s New Puppet.

Similarly, the documentary voiceover “he was the talk of the town, from the Beltway to Broadway” combines with a poster reading “John Malkovich and Philip Glass present Johann

Wolfgang Goethe's *Die Lieder Des jungen Werthers*" to question who these audiences constitute and how they might function. The viewer is made complicit in parochial cultural snobbery (the implication that 'Beltway' audiences would clamour for this event presented as ludicrous), and the availability and authenticity of popular culture simultaneously satirised. In short, a strong subtext within *Malkovich* is the questioning of 'who is the audience?' However, the film's generic drivers are sufficiently dominant to hold in productive tension the wide-ranging intellectual challenges posed by its themes.

Approaching bourgeois crises of identity in a very different way, and preoccupied mainly with middle-class angst, is *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999), where the problems of privilege are explored through the identity crisis of middle-aged white man Lester Burnham. Moderately successful if unfulfilled in his career, Lester is married to estate agent Carolyn, lives in a suburban dream home complete with non-metaphorical white picket fence, and has a stereotypically disaffected teenage daughter, Jane. His crush on her friend Angela causes him to re-evaluate his position within his family and workplace, and this self-conscious tragedy of the bourgeoisie plays out through a variety of thematic engagements – primarily with work, marriage, youth and nostalgia (particularly related to sex and drugs) – which seem calculated to signal, if not explore, rifts within the 'American Dream.'²¹³

The film's world of work is an ambivalent one, initially appearing to champion strategies of resistance to the commodification of personal labour, and the 'inauthentic' game-playing with which the film associates middle-class labour in particular. Work constitutes first a site of oppression, and later liberation, for Lester, defeated by clashes with 'efficiency expert' Brad. Reduced to sarcastic deference, Lester is pictured isolated in a sea of featureless cubicles, or framed as spatially overwhelmed by Brad's spacious office. Resentful of his role as a "whore for the advertising industry", Lester's blackmail of the company (as well as threatening to expose corruption – the failings of one individual are here what threatens Lester, not the structural inequalities of capitalism – he intimidates them with the threat of a fabricated sexual harassment suit) succeeds financially, but fails to convince as liberatory strategy.²¹⁴ For all that Lester congratulates himself on being "an ordinary guy with nothing to lose", his job at "Mister Smiley's" fast food restaurant reveals the complacent, inherently bourgeois heart of the film. Lester's supposed downward mobility is merely class-tourism for a man who, with the patronising words "I'm looking for the least possible amount of responsibility",

dismisses the real struggle of the working classes (here represented only by a succession of bored-looking, conventionally unattractive adolescents). *American Beauty* evacuates the gesture of abandoning middle-class labour of any philosophical meaning, associating it instead with regressive baby boomer nostalgia for a more 'liberated' past.

The casual disrespect evinced for paid work is evident too in the figure of pompous real estate 'king' Buddy Kane, with whom Carolyn begins an affair after he demonstrates his difference from Lester by dismissing his former girlfriend's assessment of him as "too focused on my career...as if being driven to succeed is some sort of character flaw", and most strongly in its treatment of Carolyn herself. Mocked for her supposed obsession with status and appearance, signalled repeatedly as castrating and controlling, she becomes a grotesque parody. The film seeks primarily to marginalise her – or more accurately, the suburban lifestyle which she is seen to represent – as seen in (classically Smart as per the Sconce definition) scenes of stilted, strained family dinners: awkward tableaux of commodity fetishism which expose deeper resentments and battles for status. Indeed, the treatment of the Burnham family dynamic opens the film up to a wide range of potential readings depending on how a viewer positions themselves with regard to gender or class privilege, bearing in mind that some of these possible readings might be counted as more progressive than others.

A 'preferred'²¹⁵ reading of the film might be that a combination of family and work pressure has induced a mid-life crisis in Lester, during which he tests the boundaries of his family's love, explores the nature of his own sexuality and his roles as a man (particularly as father, husband, friend). Through a rejection of predatorial sexual behaviour and the development of a personal moral/philosophical framework which holds his different roles and characteristics in a more holistic balance, Lester, whose character is flawed but fundamentally decent, achieves personal fulfilment, whereupon he is tragically murdered. Here, the emphasis is on individual rebellion – physically, as in Lester's abandonment of work, use of drugs, and reshaping of his musculature, and psychologically, as in his rejection of his wife in favour of sexual fantasy – as a means of escape from a repressively bourgeois suburban culture. The difficulty with this desired reading is that while Lester's diminished status in the family is one of the film's principle themes, the film fails to provide evidence that he has been marginalised in any significant way.

To read the film from a feminist perspective²¹⁶ (as Erica Arthur, 2004, does) renders this the story of a distant father who prioritises libidinal impulses over the psychological damage he knowingly inflicts on his daughter, and who is repeatedly threatening and emotionally abusive to his wife, in order to maintain a narrative of white middle-class male victimhood. Rejecting Carolyn in order to pursue his fantasy courtship of Angela, he emotionally abuses her in order to assert his dominance, not in the relationship, but as a man; as when, denying that he cares about her affair, he manufactures a scene of public humiliation in order to reinforce that she doesn't "get to tell me what to do. Ever again." Masturbating beside her at night, the list of euphemisms he reels off is played for comedy, but the abusive nature of his engagement with her is clear, in that his needs must be considered dominant to hers: when she correctly points out "This is not a marriage", he replies "But you were happy as long as I kept my mouth shut. Well guess what. I've changed. And the new me whacks off when he feels horny." Following this with a threatening diatribe in which he rejects her claim that she will divorce him ("On what grounds? I'm not a drunk, I don't fuck other women, I don't mistreat you, I've never hit you, I don't even try to touch you"), we are directed to interpret his threats – including a threat to take half her business – as a personal victory with which we should identify, rather than as the vitriolic outburst of an abuser. Similarly, his accusation that she "keeps [his] dick in a mason jar under the sink", plate-throwing dinner tantrums, and evident enjoyment of her distress are all coded as symbolic victories in which viewers can share.

The misogyny is heightened in the way the film constructs the character of Angela. In the heightened symbolism and visual lushness of the film's fantasy sequences, Lester's crush on Angela is given the texture and tone of depersonalised desire; this clear signalling of unreality is the film's distancing strategy, its schema for avoiding accusations of quasi-paedophilic tendencies. This 'Angela' is simply a creation of Lester's ego,²¹⁷ nubile, perpetually available and willing. The reality of Angela's character is much more complex, as she demonstrates that she has rationalised her own early vulnerability to sexual predators by colluding in her own exploitation. In theory, this complexity should provide for a subtle exploration of gendered expectations – however, the film is dominated by Lester's sense of entitlement and victimhood, which works to deny a voice to Carolyn, Jane or Angela. The film thereby legitimises the culture of exploitation, objectifying Angela as a sexualised (adult) figure

throughout; in an effort to recoup its objectification of her, the source of symbolic victim-blaming moves from Lester to Jane and Ricky.

Shaming her for her desire to have sex with Lester, something she believes will allow her to achieve adulthood by complying with the social structures which dictate that she only 'exists' when seen as sexual object (as Lester puts it, she is "the most beautiful thing [sic]" he's ever seen), Ricky says "you are [ugly]. And you're boring. And you're totally ordinary. And you know it." Angela can function only as fantasy figure, compliant with patriarchal demands, or as figure of shame, rejected for her 'slutty' desire to comply with those demands, as much as for her status-obsessed rejection of Ricky. Patriarchal visions of femininity are here enforced as natural law; masturbatory fantasies and sexually-predatory behaviour are unproblematic despite Angela's youth, even if they must be later rejected to reinscribe Lester's credentials as a 'good father'; however the suggestion that Lester and the teenaged Ricky are sexually involved is seen as so transgressive it leads to (redemptive) climactic death.

The misogyny perpetuated here must either 'eject' the female viewer, or induce her to become compliant with her own symbolic destruction in a Mulveyan sense. Therefore, in order to read the film as anything other than a tale of misogynist suburban horror – to 'convert' it into the kind of middle-brow prestige piece suggested by its multiple awards and significant mainstream box office – it must be contained within a bourgeois, anti-feminist viewing framework. The film's Smart tendencies – its flirtation with rejection of intellectual labour-for-hire, its focus on non-heteronormative sexuality and rejection of homophobia, its engagement with underage and transgressive sexuality, its apparent rejection of relational and social norms and exploration of suburban anomie, its diegetic visualisation of the interior fantasies of its protagonist – are founded in fundamentally reassuring mainstream structures; soft drugs, liberal sexual attitudes, and a choice to reject sexual exploitation in favour of 'father role.' The film's mainstream tendencies therefore remain dominant: its focus on classical emotional engagement (centred on Lester's 'personal growth'); its casual reproduction of misogyny; its use of generic elements from melodrama, comedy and misdirectional thriller; and finally Lester's death, functioning as a mechanism by which to propose his personal transcendence as well as to obviate the philosophical challenges posed by his alteration.

American Beauty, then, signifies an industrial co-option of Smart strategies, tailored for middlebrow audiences. The *impression* of Lester's rebellion – the valourisation of his masturbatory objectification of a vulnerable teenage girl, and his subsequent misogynistic 'overthrow' of his supposedly oppressive family – is prized over actual challenge to capitalist or gender-based ideologies, and his death functions to truncate the narrative at a point where his death can mythically 'redeem him' without further interrogation. Producing on the surface the impression that it is 'challenging' in its thematic strategies (as opposed to its formal strategies, which are strongly classical in orientation), the film is in fact resolutely patriarchal and capitalist, failing to challenge prevailing ideologies and reinforcing the bourgeois hegemony, despite its apparent non-conformist slant. These impressions are strongly anchored within a quasi-melodramatic 'family drama' genre, one which itself tends to produce and reinforce heteronormative and socially reassuring conclusions. It is also therefore fundamentally suited for the prestige market, inhabiting and dramatising the fantasies of the wealthy and secure; the transgressive thrills involved in rejection of bourgeois values and supposed female domination are symbolically redeemed by Lester's death.

A film which similarly managed to cultivate a dominant presence in the mainstream marketplace was *The Matrix* (Andy Wachowski and Lana Wachowski, 1999). Its financial success in some ways served to foreground more traditionally 'blockbuster' features, such as the film's spectacular fight scenes, at the expense of its (albeit subtle) resemblances to more easily-identified Smart films. To be clear, this is a film very much at the mainstream end of the spectrum; it is an action blockbuster which mobilises certain Smart preoccupations in ways which serve to problematise that mode. The film provides many initial points of engagement, many of which are explicitly generic. Paranoid thriller, noir, martial arts, superhero, and psychological drama (particularly in the more messianic aspects of Neo's awakening, which form a kind of 'vision quest'²¹⁸) elements are called upon throughout, although it is the science fiction and action elements which dominate. These multiple generic elements are signalled as clearly through the visual aesthetic as they are through narrative action, with a murky green cityscape which recalls both *Dark City* and *Fight Club*, and nods to an eclectic mixture of noir, classical Asian martial arts,²¹⁹ and biker style.

This deliberate, and often contradictory, stylistic eclecticism is emphasised in much the same way that generic hybridity is emphasised – not as pastiche, but as an *unheimlich* compression

of aesthetics and time periods designed to reveal the artifice of the Matrix itself (as with *Dark City*, which also takes place in an ‘impossible’ location). It can be seen in the way the film employs aesthetic contrasts throughout, such as that between the dilapidated grandeur of the abandoned house in which Morpheus offers Neo his choice of enlightenment or blissful oblivion, and his crew’s quasi-futuristic clothes and technology, or in its emblems of ‘futuristic noir’ such as their old-fashioned car with ultra-modern front-opening doors. This scene, in which the crew removes Neo’s ‘bug’, links the contrast with ‘body horror’, its dystopian fusing of technology and flesh instinctively repellent. The (part steampunk, part Heath Robinson) machine with which they withdraw Neo’s parasite, revealing its hybrid flesh-and-metal nature, provides us with a clue to Neo’s ‘real’ existence: confined, hairless and foetal, to a metal and glass womb whose tubes sustain him on liquidised corpses, a probe penetrates his brain and feeds him images of the Matrix. It is Neo’s struggle to negotiate his newly-liminal state – freed from physical prison, and as yet unable to master the Matrix – with which the film is concerned, and which gives it some of its (partial) claim to Smartness.

The environmental style, therefore, relies largely on creating a sense of aesthetic *imbalance* between the monotonous physics of the natural world, and the dizzying possibilities available to those ‘liberated’ from the Matrix. This imbalance, too, gives the film some of its Smartness, in that it deliberately destabilises the terms of audience engagement and identification, all the while maintaining its momentum as an action/sci-fi picture – evidenced in the thrill of horror we experience the first time the physics of natural world truly go awry, when Neo’s mouth spontaneously seals shut during his interrogation by Agent Smith. These elements, with their focus on generic, narrative, and stylistic play, are arguably more Smart than what one might at first glance describe as the film’s ‘clever’ use of philosophy. On the whole, the film’s philosophical outlook is a combination of undergraduate phenomenological solipsism²²⁰ and half-baked Gaia theory.²²¹ At the same time, its inclusion of serious philosophical questions on the nature of humanity not simply as narrative rationalisation or tool of exposition, but as what we might call the ‘deep structure’ of the film – the foundation on which narrative, characterisation, structure and aesthetics all stand – is itself a marker which distinguishes it as considerably more Smart than its action counterparts.²²²

As importantly, the film successfully integrates philosophical engagement with action and thriller elements, performing two functions. The first is to utilise the asking of philosophical

questions, in and of themselves, as elements of narrative play and innovation both within the diegesis (for example we are unused, outside of the framework of art cinema, to a protagonist's primary motivation, and almost all their dialogue, being concerned with the deeper questions of human existence) and within the broader generic framework (that is, the action/thriller elements which dominate, although indeed science fiction is often concerned with philosophical questions). The second is the way in which this multiple generic coding and integration of philosophy make the film accessible to several audiences which might not generally engage with this type of work. This includes the notional audience for action films, who might under other circumstances reject explicitly cerebral material on the grounds of it being solely 'fit for' a more prestigious mode. It also includes audiences which might be more inclined to engage with higher prestige 'art house' cinema than with action, but for whom the philosophical framework deployed by *The Matrix* provides more 'acceptable' terms of engagement.

In this sense, the film manages to move beyond the 'small but significant audience'. It does so by appealing to mass market – and international – attractions such as action, presenting the integration of a philosophical framework as a mark of formal innovation; it also appeals to prestige audiences on the basis of the *same* philosophical framework, but by positioning itself as an action sci-fi 'clever' enough to view without any associated loss of cultural capital. This is also the case in the way in which visual technology is used as an 'attraction' or innovatory thrill within the film, such as the 'bullet time' technique which forms a key appeal here, playing with time and space in a highly spectacular way. The extent to which the film privileges spectacular action above all else means that it cannot be regarded as being as Smart in the same way that, for example, *Dark City* is, but it still approaches metaphysics in a more cerebral way than the average action blockbuster, in particular in the way in which the audience's knowledge of the (un)reality of the Matrix provides for extravagant play with material conventions and physical or spatial barriers.

This includes fight scenes and martial arts techniques, but also the fetishisation of artificiality and excess, such as when Morpheus freezes 'the Construct', allowing him and Neo to walk around in it, or when Neo's request for "Guns. Lots of guns" is answered by an impossible array of weaponry, sweeping past him in racks. Several spectacular set-pieces emphasise this knowing perspective, such as that in which Neo and Trinity rescue Morpheus from the

agents. Here, knowledge that the Matrix is ‘unreal’ absolves the pair of moral responsibility for the massacre they unleash²²³ and fetishisation of the spectacular is foregrounded, with wildly excessive gunfire resulting in an accumulation of bullets, deaths, and spectacular debris. Slow-motion and bullet time are used as ‘showcase’ techniques, often so heavily stylised as to appear almost art-house in their formalism. This is particularly the case in the many slow-motion shots of water droplets or bullets hitting water, which appear to show considerable pleasure in formal visual organisation, but retain their ‘spectacular’ quality through inevitable associations with Asian ‘wire-fu’ style.

Many of the film’s themes also link with Smart strands which emerge elsewhere: the search for human identity (both as an individual and within – or more specifically in resistance to – a social context) and the struggle to develop an ‘authentic’ self; the futility of paid work without meaning; and the importance of resistance to authority. This is expressed in Neo’s relationship to the bureaucratic minutiae of paid work; he is rebuked by his boss, who says, “You have a problem with authority, Mr. Anderson. You believe that you are special, and that the rules somehow do not apply to you. Obviously you are mistaken.” The resistance he displays by refusing to accept Agent Smith’s contention that Morpheus and his group are “terrorists”, and subsequent actions, establishes the “Thomas Anderson” identity as the fraudulent one, and hacker alter ego “Neo” as his authentic self. Related to this proposed ‘authentic identity’ is the insistence throughout on establishing and maintaining distinctions between Neo and the rest of the resistance, and the (still oblivious) general populace, in a kind of fetishised cultishness.²²⁴

With its continual privileging of the need to ‘believe’ over the requirement to think, socially progressive tendencies are somewhat undercut. Therefore, when for example Morpheus asserts that “many of [the Matrix’s prisoners] are so inert, so hopelessly dependent on the system, that they will fight to protect it”, the implication is not that a call to socio-political action is being issued. It is that ‘we’ are being appealed to as a cult all of our own, the enlightened audience who cannot be fooled by “the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth...that you are a slave, Neo...born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind.” In this sense, the strongest call from the film is for the audience to self-position: as an audience superior to the ‘normal’ action audience, which again casts it within a more Smart framework than might have been thought.

Key to this is the way in which the film integrates diegetic elements (including the uncertain physics of the Matrix, and the use of technological innovation as spectacular display), generic drivers of a strongly mainstream nature, and metaphysical themes through the central organising principle – the film’s philosophical underpinning – in a way which calls upon mainstream, cult and to a lesser extent art-house concerns, as well as nodding to specific cultural concerns of the period, such as anxiety regarding increasing technological interconnectedness, and the problems of the emerging ‘networked society’.

Donnie Darko (Richard Kelly, 2001)²²⁵ focuses in a different way on the contingency of its protagonist’s experience, but generates a great deal of textual tension in the similar ‘gap’ between its at times conflicting generic requirements. It is important, too, to note that this is a film which found itself a strong cult following through its original releases, DVD release, and subsequent director’s cut DVD, and has a network of paratextual material surrounding it, including a somewhat pioneering website, all contributing to its cult nature.²²⁶ So too does its ‘retro’ soundtrack, which itself became a separate and distinct route of access into the film.²²⁷ In many ways it is a nostalgic teen film, set as it is during the 1980s, a period of enormous cultural traction for the teen picture. Its disturbed and ultimately doomed protagonist Donnie is a classical teen hero: rebellious, unconcerned with convention when it conflicts with his personal ethics, and disinclined to bow to authority. However, in his uncertain status as troubled visionary or paranoid schizophrenic, or both, he is also a tragic figure who can most clearly be seen as such through adult eyes, and therefore this is not a film specifically directed at teenagers – for all that it speaks to the experience of marginalised youth²²⁸ – so much as a quasi-nostalgic vehicle for the exploration of generic codes, and in ways which collide fruitfully with these, some strikingly Smart themes, including the gulf between adult hypocrisy and a presumed ‘authenticity’ of youth, and the nature of fate or predestination.

Set in an idyllic suburb on the verge of the 1988 American presidential election, *Donnie Darko*’s world is one where the trappings of a carefree middle-class lifestyle – from trampolines and Halloween carnivals to lawn sprinklers²²⁹ – are given an almost epic framing by being filmed in slow-motion. This also serves to enhance the way in which Kelly fetishises the plentiful period elements, from the soundtrack to Donnie and friends’ extended discussion of *The Smurfs*.²³⁰ The Bush-Dukakis election is presented as historical curiosity, and evangelical teacher Kitty Farmer’s crusade against the teaching of Graham Greene’s *The*

Destructors in Donnie's Catholic school echoes the actions of groups such as PMRC during that era.²³¹ The ambivalent representation of prepubescent dance group 'Sparkle Motion' illustrates the sense of the period recalled ironically at a distance; their routine to Duran Duran's 'Notorious', and the rapturous applause with which it is greeted, is both childishly innocent and quasi-sexualised in a manner which would have been considered unproblematic during the 1980s, but hardly since.

A narrative of suburban apocalypse rather than anything more straightforward, *Donnie Darko* harnesses many of the classical tropes of teen film. Donnie himself is strongly coded as an outsider or 'trickster' figure in many ways,²³² but one whose bluntly anti-authoritarian tendencies earn him the respect of his peers, particularly in his conflict with Farmer and self-help guru Jim Cunningham. The 'ineffectual head' and 'nemesis teacher' figures are also strongly linked with the teen film, and here feature in the comedic sense, such as in the scene in which Farmer, outraged, notes that he "asked me to forcibly insert the lifeline exercise card into my anus," or the scene in which Donnie's act of vandalism²³³ results in the head and janitor bemusedly observing (to a jaunty flute soundtrack) water pumping uncontrollably through the school in and out. This is of course complicated by the tension between humour and more sinister intrusions: Donnie's scrawled "They made me do it" is less a cry for help than a warning.

The hierarchical nature of high school society is also foregrounded. Outsiders united by trauma, Gretchen's misunderstanding of Donnie's awkward courtship "You want to go with me?" – to which she replies "Where do you want to go?" – emphasises not just the tribal nature of teen slang, but also the isolated nature of carless suburban teens. The lonely figure of Cherita, taunted with "Go back to China, bitch"²³⁴ and destined to eat lunch alone, marks a particularly potent manifestation of teenage alienation. Seth and Ricky, with their sexual taunting of Gretchen, surreptitious drug-taking, and switchblades, are classic teen-film bullies, whose attempted robbery of Roberta Sparrow's "gem collection" triggers the film's climax: along with Donnie and friends' bicycle-riding, this calls nostalgically to mind children's adventure film *The Goonies* (Richard Donner, 1985). These links to classical teen tropes, as well as the Hallowe'en party, a key 'trickster' location, and its romance and (presumed, rather than illustrated) sexual encounter between Donnie and Gretchen,

referencing the relinquishment of virginity as a rite-of-passage seen in many teen films, are played upon repeatedly.

However, these teen cinema references are positioned in such a way as to imply not just a nostalgic framing, but a self-consciously 'adult' one, of teenaged feelings and events recalled at an ironic distance, providing a means of entry to multiple audiences. This can be seen in the set-piece introduction to the school itself and the film's significant characters, set to a period song (Tears for Fears' *Head Over Heels*). Here, swirling cameras, and formally experimental play with slowed-down and speeded-up footage, highlight the sense of time elapsed, fleeting, contrasted with the temporal immediacy of most teen film. The camera's refusal to privilege any one character, not even Donnie himself, produces a sense of the school as a 'community' of viewpoints: terminating in the soundtrack line "time flies", this serves to complicate any sense of the film as a straightforward teen genre piece, and highlights its sense of generic (and audience) intermixing.

Donnie Darko is as much science-fiction film as teen picture, with its obsessive focus on time travel and impending apocalypse, even where the science-fiction framing is complicated by the possibility that Donnie is experiencing psychotic hallucinations. The grotesque figure of rabbit-suited 'Frank' with his 'messages from the future', the 'tubes' protruding from characters' chests acting as visual representation of the spatio-temporal paths on which humans move, and Donnie's conversations about time travel with his physics teacher (touching on philosophy and religion as well as Stephen Hawking), all code it as such. However, the film also contains elements of horror, whether in Donnie's grinning, absent, face – calling to mind Kubrick – or the hallucinogenic quality of his sleepwalking. Here, the science is sublimated to the demands of the fiction, and the eroding barriers dividing Donnie from the 'real world' (for all that we are led to expect that it is nothing of the kind) are coded as psychological barriers, with the apocalypse located as much in Donnie's mind as anywhere else. This is illustrated clearly in the scenes where he attempts to breach the screen with a knife; the physics of this on-screen universe are too tenuous, too breachable, to be coded as realistic, but the knowledge of Donnie's mental crisis renders them unstable as 'pure' science fiction.

The dominant tonal driver is, rather, that of the paranoid mystery or thriller, whether in Donnie's theft of a gun (which we 'know' must be used) from his parents' wardrobe, the mysterious origins of the engine which falls through the Darko house, or even the anxious voicemail Donnie's therapist Dr. Thurman leaves for his parents. However, these feed into thematic elements which serve to signal the film as Smart, including an existentialist preoccupation with ideas of fate and predestination, in which Donnie functions as a sacrificial figure who cannot escape his destruction, for all that it will serve to save Gretchen from death.²³⁵ The contrast between Donnie's 'authentic' (albeit psychologically suspect) actions and adult hypocrisy also features. Several separate strands illustrate this, in particular Kitty Farmer's anti-intellectual crusade to ban the "pornography" of *The Destructors*, resulting of the dismissal of empathetic English teacher Karen Pomeroy.²³⁶ Another is the manner in which the well-meaning Dr. Thurman tries but fails to assist Donnie via hypnotherapy, resulting in several amusing scenes among the underlying horror, where Donnie variously masturbates, and bemoans his parents' failure to get him "Hungry Hungry Hippos" for Christmas as a child; the effect is a critique of the drive to pathologise what might be termed 'rational' existential crises.

The primary vehicle for this, however, is in Donnie's resistance to evangelical self-help guru Jim Cunningham, whom Donnie later inadvertently exposes, by burning his house down,²³⁷ as leader of a paedophile publishing ring. Cunningham's assertion that "life is absolutely too important, too valuable, and too precious, to be controlled by fear" may in fact dovetail neatly with the theme of many Smart films, but here is undone by Cunningham's criminality and profiteering. For Donnie, Cunningham, with his platitudinal rhetoric of 'love', fear' and "lifeline exercises" is "the antichrist", selling empowerment and self-acceptance but (we later discover) leading a sordid secret life. The self-consciously retro-styled videos which Kitty Farmer shows function as a satirical critique of self-help culture; with their split screens and zooming frames, and cod-Freudian references to "ego reflections", they highlight Cunningham's cynical jargon-peddling. Donnie's advice to teens searching for guidance – "next time he tries to [shove your head in the toilet] you kick him in the balls" may lack maturity, but is, crucially, practical, and signalled as *authentic*. His frustrated protestation that "You can't just lump things into two categories....There are other things that need to be taken into account here, like the whole spectrum of human emotion. You can't just lump

everything into one of these two categories and then just deny everything else” may lack subtlety, but it is more ethically functional than the options Cunningham offers.

It is also *Donnie Darko*'s refusal to allow a traditional resolution of its generic imperatives which marks it out as Smart. As a teen film it denies Donnie a traditionally triumphant emotional resolution, sacrificing him instead. As a science fiction film, it refuses to clarify its theoretical underpinnings, or obey the contemporary coding of science fiction as a genre preoccupied more with action than introspection. As a thriller it refuses to retain the discovery of Jim Cunningham's paedophilia, this being erased from the timeline by Donnie's acceptance of his fate. Therefore, it is in the space required by viewers to negotiate the at times contradictory generic demands that the film generates its Smartness as well as its cult appeal, resisting as it does the drive towards conventional narrative-generic resolution.

Also utilising fractured narrative, albeit with a stronger degree of playful self-referentiality, was *Adaptation* (Spike Jonze, 2002), a feature which appears to locate it much more strongly on the 'art-house'²³⁸ end of the Smart spectrum. Prefaced with a scripting credit to the fictional 'Donald Kaufman' as well as real writer Charlie Kaufman, it opens in the hand-held style of a behind-the-scenes feature on the location of *Being John Malkovich*, in what could be described as an eruption of meta-paratextuality, invoking as it does that work as well as its screenwriter's peculiarly potent auteur-image. While firstly working to naturalise the appearance of Nicolas Cage as 'Charlie', this opening also situates the viewer within a diegesis centred on the film industry as creative industry: on creative block as identity crisis, on the unstable, artificial nature of film, and the Hollywood industry. Charlie delivers an early manifesto, one that registers as almost 'anti-cinematic' in the context of mainstream Hollywood film: "I don't want to cram in sex, or guns, or car chases, or characters learning profound life lessons, or growing, or coming to like each other, or overcoming obstacles to succeed in the end...the book isn't like that, and life isn't like that."

Moving between incidents from Susan Orlean's (Meryl Streep's) book *The Orchid Thief*,²³⁹ Charlie's imagined version of those events, Charlie's 'real' life as a screenwriter along with aspiring screenwriter brother Donald, and his fantasised sexual encounters with women, its emphasis on the mutable, unreliable status of film is not expressed strictly verbally or visually, but through the repeating, intertwining patterns of the narrative. It intersperses

much more classical or conventional generic elements throughout, rather than maintaining a singular focus on the psychological drama of identity crisis. These elements are predominantly comedic (in particular the cultivation of comedy in the gap between voiceover and onscreen action), but also include romance (between Charlie and violinist Amelia, between Susan Orlean and obsessive orchid hunter John Laroche, as well as in less substantive senses between Charlie and his fantasy conquests, including Orlean and studio executive Valerie as well as Amelia) and action,²⁴⁰ with the film culminating in a chase through the Florida swamps, a fatal car accident, and death by alligator.

The doubling component of the film presents the ‘odd couple’ of buddy comedies as an antithetical pairing seeming to reinforce stereotypes both of the Smart fan²⁴¹ and the dumb consumer of blockbusters. Charlie is a masturbatory, self-flagellating figure, paralysed by his inability to engage with the opposite sex as much as with his own creative instincts; by contrast Donald’s naively enthusiastic espousal of ‘Hollywood values’ in his patently unworkable serial killer script, are made fun of initially. Yet while Donald may regard Charlie as a genius, Donald is the ‘successful’ one: creatively fertile (on his own terms) socially functional, flourishing romantically, and engaged with life. If the relationship between Charlie and fictional twin Donald functions for Kaufman to interrogate both his best and worst creative impulses, here are played out some of the film’s dilemmas about itself. Donald’s approach (for Charlie a venal, anti-artistic one) emphasises that structure, and the establishment of generically appropriate expectations, are paramount; Charlie feels contrarily a writer makes a journey into the unknown, that film is art and should mirror the messy, frequently un-dramatic ‘real world’.

In this sense we see a comment on Smart film itself; how can one work within, and rework, the classical format? Or from a personalised perspective, does Donald’s dumb optimism (later revealed as a knowing choice to look away from others’ contempt), make him better-adapted for the world than Charlie’s clever inertia? The film’s eventual symbolic integration of the two characters takes the form of a playfully deliberate mis-step; Kaufman ‘kills’ the film’s art-house tendencies by ironically foregrounding its conventional generic attributes and emotional pathos. After a moment of emotional redemption in Charlie’s apology to Donald, and Donald’s subsequent (cathartic) death, the film simultaneously sacrifices Donald and symbolically integrates him into Charlie and/or ‘Kaufman’. *Adaptation*’s psychoanalytical

games are complexly doubled with the pleasure of knowing we are being manipulated as viewers, with structural in-jokes deployed to foreground at every turn the mutability of the film text: voiceovers, cuts from one version of reality (or fictionalised reality) to another, subtitles reinforcing the unstable character of Charlie's vision, and montage sequences which move ever faster – all displaying Charlie's fractured take on both the subject of his screenplay and his own life.

However it is in its gradual evolution into crime thriller, indeed, into almost precisely the drug-running thriller – and/or parody of one – which Charlie had so wanted to avoid, that *Adaptation* reveals its most Smart characteristic: its melding of art-house and mainstream conventions into a kind of double helix of cinematic playfulness. Diegetically, the film's climax follows from Donald's deduction that Orlean's elegiac story of passion and loss – of the search for a ghost orchid never glimpsed, “wonderful to imagine, easy to fall in love with, but a little fantastic, and fleeting, and out of reach” – fails to reveal a deeper secret. This turns out to be that Orlean and Laroche have been conducting a clandestine affair, as well as cultivating dozens of ghost orchids for psychotropic purposes – indeed we see Orlean as paranoid gangster's moll, dancing provocatively and snorting lurid green lines, before having sex with Laroche – and the climactic section is filled with the structural and iconographic concerns of many a detective film: tense music, late-night stakeouts, car chases, Donald's shooting, the eventual death of he and Laroche, and Orlean brought low.²⁴²

The film can at one remove be seen as, simply, taking a turn away from the introspection of the first two-thirds and towards a more actively genre-inspired and narratively fast-paced climax. In that sense, it enables access at a very simple level, forcing no particular interpretive position on the audience. Of course, to read the film in this way would be to treat the multiple references throughout, to film culture generally and the requirements of a notional Hollywood film in particular, as mere thematic or emotional placeholders, and not what they are, which is deep-structure ‘cues’ for narrative action. Hired for his “unique voice”, Charlie wants to “let the movie exist rather than be artificially plot-driven”. He does not know what that means, other than that his explicitly anti-Hollywood position requires that the film not involve characters “learning valuable life lessons”, or turn into a heist or drug-running film, as “the book isn't like that, and life isn't like that”; Valerie's suggestion that Laroche and Orlean fall in love²⁴³ is greeted with a blank, contemptuous stare. Yet the film's

ending appears to betray his creative ambitions – although we are never sure that Charlie does so, given that our assumption that Kaufman’s film *is* Charlie’s film is not corroborated for every scene; the ‘interpretive gap’ between our understanding of Charlie as a fictional character, and Kaufman as the actual writer of the piece, is continually mystified for our pleasure.

Both within the immediate diegesis and from a more distanced perspective, the viewer is exquisitely aware that Charlie has signed on to adapt the almost un-adaptable, his frustration leading him to seek advice from screenwriting guru Robert McKee (Brian Cox, another fictionalised version of a real person), who pours scorn on Charlie’s desire “to create a story where nothing much happens, where people don’t change, they don’t have any epiphanies. They struggle, and are frustrated, and nothing is resolved.” McKee advises him to “go back and find the drama...Wow them in the end, and you’ve got a hit. Find an ending, but don’t cheat, and don’t you dare bring in a *deus ex machina*. Your characters must change, and change must come from them.” McKee’s words therefore lay out the precise trajectory for the film’s unfolding. Significantly, it is Donald’s encouragement (the ‘Donald’ figure representing a level of active engagement with the world, and crucially, with classical narrative and genre, which Charlie feels incapable of) which prompts Charlie to follow Orlean to Florida, whereupon the film mutates towards its action-adventure climax.

McKee’s ‘big ending’ is forthcoming – the film is retrospectively revealed as a palimpsest of failed attempts, desperate imaginings, hallucinogenic and psychological fantasies, with Donald’s detective-style intervention as structural *deus ex machine* along with a fatal car accident and alligator, and an ending structurally plausible only as parody, but given the emotional depth of classical character-centred narrative. Here, the structural fluidity is such that diegetic reality is subordinated to the structural demands: the diegesis alters itself to fit with what McKee ‘tells’ Charlie the film must become, which is in itself the creative process inscribed by Kaufman himself, at multiple distances. Here lies the satirical nature of the film, rather than in any of the more gentle commentary in which it indulges; not what the film says, but the means by which it turns the ending into that which it has pretended to resist all along. At every turn the film has inscribed reasons for us to distrust its veracity, or rather, to experience a particular kind of pleasure in negotiating its complex, doubled nature.

To understand, for example, that Kaufman exists as a real screenwriter with a particular auteur image, within a specific industrial context, is to interpret the doubled character(s) Charlie and Donald not simply in a different way than would a viewer who was not familiar with his work, but in a way which foregrounds an entirely different set of artistic and narrative concerns – those of artistic identity, and the exigencies of creative success within the Hollywood environment, rather than those of, for example, sibling rivalry and the attainment of narrative ‘completeness’ through the investigation and subsequent exposure of Susan Orlean. Pointed commentaries on Kaufman’s new real-life status at the time, that of specifically genre-bending maverick script innovator, recur throughout, such as when Donald compares Charlie to McKee, saying “He says we all write in a genre, and we must find our originality within that genre...It turns out there hasn’t been a new genre since Fellini invented the mockumentary...My genre’s thriller, what’s yours?” This continual wry referral from the diegetic world of the struggling auteur to Kaufman’s real-world rise to prominence, and in particular the widespread generic confusion which attends Kaufman’s work, forms a distinct thread throughout the film. In that sense, while *Adaptation* mobilises the generic strategies of more classically-structured films, it is viewer knowledge and perspective which governs access to and engagement with the film, both in its generic elements, and in its wider claims to – and play with – the idea of experimental or art cinema.

In contrast, for all that its directors were at the time strongly linked within a particular social-industrial network, *Lost in Translation* (Sofia Coppola, 2003) is in its structural aspects a straightforward narrative, albeit one which stakes art cinema claims.²⁴⁴ The story of two alienated people who make an uncertain but profound connection of romance and friendship in the unfamiliar surroundings of Tokyo, it is characterised by its incomplete resolution,²⁴⁵ comparative stillness (with a slow cut rate and long takes occasionally disrupted by hand-held camera), intermittent backgrounding of dialogue, and self-conscious concentration on formally pleasing visual elements (such as its luminescent use of natural light, and colour palette of soft blues and muted neons). Generically, it harnesses multiple appeals of a classically conventional nature; part travelogue or road movie, embedded though it is in one location, it also functions as a coming-of-age narrative for displaced protagonist Charlotte, and a drama of identity crisis for middle-aged film star Bob. Both find themselves ‘fish out of water’ in an odd-couple romance providing elements of observational comedy; the hang-dog Murray’s battered face and world-weary delivery are a specific driver of much of this

humour. I would argue that two other separate extra-generic or tonal appeals exist. The first is that of Sofia Coppola's distinctly 'feminine' narrative approach,²⁴⁶ which centralises Charlotte's experience and perspective, distinctively within the Smart context.

The second is almost extra-textual, centring on the soundtrack. With five songs from Kevin Shields of cult band My Bloody Valentine, this produces specific appeals all of its own, ones which invoke particular kinds of cultural capital, marking as it did the first widely-accessible work Shields had done²⁴⁷ following the group's disbandment in 1991. Shields' contribution, along with those of quasi-underground artists Squarepusher, Phoenix, Air, and Death In Vegas, and consciously retro songs from The Pretenders, Roxy Music and Elvis Costello, works to position the work squarely in the kind of 'indie' framework that Newman (2009, 2011) outlines. Music here – taking an unusually prominent narrative-diegetic place – constitutes not just a specifically 'hip' attraction, but also a cross-generational appeal, given the hiatus in Shields' career which it concludes. This links with the extra-textual associations between Coppola and indie music generally²⁴⁸ to create a sense that the film is directly aimed at a certain 'hipster' audience.

The film's tentative romance is characterised by a combination of highly restrained erotic flirting and quasi-paternal care which is neither sexualised nor Platonically figured – physical contact is minimal, right up to the conclusion in which Bob kisses Charlotte – but instead demonstrates the recognition of each by the other as 'outsiders'. It is the disorientating strangeness of their jetlagged introduction to Japan which initially unites them, and this cultural clash²⁴⁹ dominates the comedic elements, as well as being a key element of the framing of both as 'lost' in some sense. Bob experiences continual disorientation as he struggles to make the Suntory ads which have brought him to Tokyo, his director's detailed guidance reduced to abrupt phrases in translation, is discomfited by the flamboyant television show on which he is interviewed, and fails to negotiate even the hotel's gym equipment with its Japanese instructions. Similarly Charlotte, repeatedly framed as distanced from Tokyo by the massive glass windows of the Park Hyatt hotel, finds the city chaotic and unreadable when she ventures out, with its exotic amusement arcades, and hentai-reading commuters.

However, it is not simply Japan from which Bob and Charlotte are alienated, but themselves, and those around them. They share a sense of loss, Bob apparently as attracted to Charlotte

by the youthful potential she represents as for her place in his “mid-life crisis” (exemplified by his unflattering camouflage t-shirt and admission that he has considered buying a Porsche), and alienated from his wife by the grind of negotiating the roles of parent, lover and household administrator. Unable to communicate his spiritual loss, he resorts to babbling about “eating better” and “getting healthy”, and has a one night stand with a singer which contrasts in its vacuity to his link with Charlotte. Recent graduate Charlotte is, as she puts it, “stuck... I just don’t know what I’m supposed to be”, unwittingly neglected by workaholic husband John, with whom she cannot communicate honestly: he thinks of Charlotte as “snotty”, and awkwardly flirts with shallow actress Kelly (with whom a more complex entanglement is occasionally implied). It is not John’s work of which Charlotte is jealous, but his engagement with the world, and sense of purpose. Therefore, in common with most of the other Smart films, we are presented with bourgeois characters in identity crisis²⁵⁰ and with the added complication of finding this impossible to communicate to their loved ones.

This crisis of communication – each metaphorically hermetically sealed away from the world: by language, headphones, glass, or the succession of taxis and chauffeured cars in which they navigate the city – is breached only by two strands of interaction. The first is through the international language of commerce,²⁵¹ in which Bob’s celebrity functions as a dual token of business and culture, and which renders Tokyo itself, its public spaces dominated by grand-scale advertising, alternately ‘othered’ and utterly familiar in its post-globalization economic landscape. In what amounts to a mild critique of the excesses of capitalism²⁵² the international language is that of advertising and branding, and the bar of the Tokyo Hyatt becomes the (con)temporary *agora*, a locus for the postmodern collapse of culture and capital. This is seen in the performance there of an English folk song (Scarborough Fair), as a jazz standard, by a red-haired white Australian fronting a band named after a Californian city (Sausalito) to international business people.

This sense of culture as an inextricable but problematic linking of capital and material seduction is emphasised by the Suntory ad Bob shoots: in front of watchful executives, each glass of whisky (actually iced tea) is ‘wrangled’ for visual perfection. All is artifice, whether Bob’s suit, clipped unnaturally behind to fit perfectly on camera, or his \$2 million fee, which constitutes the moral failure of ‘selling out’ – another eruption of the Smart preoccupation with ‘authenticity’. However Bob retains his innocence, as his slightly awed response to the

sight of himself on billboards indicates. Bob's self is not compromised, largely because his 'self' is leached from the ads, replaced at his director's request by laconic impressions of the Rat Pack and 007 – here significantly embodied in lacking-in-cachet Roger Moore, not the more virile Sean Connery. In this symbolic bricolage the post-globalisation world is constituted of displaced signifiers, adding up to a presumed sophistication to be sold by the face of a reluctant actor, to a country in which he is just another 'western' signifier.

The second communicative strand emphasised is that of popular culture (and specifically music) as a unifying force, providing the moments of greatest interactivity and *jouissance*. As a post-globalisation narrative, it is notable that American culture is here defined as 'international' – Charlotte's friend acquires the name "Charlie Brown" and discusses his surfing teacher; a partygoer has hair like Jimi Hendrix – but the primary focus is on the relationship between music and pleasure. Indeed, it is arguably not in the enigmatic ending that the film finds its moment of deepest emotional engagement, but during Bob and Charlotte's karaoke performances, which find them lost in the pleasure of singing and gentle flirtation.

As mentioned, the soundtrack forms an additional (paratextual as well as textual) attraction, and it links too to the film's repeated concerns with authenticity: in many ways, these take the place of play with genre and form, which are significantly underplayed by comparison to many other texts, in establishing a sense of 'Smartness'. As John points out the band he has been photographing are, without the ersatz 'rock and roll' clothes supplied by the label, "skinny and nerdy...so much better", and the self-absorbed Kelly is repeatedly mocked for the shallowness of her interactions with others. This is figured in something of a dual manner, both textually and extra-textually; while Bob and Charlotte are concerned with authenticity of experience and identity, the film itself is engaged in reworking contemporary paradigms of coolness or hipsterism, and the way in which appearance and cultural consumption are linked to them.

A film in which hipster identity crises are played for comedic effect is *I ♥ Huckabees* (David O. Russell, 2004). Here Smartness is created not from the interplay of generic demands – formally it is a farcical, occasionally slapstick comedy with flashes of parodic noir – but from the way it treats its thematic concerns. Post-boomer anxieties and mid-youth identity crises

centred around corporatism, the environment, and the objectification of women, are satirised in a manner foregrounding philosophical enquiry and questions of ‘authentic’ existence, for all that these are also problems of privilege. These themes are played out through the engagement of characters with their own personal crises and experiences of the world. Textually literalising the existential and philosophical crises of Smart cinema through special effects – wonky jump-cuts, cartoonish Freudianism, and lo-fi cut-out animations used to illuminate characters’ internal processes – its formal play marks it as Smart. *Huckabees* also assumes a certain amount of pre-existing knowledge of, or at least openness to, philosophical exploration on the viewer’s part; despite its broad, frequently slapstick comedic underpinnings, the dialogue and ideas contained within it are sophisticated, and make high demands of the audience.

Albert Markovsky (Jason Schwartzman) is a socially-engaged version of the Slacker stereotype. President of the local chapter of the Open Spaces Coalition, a group fighting urban sprawl, his political actions are limited to writing environmentally-themed doggerel, and planting trees – destined to die, impotent even as PR gesture – in the tarmac of shopping mall car parks. Coincidental encounters with an unknown “African guy” lead Albert to hire a team of “existential investigators” to winkle out what he believes is a deeper meaning behind them, while fighting usurpation at the Coalition by ‘nemesis’ Brad Stand (Jude Law), a rising executive at Wal-Mart style department store conglomerate Huckabees. Albert’s central problem is the search for meaning in his own life, as evidenced by his opening monologue: “What am I doing? I don’t know what I’m doing...I’m doing the best that I can. That’s all that I can ask of myself. Is anyone paying any attention? Is it hopeless to try to change things?...I don’t know what the fuck I’m supposed to be doing any more.”

A heightened, comedic version of the agonised bourgeois, he serves both as identificatory figure, and as satirical butt of the film’s often ambiguous attitude to middle-class crisis. Albert’s identity crisis is sincere, but played so comedically that it appears a kind of indulgent excess, which must be reined in by the conclusion of the film, in which he achieves peace through synthesising the conflicting philosophical positions of existentialism and nihilism. These are ‘channelled’ through the film via, respectively, ‘existential detectives’ Vivian and Bernard Jaffee,²⁵³ through whom Albert initially seeks to resolve his coincidence/identity crisis, and their rival and one-time protégée, nihilist Catherine Vaubon – whose business card

reads “cruelty, manipulation, meaninglessness”. As much a parody of the search for enlightenment – of self-help culture – as an adventure in it, here the self is a puzzle to be explored – through comically impenetrable riddles like “Have you ever transcended time and space?” “Yes. No. Time, not space. No, I don’t know what you’re talking about.” This creates a deliberately defamiliarised sense of moving from the interpersonal traumas and physical dilemmas of the mainstream movie to the Smart territory of the *mind* as the engine of human existence. Bernard, with his philosophy that “everything is the same even if it’s different... We are all connected... We need to learn to see the blanket truth all the time, even in the everyday stuff” wishes for Albert to dismantle his identity and fears, so that he can ‘remake’ himself with a more synthesised worldview. Vivian is the pragmatic investigator, spying on the minutiae of Albert’s daily life while acknowledging “Most people prefer to remain on the surface of things.”

Albert’s ‘nemesis’ Brad, who also hires the Jaffees, uncovers unpleasant truths about his own inauthentic existence as a corporate executive: he is “exhausted from charming everyone but [doesn’t] see any alternative... because that’s how you get ahead”; Brad’s identity is constructed not through self-investigation, but defined in the reflected glory of a celebrity encounter (as Vivian says, “you’re so impressive because you know Shania [Twain], and so strong because you can put one over on her.”) Brad maintains the façade; staying in an unhappy relationship with Dawn (Naomi Watts), the ‘Voice of Huckabees’ because his self-image requires that the fantasy of suburban splendour remain intact. “How am I not myself?” is the question the Jaffees repeat over and over after Brad first asks it; he has been so seduced by ‘the system’ he has absorbed its goals as his own, but in doing so has lost his own identity.

Similarly, Albert’s “Other” Tommy Corn (Mark Wahlberg) is a tightly-wound firefighter traumatised, following 9/11, not by what Vivian refers to as “that September thing” but by his inability to cope with America’s petroleum-based culture. Examining the political and economic structures which control his country, Tommy draws the logical but uncomfortable conclusion that “You use petroleum, you’re a murderer. That’s a fact.” For Tommy, the links between oil, unethical corporate activities (including the sweatshops where, as he tells his small daughter, children like her made her clothes), environmental damage, and the military-political machinations of capitalist America, render his position as a privileged first-worlder philosophically untenable; either life is controlled by unseen forces and everyone is

powerless, or life is an illusion, and all is chaos. Here, the juxtaposition of that modern all-American mythic figure, the firefighter, with the rejection of contemporary globalised capitalism, is semantically loaded.

The film also looks tangentially at the beauty myth and its place in the corporatisation of modern life. Once Huckabees model Dawn realises her sense of personal worth comes only from perceptions of her attractiveness, she begins eating with abandon (a powerful gesture in the context of conventional femininity) and dressing “like an Amish bag lady” in an attempt to ‘dismantle’ her self. However, opting out of the conventional standards of beauty does not breach them, and Huckabees replace her. Without an alternative narrative of self to draw upon, Dawn breaks down, whimpering “Wake up, pretty girl, the joke’s on you...Don’t look at me, I’m sick of people looking at me...Look at me, everybody look at me.” While her rejection of patriarchal-corporate constructions of femininity costs her job and relationship with Brad, it is eventually with Tommy – who values the spiritual search over the material, in his own way – that she finds a more equal relationship.

In that environmental and anti-globalist activities appear to have replaced Left-Right politics for this generation, the film produces a mesh of differing viewpoints. Here the individual as activist is vital; these environmental crises are not ‘natural’, but as a result of self-interested human intervention. Alternatively, personal activism is shown as predominantly futile, as per Brad’s comment “You don’t go through the back door with a poem and a bonnet, you go through the front door with a suit and you own the marsh.” Huckabees’ expansionist tendencies cannot – without bringing down capitalism itself – be halted; Tommy’s anti-petroleum standpoint is untenable as long as people like the family who have taken in Sudanese refugee Steven (“the African guy”) ignore their complicity in the structures which produce social and environmental crises all over the world. As Tommy points out “How did Sudan happen? Could it possibly be because we support dictatorships?”, the family respond (in what seems a very explicit critique of America’s Blue State/Red State religious, political and social divide) that “God gave us oil”, dismissing him as “crazy.”

Brad and Albert are each trapped by the treacherous forces of image and expectation. Brad breaks down and admits, that despite his material trappings of success, “I don’t even know who I am.” Albert discovers that at the root of his crisis is the weight of parental expectation:

his mother clips articles on marketing internships from magazines to give him, and remarks derisively that he “couldn’t even hold down a poetry job”, while his father is more interested in his sound system than his son. As Catherine remarks when his mother says “This is my home, I can tell him what I want...I gave my life to this selfish bastard”, it was “so he could be an ornament to you.” This is where the meaning, if it can be described as such, of the coincidental appearance of ‘the African guy’ is revealed, for Catherine: “He was orphaned by a civil war, you were orphaned by indifference”. In this way, Huckabees simultaneously mobilises the crises of the middle-class, and satirises them through Catherine’s pretentious nihilism.

Her question, “Do you want to lead a fake life?”, is answered: Tommy finds meaning in love, saving Dawn from a fire, and Albert in realising that a synthesis between the apparently warring philosophies of Catherine and the Jaffees will bring him a workable ethics of existence. When Catherine hands Albert the picture she has taken of him after the fire, Brad’s face has been partially replaced by Albert’s own. They are each formed and forced by expectations to live in a way that suits neither of them, and hemmed in by prescriptive philosophies – hence Albert’s remark to Catherine and the Jaffees that they should work together, as “You’re too dark and you’re not dark enough...[these are] two overlapping but fractured philosophies.”

Tommy and Albert realise that while they both “saw some truth,” which is “amazing”, “But it’s also nothing special”: the battle for personal identity cannot be definitively won, only fought on a daily basis. “No manure, no magic.” Human drama is inevitable. Suffering cannot be avoided. These are ideas which underpin the ethics of many mainstream film narratives, yet are rarely made explicit; the resolution may be a conventionally hopeful synthesis of conflicting positions, but their use as direct narrative driver is unusual, and militates against reading this as a mainstream text, regardless of the generic coding of the material as comedic. Therefore, while all of the generic elements work to position the text as mainstream, it is the parallel intellectual investment required by the viewer, in order to position it on the terms which it sets out for itself – an intellectual investment which must predate the experience of watching the film – to place themselves in a position of full comprehension, that works to directly undermine its generic tendencies, and therefore position the text as Smart.

Even more flamboyant in its textual play is *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004). Generically speaking, this takes the form of a romantic comedy, in which heteronormativity is reinforced, along with the prospect of personal reinvention through romantic love. However, strong science fiction elements are present, emphasised in contrast to their location in what initially promises to be a realistic diegesis. After their relationship goes awry, Joel and Clementine sign up with Lacuna, a company which, through an inexplicable (and unexplained) process, removes their memory of each other; afterwards they struggle to reconcile daily experience with the fragmentary remains of what the viewer understands as memories of their ‘true’ desires. Introspective Joel²⁵⁴ is the typical socially-awkward middle-class white male of Smart; Clementine appears his polar opposite; bohemian, confrontational. The rooting of their conflicts in their clearly very different personalities functions here not as insurmountable obstacle, but as ‘proof’ of their love, thereby basing it in the tropes of conventional romantic comedy.²⁵⁵

The promised magical cure instead results in a technological violation, chipping away at their identity, and the film becomes a quasi-psychoanalytical chase through Joel’s brain. As he relents mid-erasure, trying to ‘hide’ Clementine in the recesses of his mind, he becomes protagonist *and* battlefield. Much of the film’s action therefore takes place in Joel’s unconscious, with the audience positioned as a kind of mediated subject on a ‘tour’ of their relationship. Generically, this section of the film forms a chase sequence, with Joel pursued by the predatory forces of Lacuna. This strong thriller tendency is compounded in the ‘real world’, as Lacuna employee Patrick tries to steal Joel’s identity in an attempt to court Clementine. Joel and Clementine’s relationship unfolds ‘backwards’, played out through firstly revisiting, then finally amending Joel’s memories of it (all subsequently erased). Far from an assured romantic trajectory (within the bounds of the genre²⁵⁶), it confronts us with the dissolution of Joel and Clem’s partnership amid drunkenness, accusations of infidelity, bitterness and recrimination. Here is the darker side of long-term love; stilted dinner conversations, Joel disapprovingly noting that Clementine will get “drunk and stupid now”, Clementine’s frustration at their lack of emotional intimacy.

The film’s inherent temporal instability complicates the way in which romantic elements are drawn out and generic expectations elided. That is, as its hybridity is of varying and intersectional kinds (temporal, structural, and combining realist and fantastical diegesis, as

well as generic), viewer expectations must be continually re-set, and moved outside of the classical-conventional framework. As well as complicating its generic expectations, the film displays many elements which would normally be associated with art-house film: a nightmare of invasion and erasure, its fractured narrative and complex diegesis reflect and explicate the psychological struggles of characters who wrestle to construct and retain their own sense of identity. Without clear boundaries between internal (Joel's) vision and external (ours in watching it), *Eternal Sunshine* blurs past and present, memory, imagination and reality, marking our viewing experience as unreliable. Scenes disappear and remake themselves as fast as we can see them, part-sharp, part-blurred frames a dizzying mix of focal lengths; figures are physically erased passing through Joel's mind, memories fold in on each other as they disappear. The film's structure is not a chronological sequence with events occurring within defined parameters of cause and effect, but rather a palimpsest.

Behaviour and emotions are overwritten, and subject to structural dictates foregrounding uncertainty and unreliability, at an interpretative as well as thematic level.²⁵⁷ 'Impossible' transitions between scenes are made visible, insisting on contingency and unreliability. Memories are displayed as they are evacuated from Joel's mind: a car falls, shop fronts and hoardings collapse and decay around him, book covers lose their crisp delineation, fading to blank. The process of erasure is therefore identified as an 'unnatural' and risky one, creating a high degree of psychological and emotional tension in Joel, and his struggle for mastery over the process forms the structural and narrative heart of the film. These images cannot be trusted; they are copies, potentially unfaithful reproductions – the erasure process itself, its machine-nature, is 'inauthentic'. At the thematic heart of the film is a concern with identity, and the idea of the 'authentic self'. Joel struggles to avoid his erasure; Clementine suffers a post-erasure crisis of identity, lamenting "I'm lost, I'm scared, I feel like I'm disappearing, my skin's coming off, I'm getting old, nothing makes any sense to me. Nothing makes any sense"; Patrick attempts to become Joel's doppelganger; Lacuna employee Mary, erasing her own memory following a disastrous affair with boss Dr. Mierzwiak, becomes a diminished version of her pre-erasure self.

The transformation offered is Joel's; only in relation to her childhood perceptions of herself as ugly is Clementine transformed, displacing her fears onto the doll she wishes to transform:

“If I could transform her, I would magically change too.” This diverges from Clementine’s previous mentions of physical appearance, which link appearance to ‘personality’ (as in “I apply my personality in a paste”) rather than to ideals of beauty. Here *Eternal Sunshine* makes any obviously gendered reading slippery. While Clementine can be seen in this instance as traumatically affected by the cultural preoccupations which stress ‘beauty’ as an ideal for girls, the doll here seems to reference not any particular ideal of beauty or aesthetic dissatisfaction, but Clementine’s ongoing preoccupation with transforming herself. The implication being that as Clementine has developed into an adult, she has indeed been transfigured or “magically changed” but only through confronting her fears. For all that she frequently displays ‘childlike’ behaviour throughout the film,²⁵⁸ the implication is that she has transformed, into an adult; therefore we are positioned to understand that it is Joel, rather than Clem, who needs to undertake the transformative struggle.

But to speak of her at all, we must of course bear in mind that most of the ‘Clementines’ we encounter (the fragmented, distressed, daytime-drinking Clementine apart) are merely re-vivified memories, or fantasy extrapolations of aspects of her. At times Joel’s interior conception of Clementine seems crucially different to her own conception of herself. This is explicable in the context of (the real) Clementine’s own personality having been ‘amended’ by her memory erasure and its implied diminution of her self. However it is as Joel’s imaginary guide through his own psyche, the catalyst for his renewed appreciation for love, that she features most strongly. She becomes a kind of internal ‘other’ in the context of Joel’s mind, his doppelganger. This is interesting not just in itself, but because so many other Smart films adopt a curiously complex position with regard to the ‘other’.²⁵⁹ Clementine becomes in this context a cipher, not a character – and ironically, given that her most clearly-expressed wish is that she be seen for herself, rather than projected onto by men.²⁶⁰ Her existence as a fictional construct is predicated on the erasure process manufacturing a kind of ‘out-of-body’ experience for Joel: therefore Clementine’s interaction with him must be regarded as a phenomenon by which Joel speaks to himself, and by which he (or Kaufman/Gondry) speaks to the audience.

Joel’s explicitly Freudian ‘therapeutic process’²⁶¹ is central, placing certain pressures of intellectual investment on the audience. In revisiting his memories, it is only through mastering his own childhood fears and humiliations, and curing himself of the delusion that Clementine can save him from himself²⁶² that Joel can gain the adult maturity needed to

conduct a successful relationship. Only by losing his memories (in the therapeutic context of their re-visitation) can he form a new and viable self. Once he starts to do so, Joel's memories symbolically collapse together: the rain of a childhood recollection begins to fall inside the room of his adulthood; his hallucinated childhood Clementine helps him to come to terms with his own trauma and fearfulness. With the (coded as comedic) memory of being caught masturbating by his mother, Joel's progress is couched in explicitly psychoanalytic terms.²⁶³

It is in the symbolic house of Joel's memory of his first encounter with Clementine at Montauk that his 'last stand', his final reckoning with his memories of her, takes place. Here he reconnects with his original fascination with Clementine, whose transgression of the normative social order in the shape of both her breaking-and-entering, and her fluid breaches of conventional interpersonal behaviour,²⁶⁴ can be seen to represent more active, even rebellious, aspects of his own self that he cannot access. Admitting that her dismissal of his fears constituted painful rejection of him ("So go", are her words), he confronts the aspects of his identity which led him to abandon the Montauk house on the night of their first encounter. Joel confronts his regrets, saying "I wish I'd stayed. I wish I'd done a lot of things", and attempts to integrate his fears with the more functional adult self he has developed as a result of this forcible confrontation with his past.

The structural logic sustaining the film is a conventional romantic one: that Joel and Clementine's love is so profound and 'true' that it can survive any crisis, even complete erasure of each other.²⁶⁵ Joel's last memory of Clementine (or hallucination, as he is by now 're-making' his memories in light of their impending loss) is of her whispering "meet me in Montauk". Both a climactic narrative point near the film's conclusion *and* the starting point for the temporal play which characterises it, Joel does, indeed, meet Clem in Montauk; however the 'real' Clem could have no specific knowledge of Joel's presence there; indeed neither does Joel, whose memory of that hallucination has also been wiped. It is, therefore, an act of 'synchronicity' (as per Sconce) that brings them together at the beginning of the film (after the end of their relationship and its erasure), and the audience *alone* which bears witness to the 'inevitability' of their love, as with more conventional romantic comedies. The surrealistic imagery and experimental narrative structure are therefore softened and indeed 'contained' by the generic borders of conventional romantic logic.²⁶⁶

Loss is explored in a more marginal sense in *Brick* (Rian Johnson, 2005), a film whose mainstream leanings are complicated at every turn by the opacity of its communicative strategies. A labyrinthine journey through the social underbelly of drug dealing and teenage pregnancy, *Brick* is a hybrid of two forms, noir and the teen film. Characterised by a distinctive visual style, it is reminiscent of the classic gumshoe narratives of the 1940s, foregrounding its jazz soundtrack, stark blue palette, modernist architecture, and quirky interiors.²⁶⁷ Stylistically the effect is to create a sense of knowing mystification; long shots which refuse a sense of identification with young detective Brendan intermix with jump cuts, fades, a flat tableau-style framing, and an at times extremely slow pace.²⁶⁸ This stylistic experimentation is a strong aspect of the way in which *Brick* constitutes itself as a Smart (adult) film, excluding or displacing the teen viewer in favour of the adult audience;²⁶⁹ for all that the narrative strands are teenage-oriented, the elements of thriller and melodrama here (in particular Emily's 'tragic' pregnancy and subsequent death), as well as tangential references to *Nouvelle Vague* style, work in opposition to the visual aesthetic, making complex or 'closing off' more mainstream tendencies.

A frantic phone call from ex-girlfriend Emily, referring to a mysterious 'brick', functions here as a classical thriller introduction to Brendan, who seeks to first find Emily, and then her killer, leading him to explore the hidden networks behind the supply of drugs to his school. Here, all relationships (bar the one with his classically bespectacled nerd sidekick, "Brain") are potentially treacherous, in a manner which intimately links the dangers of the criminal underworld with the duplicity of teenage interactions, in friendships and love affairs. Education is absent here; as with the classical teen film, the 'real' action is outside of the pedagogical setting, and the classroom must be escaped in order to achieve an 'authentic' education outside of its restrictive setting. The film is populated by classical teen film types – the rich girl, the aggressive jock, the socially manipulative drama queen, the out-of-control delinquent, the refusenik-rebel. In all cases, however, the strong linkage of each with their respective noir types – the femme fatale, the muscle, the showgirl, the heavy, and the informant – lends narrative and generic weight to otherwise thinly-drawn characters.

Here, we are given to understand, while drugs are of no particular danger, unguarded emotions towards peers are potentially fatal. The self-possessed, resourceful Brendan adopts a highly adult outward aspect in his function as detective, but the social hierarchy displays

similar characteristics to any more classical teen film; Brad, the loud-mouthed football player, and Laura, the rich girl *femme fatale*²⁷⁰ are dominant social figures, the predatory Kara accumulates and scatters adolescent minions, and Brendan is marked out as a loner by his choice of lunch venue.²⁷¹ ‘Lunch’ becomes a potent social marker, referred to continually: the question “Where you been eating?” [sic] tracks hierarchical and network interactions as much as physical location, serving much the same function as the ‘dive bar’ of classical noir. Searching for Emily, Brendan’s first question is always “Who’s she been eating with?” Laura, seducing Brendan, offers him not just (untrustworthy) affection, but also a sense of illicit hierarchical dissolution, courting him with the words “You think nobody sees you. Eating lunch behind the portables... I always seen you.”

This sense of impenetrably codified teenage hierarchy, breachable only in extremis, is augmented by the complex language employed, which carries experimental or art-house overtones. It renders the text somewhat opaque, in its combination of 1940s formality and reclaimed slang, but also has the ring of authentic teen argot, in its clarity to its *desired* audience and contrasting impenetrability to those outside.²⁷² ‘Outside’, too, are authority figures: parents are entirely absent from this world, with the occasional reference to a ‘mom’ and none at all to fathers, until the film’s conclusion. The one clearly adult figure (aside from eccentric drug trader The Pin²⁷³) is assistant vice-president, Gary Trueman, whose quasi-conspiratorial relationship with Brendan marks a rupture of the barriers between genres.²⁷⁴ In classical noir style Brendan methodically exploits his knowledge of the relationships and activities of others in order to gain tactical advantage, reveal the killer (who is then himself killed via Brendan’s often cold-blooded manoeuvring), and expose senior players within the drug ring to the authorities.

The outcome of the film, however, does not display any of the simple moralising or pedagogical impulses one might associate with the classical teen form, adhering more to a fatalistic, Smart *and* noir tendency to refuse resolution in the form of a ‘happy ending’. Brendan exposes the manipulations of *femme fatale* Laura, revealed as having engineered Emily’s death in order to deflect attention from her own activities. Unmasked, she reveals that Emily was pregnant with Brandon’s baby at the time of her death, and the film ends to the abrupt cessation of the atmospheric jazz soundtrack, replaced by the sound of passing traffic. This has the effect of leaching the film of its historical and mythic contexts and

references, leaving us with a much more sordid and tragic – but contemporary, as opposed to anchored in a kind of quasi-noir historical hinterland – conclusion. In this sense we can regard *Brick* as a film which adopts much of the generic play of the Smart film, but which shies away from the kind of philosophical questioning which characterises the others. I view this as an indication of the gradual infiltration of Smart’s formal experimentation into contemporary film practice, but perhaps too a sign that the mode’s questioning of identity and epistemological boundaries was being replaced with more formalised generic play.

Conclusions

The differing generic, thematic and tonal considerations of the films result in each expressing its combination of generic play, thematic preoccupation, and references to notions of ‘cult’, ‘art-house’ and ‘mainstream’ in a singular way. Here, double-coding forms part of an embedded position-taking process which occurs at the level of writing and production, whereby these films are constructed to appeal to multiple audiences on the basis of both mainstream and marginal tendencies. The extent to which each investigates common themes also varies; however a strong preoccupation appears with questions of personal identity, and identity lost or in crisis – many of these narrators are not simply ‘unreliable’, they are psychotic or threatened by forces which promise to render them psychotic – and the place and function of creativity, and the importance of practical philosophy, also emerges.

As can be seen from the examples I have used, there is a strong sense throughout that each uses play with – sometimes multiple – generic conventions, in combinations and narrative frameworks which show a tendency to work *against* classical expectations of narrative resolution, something which I would regard as a marker of Smartness. However, it is not a simple marker, in that for each the generic demands and structural formations also work to produce a certain level of familiarity – accessibility – to audiences which grounds it in more mainstream contexts than certain of the textual strategies might initially suggest. Additionally, the interpretation of these films tends to necessitate a high degree of intellectual or cultural investment on the part of the viewer. The hybridity which emerges is not a simple matter of textual play, in which what we might describe as ‘classical’ generic framings are mystified and complicated in the search for textual novelty.

In this sense, films which produce strongly experimental narrative or visual effects (*Pulp Fiction*, *Pi*, *Dark City*, *Malkovich*, *The Matrix*, *Adaptation*, *Huckabees*, *Eternal Sunshine*, *Brick*), or deploy non-mainstream or highly contingent identificatory contexts for their characters – whether through the unreliability of a narrator (*Donnie Darko*), the adoption of multiple tonal perspectives towards them (*Rushmore*), or authorial distancing from moral position-taking, (*Dollhouse*) – can *also* be seen to produce appeals to mainstream audiences by virtue of their strong generic underpinnings. The reverse also applies, as in the two films where classical generic concerns are seen to dominate (*American Beauty* and *Lost in Translation*), and the effect of Smartness is seen as being produced more by the appearance of, respectively, ideological position-taking, and an assumed link with the generational concerns (specifically those surrounding ideas of ‘authenticity’) of Smart audiences.

Individually, therefore, each film takes its place along the continuum from the more ‘alternative’ to the more squarely ‘mainstream’, and many of these films also mobilise quality- or prestige-based audience expectations via textual strategies (see Chapter Five) and extra-textual references, most frequently to art-house or independent cinema, or in a generational sense through musical soundtrack. Collectively my conclusion is that Smart films are characterised by a productive tension between classical generic structures, art-house and independent textual strategies such as narrative and diegetic play, and a tonal register which stretches from the observationally distanced to the dynamically ironic. In order to more deeply investigate how this process operates at the combined levels of textual, industrial and discursive interplay, in my next chapter I undertake two detailed case studies.

Chapter Eight: Smart inside and outside the system – two case studies

This chapter explores two texts more closely in their industrial and discursive contexts as well as their textual ones, in an effort to highlight the complex relationships between genre, tone, industrial practice, and discursive positioning.

Case Study: *Fight Club* – a major (cult) Smart film

Fight Club initially stakes what appears to be a claim as a noir²⁷⁵ black comedy, in which ‘Jack’²⁷⁶ vies for verbal supremacy against Marla Singer, the *femme fatale* whose appearance in the self-help groups he stalks as an antidote to insomnia has caused him renewed sleeplessness. However, the film’s remarkable degree of hybridity soon begins to emerge; it repeatedly miscues us generically, turning briefly into a kind of buddy comedy which threatens to erupt into a love triangle, then begins to take the form of an action thriller, featuring spectacular and frequently violent set pieces – and a spectacularly fantasised plane crash – complete with stylish special effects and high production values, sex, and a strongly-emphasised element of male bonding, itself presented as potentially threatening, as we discover that Jack’s apartment has been blown up by the ‘somebody else’ we later understand to be his alter ego, ‘Tyler Durden’.

Some elements are presented as strongly comedic; from the opening in which Jack wonders how clean the gun in his mouth is, to Marla’s concession that he should take their tuberculosis support group as “my smoking doesn’t go over at all”, to the comedy sequence where Fight Club members must start a fight which they lose, in which one tries to start a fight with a priest. Even apparently ‘straight’ statements are here invested with a blackly comedic tone, such as the cynical way in which the insurance adjuster investigating a car crash describes burned human remnants as “very modern art.” Along with the star element provided by the casting of Brad Pitt as the charismatic Tyler, these all call strongly to mainstream positioning.

The film’s subsequent turn towards highly a ironised psychodrama of mental collapse – itself treated in an almost slapstick fashion – would seem jarring in a film which adhered more strongly to a singular generic framing, but here the intense hybridity (and its perceived

relationship to mental instability) works to internally rationalise the swings in tone, for example when Jack tries to get himself arrested for his part in Project Mayhem: as the police are also involved, their move from “I really admire what you’re doing” to “Get his balls...It’s a really powerful gesture, Mr. Durden. It’ll set quite an example” appears both farcical, and as a surreal hyper-masculine nightmare. *Fight Club* therefore functions at one level as a black comedy in which Jack’s fantasy of masculine mastery runs amok into mutilation and self-destruction, and he must be contained or ‘redeemed’ by Marla’s love.

However, the strongly ironic tone with which the film frames every element undercuts straight readings, in particular through the ‘literary’ tone and sarcastic voiceover of Jack himself, and the contradictory nature of the film’s politics. Apparently anti-conformist, interrogating consumer society, they move to a more nihilistic plane where authenticity and consumerism may be presented as antithetical but no alternative is offered, apart from a quasi-fascistic²⁷⁷ mayhem, itself framed as masochistic submission to a cult of personality. The mixture of nihilism and spiritual longing which pervades the film means that more art-house – although perhaps less ‘indie’ – values begin to emerge, one after the other. These include a questioning of gender roles and norms; a focus on the philosophy of the individual and the epistemological problems of existence; a highly unstable narrator²⁷⁸ with a split personality; and an ironic lightness in the handling of ‘insanity’, placing the film much more directly as a parody (Gronstad, 2003).

The somewhat noir visual aesthetic – black exteriors and sickly green interiors – is contradicted by the action-oriented mobility of the camera, which is often not an observational eye, but a highly engaged, highly mobile supplementary point of view; it swoops in and out of the deep cellular structure of things: the contents of a waste bin; the internal workings of a bomb. The film is also strongly fragmented and reflexive in its styling and structure from the very beginning, when its music video-style credits and stand-off opening are interrupted by Jack’s “No, wait, back up. Let me start earlier.” Its frame-freezes and speeches to camera are pointedly non-classical, as is the extended sequence in which Jack’s IKEA furniture ‘assembles itself’ in-frame, and it is the film’s generic fluidity and ironic tone which allows these to embed themselves relatively unobtrusively in the fabric of its narrative in a manner which effectively forces them to function in a mainstream manner. Above all, this is one of a group of contemporary ‘puzzle films’, which as per Buckland

blur the boundaries between different levels of reality, are riddled with gaps, deception, labyrinthine structures, ambiguity, and overt coincidences. They are populated with characters who are schizophrenic, lose their memory, are unreliable narrators, or are dead (but without us – or them – realizing). In the end, the complexity of puzzle films operates on two levels: narrative and narration. It emphasizes the complex *telling* (plot, narration) of a simple or complex *story* (narrative). (Buckland, 2009, 6)

This holds the key to its adoption as a cult film. While an initial viewing produces the effect of revelation, with Jack's alter ego 'unmasked', subsequent viewings move the viewer's position from a more classically-sutured narrative experience to a separate kind of problem-solving structural engagement. Here, a pleasure which combines classical narrative engagement and a more alternative-coded enjoyment of the breach *of* those structures arises from (re)viewing the film in the context of the clues scattered throughout. Jack and Marla's conversations now appear evidently 'doubled', and motivate us to re-evaluate the characters themselves; the comedy sequence in which Jack blackmails his boss by beating himself up illustrates the structure's playful mechanics with the freeze-framed clue, "For some reason I thought of my first fight, with Tyler." A scene from the film's midpoint illustrates this stylistic and structural play clearly: the frame is breached by shifts and shivers, the film slows and sound goes out of synch; 'sprockets' veer in and out of frame (highlighting the unreliable nature of film, its palimpsest quality) as Tyler speaks directly to camera.

On first viewing this serves to emphasise the breach of social and political normativity implied by his rhetoric and actions, but on repeat view, functions as a signal of the fragmentation and rupture of Jack's sanity; indeed, as a clue, it is resolved through a recurrence towards the end, but this time with Tyler replaced by Jack. Repeat viewing²⁷⁹ also clarifies the way in which the film's themes are first explored and then discarded in favour of generic-structural play. These primarily engage with three inter-related themes, of masculinity, spiritual loss, and consumer culture as linked to both. The first (to which much attention has been paid; see for example Baertson, 2003) is a perennial classical theme, mobilised across almost all genres, whereas the latter two place the film more directly in Smart territory.

Jack's crisis is painted explicitly as one of masculinity, of the "thirty year old boy(s)" abandoned by fathers for other family "franchises". What begins as an investigation into the question "How much can you know about yourself if you've never been in a fight?" becomes a popular movement which taps into a vein of perceived masculine displacement, in which mastery (initially of self, later of others) and secrecy are linked; as is the homoeroticism identified by writers such as Brookey and Westenfelhaus (2002, 2004). This foregrounding of violence as a presumed basic characteristic of masculinity is in itself problematic, but here the clandestine, ritual nature of socially-proscribed pleasure is framed as an arena of productive self-discovery. This too adds to its cult pleasures; the principle that "Who you were in Fight Club was not who you were in the rest of the world", with its promise of exclusivity and hidden (indeed underestimated) power, produces much the same type of mainstream appeal as does the figure of the superhero.

It is complicated, however, by the way in which perverse endurance is here as much a part of masculine display²⁸⁰ as aggression; when bar owner Lou threatens Tyler, his response is to provoke him into beating him repeatedly. Tyler then enacts a masochistic display of calculated submission, relishing in his beating, bleeding into Lou's mouth, unnervingly; this turns on its head the classical masculine trope of the physical fight for supremacy, and turns a performance of extreme non-classical submission into an exhibition of superiority.²⁸¹ However, this subtle critique cannot, by the logic of the film's action underpinnings, be retained; a much more conventional (though nightmarish, from a masculine perspective) display is performed when the militia takes the police commissioner hostage, and performing a mime of castration, threatens to send his genitalia to newspapers, "press-release style". This retreat into more conventional masculinist tropes continues as the militia expands, and the film's physical aggression becomes less about self-mastery than directed towards a more narcissistically atavistic (and fascistic) goal, the mastery of others – or a cultist abnegation of self.²⁸²

Mastery of a different kind is sought at the support groups Jack stalks; the grief their members experience is genuine, but framed harshly, as overly-indulgent, through the ironic viewpoint of Jack's performative adoption of their pain: he is an imposter, and therefore their 'authentic' pain is sidelined in favour of a comedic reading. This is also seen in the treatment of terminal cancer patient Chloe, who has come to terms with her impending death but not

with the desexualisation assumed to come with it; her pleading tone as she promises “pornographic movies in my apartment, and lubricants, and amyl nitrate” and is shooed from the microphone by a group facilitator presents self-help therapeutics as superficial, ineffective in combating the darker truths of living and dying.²⁸³ The film’s mixture of nihilism and spiritual longing is captured more clearly in Jack’s assertion that *Fight Club* was “like at a Pentecostal church...when the fight was over, nothing was solved. But nothing mattered. Afterwards, we all felt saved.”

This spiritual loss is connected both with a perceived abandonment by the father/god²⁸⁴ and with a wider malaise; the conversion through the logic of late capitalism of the citizen to the consumer – something Lizardo touches upon when he describes it as an “attempt to craft a transcendental ‘counter-myth’ capable with dealing with the cultural and societal contradictions of post-industrial capitalism in the context of the transition to a service oriented economy.” (Lizardo, 2007, 221) Tyler’s lengthy speech on this – “Slaves with white collars. Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate, so we can buy shit we don’t need. We are the middle children of history, men. No purpose or place. We have no Great War, no Great Depression. Our great war is a spiritual war. Our great depression is our lives” – touches on all these issues, but the final (heavily ironic) solution to this finds him producing a militia in which the search for meaning becomes a fascistic devotion to submissiveness. The classical American individualist trope of the questing hero is therefore subversively annihilated in Tyler’s dictum that “you are not a beautiful or unique snowflake. You are the same decaying organic matter as everything else” – deliberately calling attention to a perceived distance between this film and the mainstream – and Project Mayhem’s activity is placed in (pleasurable) contrast to the cigar-chomping city officials spouting platitudes such as “The streets are safer now...there is hope in the inner city.”²⁸⁵

However, the call to action their vandalism and culture jamming activities represents is limited, and presented as philosophically futile; shaving monkeys and feeding laxatives to pigeons outside car showrooms are satirical, but ineffective, gestures. Tyler’s anti-consumerist stance – “the things you own end up owning you” – may be radical in terms of its positioning, smuggled as it is into the heart of a studio film, and indeed contrary to many of the other Smart films I examine, but is finally redeemed *for* capitalism in a highly conventional way through our discovery that Jack/Tyler is psychologically damaged. The

growing consciousness that his militia members have abdicated personal autonomy in favour of slavish devotion to a cult leader frames Project Mayhem as a failure, regardless of how many buildings they blow up in the finale – something the film is at pains to emphasise, treating its conclusion as a straightforward restoration of heteronormativity, the explosions viewed as a backdrop, much as a fireworks display might be.²⁸⁶

This is particularly the case in the way the film refuses any class-based interrogation of its material; the failure of the veterinary student turned store clerk is presented as a failure of individual *will*, not a problem of class or opportunity. When Tyler threatens the police commissioner by noting that “The people you are after are the people you depend on” he presents their Project not as an implied unified struggle, but as a sinister threat of unknown origin: for Tyler the old class structures may have broken down, masked by the illusion of social mobility, but no truly radical alternative is proffered. Here we see the manner in which the film’s generic and formal play provide a context so strongly ironic that the film is apparently unable to take its own rhetoric seriously, producing a strongly fantastic effect. The conclusion the film comes to – with its final, mocking shot of Tyler’s penis – seems to be that the audience itself is not just rendered complicit for its engagement with its narrative, but first mocked for, and then ejected from, its own complicity; liberation cannot mean the kind of masochistic abjection enacted by Tyler’s ‘space monkeys’, and if the audience believes it can, the joke is on them. Jack has regained mastery of his self, and of Marla through the restoration of heteronormative ‘propriety’ which ends the film.

Originally scheduled to open in July 1999, the film was delayed until October for a variety of reasons; while the studios indicated that post-production requirements and a crowded summer schedule were at fault (Klady, 1999), the primary factor was most likely the negative response of 20th Century Fox, Fox 2000’s parent company (Waxman, 2005²⁸⁷; Linson, 2002). The film became the subject of lengthy disputes between Fincher and the studio²⁸⁸ which reveal the liminal, fluid nature of the Smart film and the industrial dilemmas which can arise when attempting to market it; by producing strong calls to action for audiences on the basis of one set of textual cues, producers may find these militate against the film’s adoption by other audiences. The case of *Fight Club* also illustrates the fault lines that emerged during the repositioning of production companies themselves; if Miramax had succeeded by applying studio marketing and promotion techniques to independent films, many of the difficulties

experienced with *Fight Club* seemed to be of a diametrically opposed nature. It appears Fox were uncertain as to how precisely they could or should develop, produce, budget, distribute and market a film which had little in common with their usual output of more formally and thematically conservative pieces like *Independence Day* and *Titanic*: this unfamiliarity might be seen as revealing a sense of the ‘inflation’ that accompanied independent and quasi-independent production at that period.²⁸⁹

Optioned from Chuck Palahniuk’s cult novel, the original perception on the part of chairman and CEO Bill Mechanic²⁹⁰ was that the film could be made, and potentially profitably, at a budget of around \$23 million. This budget would place it well outside the capacity of Fox’s specialty division, Fox Searchlight, which had experienced some high-profile losses when venturing into higher-budget fields.²⁹¹ The goal appears to have been was to make a modest-to-high-budget film, with all the advantages a studio could provide, but, as part of the corporate drive of the time to occupy and monetise the margins as well as the mainstream, to use the ‘poverty economics’ (or perception thereof) of the independent stratum in order to plead their case with potential suppliers of labour. This strategy was revealed as flawed: while a star might be persuaded to take scale rate for an interesting project from a small independent, a project of this scale for a major studio would not be treated in the same manner, and the cost of Brad Pitt’s labour was a significant factor in raising its budget.²⁹²

Fox’s position seems to have been a conflicted one; caught between their existing models of output, which for the period immediately preceding *Fight Club* had been highly conservative textually and from an industrial strategy perspective,²⁹³ and what appears to have been the drive to colonise the emerging quasi-independent market, their uncertainty is revealed by a myriad of conflicts between studio and creative staff. From the outset, concerns were raised about the unconventionality and darkness of the material, and the fact that Ziskin and Mechanic were able to progress the film beyond an initial reading of the source novel is further evidence of the industrial duality we see at work in the Smart arena. A mainstream studio keen to push its repertoire, and market share, into potentially lucrative niches had to broaden its risk horizon by choosing to greenlight more potentially transgressive projects, but its institutional bias as an inherently conservative business drove it to attempt to mitigate these transgressions at all points.

Decisions and disputes over casting illustrated the contradictions at work. Brad Pitt, cast as Tyler Durden, occupied the kind of semiotically resonant, paradoxical ground the casting of the Smart film seems to favour: in looks and physique a matinee idol, but with aspirations (already partially achieved in Terry Gilliam's 1995 *Twelve Monkeys*) to more 'serious' dramatic acting; associated with a kind of soft, female-friendly masculinity that might be seen as at odds with the hard-edged viciousness of the material; a marquee name, but fresh from the relative box office disappointment of *Meet Joe Black*.²⁹⁴ Examples of other such clashes criss-cross the history of the film; cuts to production and post-production budgets, the toning-down of nudity, requested removal of violent scenes or shortening of fight sequences, the obscuring of details surrounding home bomb-making techniques, and an explicitly transgressive²⁹⁵ sexual reference amended.

The acknowledged difficulties Fox had with marketing and distribution of the film show, again, some of the contradictions of its position. These difficulties were undoubtedly exacerbated by personal conflicts, and complicated by the occurrence of the Columbine High School massacre, and attendant intense focus on theoretical links between media and violence, which necessitated rescheduling its release from July or August to October 1999, thus disrupting long-range marketing plans. But primarily the failure of Fox's marketing campaign appears linked to a generalised strategic confusion about the nature of the film itself, as well as how the marketing department could best explicate it to its potential publics. In addition, the fact that its final budget would reach €67 million – half of it eventually supplied by producer Arnon Milchan's New Regency Productions, which was based on Fox premises and in which Fox was a major shareholder (see Eller, 1997) – placed the studio in the position of being effectively *forced* to market it to a more broad audience, in an attempt to recoup costs swiftly. Robert Harper and Tom Sherak, then respectively head of marketing and head of distribution at Fox, had fraught relationships with Fincher, and actively disliked the film²⁹⁶ – certainly they seem to have failed to engage with the material, the former saying “[d]espite an aggressive marketing campaign, the general public wasn't ready for a gritty take on the world of semiorganized bare knuckles [sic] street fighting” (Waxman, 2005, 264), and the latter that “...[Fincher] tried to tell a story that the majority of people who go to movies didn't necessarily want to see.” (ibid.) Clearly, while taking a specific position on the nature of the box office failure that would follow, both statements emphasise the broad, mass-market nature of the marketing campaign.

Fincher's incursions into the marketing process – hiring a 'cutting edge' Seattle advertising agency, producing two trailers of his own which emphasises the film's more ironic aspects – were jettisoned in favour of press, posters and billboards focusing on Brad Pitt's semi-naked, bloodied body, television advertising emphasising the fight scenes, trailers that emphasised broad comedy, and (something Fincher in particular bridled at) a campaign on cable television during World Wrestling Federation programming (see Lim, 2009). This was not simply a large-scale marketing campaign – with a cost of \$20 million (Waxman, 2005, 267), it placed a significant extra cost burden on the production – but one which, in an effort to reach a mass market, worked to erase evidence of some of the subtleties of the film which could be seen to appeal to specific niche audiences: its sardonic take on masculinity, its ambivalence about consumer culture, its use of violence as methodology for spiritual or psychological transference rather than corporeal spectacle.

While it is difficult to make specific claims about hypothetical situations being described retrospectively, there are suggestions that even at the time Fincher, and others within the Fox system, felt that embracing rather than rejecting the more 'art film' elements, might have produced different results.²⁹⁷ The fact that this does not appear to have been proffered as a serious possibility indicates, I suggest, the extent to which at this point the industrial models for managing the trajectory of a film of this nature were solidified; the scale of the budget outlay was the determining factor in positioning and marketing the film, and not the generic, textual, or even target-market elements. The fact that *Fight Club* eventually became massively financially successful, once outside of the confines of the first-run exhibition system, does suggest strongly that a platform release, building word of mouth, might have resulted in a different outcome. It is also difficult to establish to what extent the largely hostile press coverage of the film during the period just before opening may have had. As it was, its wide opening on 1,963 screens in the US resulted in a first weekend take of just \$11 million, and a scathing reception from the majority of the press.²⁹⁸

By the second weekend, it had become evident that it would not be another *Se7en*, which had taken an unimpressive first-weekend \$13.9 million on its way to a US theatrical total of \$34 million (see Berra, 2008, 113), and that the audiences Fox had targeted were unresponsive. In a sense, the vital part of *Fight Club*'s case is the way in which it was essentially resurrected after its initial box failure, and not by the studio, but by audiences themselves.

Two weeks from release, it had failed to recoup half the cost of production, and was largely failing internationally too (with a meagre \$7 million intake for its British and Irish stint) – but by the spring of 2000, the film was still running; more importantly, it was carried through into the DVD sales market, grossing \$55 million in rentals by 2001²⁹⁹ and over six million DVD and VHS sales before the end of the decade (Lim, 2009).

However, the ascription of the label ‘cult’ can work to neuter industrial explanations, and leaves the matter squarely but mysteriously – innocently – in the hands of the audience; Mark Jancovich defines the cult movie as an essentially eclectic category, where “cult is largely a matter of the ways in which films are defined in consumption” (Jancovich et al, 2003, 1). He also maintains that cult is defined through a “‘subcultural ideology’ [wherein] filmmakers, films, or audiences are seen as existing in opposition to the ‘mainstream’” (ibid.). In this instance the ‘mainstream’ spoken of is not simply the socio-political world (with its demands on the viewer to which the film speaks; the strictures of rigid models of work, consumerism, and masculinity) but also the world that has created the film, that is, the mainstream studio. I believe that the initial failure of *Fight Club* is directly related to its original positioning as mass-market action film, which illustrated Fox’s lack of understanding of the audience to which the film would appeal, and the lack of sociological nuance – the determination to court mass audiences at the risk of alienating those to whom its counter-cultural tenor would appeal – in its blunt-instrument marketing tactics.

Fox’s very *status* as mainstream industry giant facilitated wide access to the film through massive international release, but contradicted and undercut the subversive intentions of the film; it was only when access routes to the film changed in a way that foregrounded a framework of audience individuality, of ‘happening upon’ the film, and privileged the notion of it speaking to specific niche audiences in particular ways, that financial success followed. It was not that *Fight Club* ceased to be a mainstream film. It was that it ceased to *appear* as one in the eyes of those who could be regarded as likely to seek it out on the basis of the attraction implied by its (now more accessible via word-of-mouth) oppositional appeal. This paradoxical appeal is in its own way symbolised by the film’s iconic phrase “The first rule of Fight Club is: you do not talk about Fight Club. The second rule of Fight Club is: you do not talk about Fight Club”, which claims this mass media event as a *private* pleasure, embedded

in discourses of prestige and exclusivity, in contrast to the highly ‘public’ – by definition non-exclusive – nature of any mass marketing campaign.

So in what ways did the film’s audience intersect with the film’s industrial structures in a manner that might account for its adoption as a ‘cult’ hit? Certainly, the film itself appears to have hit a certain *zeitgeist* nerve, particularly as regards its interrogation of masculine norms and consumer behaviour. Its retrospective recalibration as ‘noble failure’ may also have had some impact; eviscerated by many critics on release, best-of accounts of 1999’s output saw it increasingly re-evaluated. It is perhaps also the case that this new positioning, as a quality film that its major studio owners could not understand and therefore could not market, solidified its appeal, allowing the film’s very *failure* to be mobilised in representations of it as an ‘anti-studio’ film, and therefore with a higher degree of anti-establishment credibility. Here, then, the notion of prestige comes strongly into play, in a way that privileges being seen to be ‘outside the system’ at a higher level than the traditional bourgeois conception might suggest – and yet is still deeply grounded in the bourgeois concerns of the white middle class male.³⁰⁰ The film’s very attention to the discourses of contemporary masculinity as a fractured, tenuous state, emphasise a sense of victimhood³⁰¹ which itself constitutes a strong appeal to the white middle-class cult audience.

A significant factor is the attention that Fincher paid to the DVD extras and packaging,³⁰² as one of the first Hollywood directors to have significant involvement with the transition of their film from theatres to home media (Kirsner, 2007; Lim, 2009). Audio commentary from cast and crew is commonplace nowadays, but was not at this point; nor was the bonus disk with extra-textual material like cast and crew biographies, publicity material, behind the scenes footage, technical details, detailed explanatory accounts of why one angle or take was privileged over another, music video and so on. Parts of this extra-textual material are particularly interesting in highlighting the differences between the text as industrially constructed for a cinema audience, and for those who viewed it at home. Focus is strongly maintained on Fincher’s ‘organising’ or auteurial presence, including information on aspects which would have been approached differently if additional funding had been available. The tendency is towards producing a dynamic which privileges the relationships of (assumed) auteur to text, auteur to audience, and text to audience – creating a circuit of shared secrets, a

shared intimacy created by exposing the technologies and practicalities of the filmmaking process – while obscuring or complicating the industrial origins of the film.³⁰³

An example of this is the fake ‘warning’ which appears at the beginning of the film. Usurping the position of the usual anti-piracy warning, it breaches the boundary of the film text itself, while conveying a strongly anti-authority message, and in particular parodying the rule-based system which governs this conventional industry advice.³⁰⁴ In other paratexts, information which frames the film as transgressive and, crucially, positions Fincher in direct conflict with notional ‘studio heads’, is foregrounded, such as an included section of deleted and alternate scenes, where reference is made to the ‘abortion’ line which was removed from the final cut. Here, text made prominent within the display describes “The infamous line of dialogue changed before release” and the supposedly horrified reaction of the studio which “begged for it’s [sic] reinstatement when they heard what Fincher replaced it with.” This, again, places the viewer in a position of privileged intimacy, of being entrusted with private *objets* previously restricted from public access, in an almost conspiratorial manner.

This process of intimacy-building is reinforced by many of the other additional features, which are situated within a system of power-relations based on rule-making and rule-breaking, and in which conventional or ‘mainstream’ social rules are seen as antithetical to personal growth. Interestingly, this dynamic is also played out in the contrast between the materials used for the film’s theatrical use, and those either mooted by Fincher and rejected by Fox, or those utilised for less (at the time) mainstream channels, such as the internet. Included in the DVD extras, the trailers are of particular interest. The US Theatrical Teaser minimises the film’s political elements, emphasising instead the visceral nature of the fighting, codes Marla as a femme fatale, frames ‘fantasy’ material as diegetic action, and utilises ‘cool’ music that echoes the David Holmes soundtrack for Soderbergh’s *Out of Sight* (1998). Illustrating both the fluidity with which trailer construction approaches any cinematic text, and the polysemic nature of the film, it could easily be for an action heist movie. Although it hints at the loss of self in consumerism, the US Theatrical Trailer places a greater focus on male bonding or shared male group experience, with violence as an empowering force; here the supposedly transformational aspects of combat are highlighted, and the trailer alludes to a ‘personal journey’ of a narratively conventional type, with a love triangle component, and elements of humour (the “Shatner” joke concludes the trailer). Both

avoid explicit reference to any of the more potentially alienating features of the film, and seem constructed for mass audiences.

By contrast, the '8 Rules of Fight Club' Trailer is, it is intimated, the trailer that would have been used had Fincher had unrestricted control of his own project: the format of the screen layout prominently highlights the fact that it was never used and has in fact been completed "under the supervision of David Fincher" specially for the DVD. While still somewhat depoliticised, this trailer greatly emphasises the film's more transgressive and potentially 'antisocial' aspects – showing us the van filled with explosives, exploding computers, Tyler and Jack bashing in car lights – while maintaining a more 'mysterious' aspect in terms of mood. The audio backdrop used is of Tyler reciting the Rules of Fight Club, to underscore the film's emphasis on rule-breaking: this trailer is altogether more apocalyptic in tone, and criminal in aspect. The same is true of the faux Public Service Announcements which (according to Waxman's account) created such consternation in the Fox marketing department. Both are strongly focused on rule making and rule breaking, 'appropriate' behaviour and boundary-crossing, and ironic delivery, and breach the lines between filmic and pro-filmic worlds quite deliberately (it would be a misnomer here to speak of a 'fictional universe', as neither of the pieces appears to seek to create such).

While in a sense they are incomprehensible, that is to say they do not directly refer to the film text itself, they contain an internal logic which gives them a certain art-cinema appeal; while this is speculative, I believe that even a few years later a studio would not have found them so baffling, nor would a specialist in the marketing of independent film, who would presumably have linked these with a platform release schedule and a more targeted campaign. To me this lends credence to the idea that part of the reason for the failure of the film at the box office was Fox's inability to manage the positioning of a film that fell even slightly outside of the margins of the mainstream taste culture. Therefore, it seems possible to speculate that Fox's involvement with the project constituted an attempt to conquer the industrial territory that smaller companies (like Miramax) seemed to be negotiating successfully.

This is perhaps reinforced by the manner in which such (at the time) marginal intertexts as internet advertising slots and music video differed from the mainstream campaigns. The music video is to the song released as "This Is Your Life" by The Dust Brothers,³⁰⁵ which is a combination of original electronic music and a sample-based monologue by Brad Pitt,

containing many of the most agitational messages from Tyler Durden. Here, and in specific contrast with the film's trailers, the focus is very strongly on the more 'nihilistic' or counter-cultural, anti-establishment elements of the film, particularly its implied critique of the American Dream as it repeatedly intones "You have to give up". Similarly, the five internet video spots – sharing the scratched, grainy, found-footage aesthetic of the film – are structured as to-camera appeals made explicitly to (supposedly) disenfranchised young men; outwardly successful, socially concerned, but full of seething inner rage. One has a strongly anti-consumerist focus, accompanied by jauntily ironic cartoon music; another contains sexualised appeals to links between violence and freedom, to a soundtrack of pornographic moaning; a third appeals on the grounds of 'authenticity', differentiating *Fight Club* from American football (which it presents as inauthentic, commercial or sanitised) through drawing a football = porn versus *Fight Club* = sex metaphor; a final one with a Gregorian chant audio track equates religion and culture, and rejects both, asking "which is worse, hell or nothing?" and exhorting viewers to "wipe your ass with the Mona Lisa".

Both the music video and internet spots eschew the softer appeals to presumed sports- and action-film fans that characterised the mainstream trailers; as ancillary marketing is often marginalised in its industrial production, it is possible to ask if these campaigns have 'evaded' censure by marketing bosses, or whether the studio was well aware that potential niche audiences for the film existed, and could be found among alternative music fans and internet users. If so, this implies that it was the industrial scale – the cost burden – of the film which prevented Fox from pursuing this line of publicity, and instead trapped them in a zero-sum game of attempted mass appeal to mass audiences. This kind of industrial schizophrenia does not lend itself to coherent strategising, as is seen also in the press kit visuals supplied in the DVD.³⁰⁶

Here, so, as the text has moved (industrially) from the public to the more closed-off circuit of the private sphere, in combination with the raised prestige (however defined) of its post-cinematic period, discursive elements which might have had detrimental effects while the film was in cinematic circulation may become more open to reframing: an atmosphere of sensationalism and 'moral outrage' (in relation to the film's violence) may also enhance popularity in texts viewed in the privacy of one's home, and particularly for teenagers,³⁰⁷ for whom home access to adult-rated films is often easier than cinema viewing. Home viewing,

which emphasises repetition and revisitation in a way played to by the DVD's extras, also privileges intimacy and group bonding – Sirc mentions anecdotally the repeated playing of the DVD in men's college dormitories (Sirc, 2001, 424) – which may be played out in particular ways given the film's take on gender politics.

Indeed, Susan Faludi refers to the film as “Thelma and Louise for guys” (Faludi, 1999, 89) with the implication of ‘male bonding’ and shared social space (or at the very least, shared male experience) that that provides.³⁰⁸ While Giroux complains that the film reduces the crisis of capitalism to the crisis of masculinity (Giroux, 2001, 5), to my mind this conveniently – from an industrial standpoint – both encourages seeing the film as the focus of shared male experience, and minimises the psychological commitment to rejecting consumerism that the film might superficially seem to encourage, by instead displacing ‘male rage’ onto women. It does seem, however, that the industrial positioning of the film both tacitly accepts the ‘Iron John’-style mythopoetics which underpin it, declining to explicitly seek a female audience for it, and at the same time underplays them; this is not difficult to do, when female *absence* can usually be taken for granted when exploring the selling of broadly action-based American cinema.

Lynn M. Ta sees its industrial position in more progressive terms, however, noting that “[t]he action that indeed needs to be taken against the globalizing market ideology of consumerism is to seek resolution in public, communal spaces. These spaces include neither the private realms of the corporate world nor the underground basements of paramilitary vigilantes. They are, instead, spaces that take into account individual *and* collective needs” (Ta, 2006, 276). Either way, the popularity of the film seems to rest on both its textual structure (at filmic and paratextual levels) *and* industrial positioning (as corporate failure, re-colonised to the ‘margins’ by a public with pretensions to oppositionality). The difficult – and appropriately ironic – question is whether Fox's failure to market the film to cinematic audiences in fact ‘saved’ the text at the home viewing level, in that it saved audiences from having to ask themselves just how easily anti-consumerism had been marketed to them, as consumers.

Here then, seemed a kind of industrial template for the studio-produced Smart film; a script from a critically-lauded and somewhat transgressive source (adapted or original), produced with a minimum of direct interference from the studio, and with a large-scale advertising

campaign with extensive reach, calculated to draw maximum audience numbers. However, the inexperience of the studio in dealing with work of this tenor, combined with the intense pressure created by the high costs involved, contributed to the production of a marketing campaign which could not play to the fringe strengths of the film in an effort to showcase it, but only attempt to obscure them. Only once the studio's position was re-established within the audience-text discourse as an adversarial one (the studio which 'could not cope' with Fincher or *Fight Club*), and the primacy of the auteur-text-audience triad confirmed, could the text itself achieve a kind of plausible deniability about its real industrial positioning, as the big-budget output of a major studio, and take its place as a marginalised 'cult film'. *Fight Club* is therefore also implicated in establishing the primacy of the 'indie subsidiary' within this sector, where appropriate skill-sets and experience could be drawn from one end of the industrial spectrum, and capital from the other, with the personnel of the indie subsidiary acting as 'buffers' between.

The production history of *Fight Club* obscures the true nature of the industrial tensions at play, and explains to a certain extent why the broad range of what can be termed 'Smart cinema' exists both firmly within, as well as outside of, the major studio; while these David-and-Goliath discourses pre-exist for independent films and can be plugged into as required, they must be *manufactured* in a specific manner for studio films. Here, again, we see the double-coding which appears a significant feature of the Smart production, as the discourses which must be mobilised in order to position the film as 'appropriate' for the Smart audience are also those which reject, negate, or elide the industrial power of the studios as mass market powers. In this sense, the market positioning of a film like *Fight Club* – textually Smart, but industrially not significantly different to the other big-budget action films of the period – is dependent on cultivating its own position within the discourse; its failure to do so on initial release becomes more interesting in light of its subsequent reclamation of territory.

Case Study: *Happiness* – an indie in the mainstream crossfire

‘Classically’ Smart in the sense originally described by Sconce, *Happiness* is distinctive in its blackly comedic tone, and accusations of nihilism could perhaps be levelled at it, something most of the other films under discussion sidestep. In tone, thematics and structure, it takes a classically ‘independent’ approach, the interplay of genre minimised in favour of a broad ensemble form. King notes its “multi-strand narrative structure [which] defer[s] the process of narrative progression in each thread” (King, 2005, 86), observing that its “lower degree of narrative communication” (ibid.) can be a source of confusion for viewers. This is something I regard as an intentional complication of its narrative engagement, designed to heighten the later moral conundrum the film presents, and intensify the theme of modern America as lacking in genuine *connectedness*. Foregrounding sexually transgressive material that seems unlikely to generate significant mainstream appeal, Newman describes it as in some ways “the quintessential American independent film” (Newman, 2009, 25) featuring as it does a low-budget aesthetic, disturbing subject matter treated in morally ambiguous terms, and problematic subject positioning, privileging irony above other interpretive frameworks. This is something even the characters make sidelong reference to, as when Helen wryly bemoans her peers’ lack of appreciation for New Jersey, whereby “they just don’t get it. I’m living in a state of irony”. Given my contention that ‘Smartness’ comes from the interplay of genre, structure, tone, industrial contexts and transmedia discourses, it is vital to investigate the ways in which these function together.

Here, the way in which Smartness is configured is largely a matter of tone and transgression. However, that is not to say that there is no emphasis on generic play. Occasionally neglected are the subdued suspense elements, where tension is generated in the creation of a gap between diegetic and audience knowledge: while we are aware that psychiatrist Bill has been drugging and raping his son’s friends, leaving tone aside temporarily, the question of whether this will be revealed creates suspense throughout. *Happiness*, for all its ironic bleakness, is also primarily a comedy – indeed it combines comedic and thriller elements in the sequences in which Bill drugs Johnny’s food and cannot persuade him to eat it, producing a blackly comic tension – and one which mobilises a variety of sub-generic comedy styles. Some of these styles it is faithful to and others it reproduces only to undercut them ironically: romantic comedy, sexual farce, social comedy of manners, black comedy, even introducing an almost

jarring element of gross-out humour in its last scenes, in which a dog licks semen from a balcony railing, then licks its oblivious owner's face.

Its introductory scenes immediately place it, with jaunty violin and accordion soundtrack, in the territory of light-hearted social farce; however this impression is destabilised almost immediately. The ineffectual Andy, dumped after just a few dates by the ironically-named Joy, first presents and then retracts an inappropriate antique gift,³⁰⁹ after which he unleashes a torrent of abuse, finishing with "I'm champagne. And you're shit. And till the day you die, you, not me, will always be shit." The musical accompaniment throughout maintains its thematic integrity, complicating both Andy's inappropriate rage and Joy's tearful (perhaps insincere) rejection, as the opening title appears, in italics which seem coded for a romantic comedy of manners: *Happiness*. We are thereby signalled to anticipate the ironic undercutting of comedic and romantic tendencies throughout.

Play with generic structure is reinforced repeatedly through the film, in the variety of encounters which are initially set up to mirror the 'meet cute' of romantic comedy convention, and then are destabilised, turning rapidly darker. Joy takes a call from a man she assumes to be the 'Damien' her sister has passed her number to: their conversation is flirtatious, but he is in fact phone sex pest Allen. As she responds to his "What are you wearing?" with a cheery "You mean, when we go out? Where do you wanna go? I mean, I'm fairly easy to please" a shift to splitscreen³¹⁰ prefigures not a comedy of mistaken identity, but instead shows him masturbating, asking "Is your pussy all wet?"³¹¹ before she hangs up. In another narrative thread, her encounter with English student Vlad, who silences her aggrieved class's chants, and drives her home in his taxi after he encounters her walking in tears, promises romantic entanglement of a conventional nature. However, following sex – after which she is cheerfully transfigured, striding down the street to romantic music which drowns out the chants of the union protesters outside her building – it transpires that he not only has a partner, whom he beats, but is a thief who steals her stereo and guitar, and extorts cash from her.

Similarly, when Allen, who has developed a curious – built on mutual self-loathing – anonymous telephone connection with his neighbour Helen, Joy's sister, on whom he has a crush, one specific scene is framed in a highly conventional manner which becomes ironic by

virtue of the audience's knowledge of the participants. Allen sits with phone in hand, mustering the courage to phone; this cuts to Helen, waiting anxiously for the phone to ring. The camera circling her, and the operatic strains which accompany the scene, produce an effect of romantic anticipation; as Allen calls, she answers and they sit in expectant, erotic silence. She says "I have to see you", and Allen hangs up: the music abruptly cuts out. Here our knowledge of Allen's predatory sexual fantasies of Helen, which he has described in detail,³¹² is temporarily overridden by the conventions of the genre. As romantic comedy predicates itself on *some* kind of romantic or sympathetic connection being established, the conclusion of their interlude, in which Allen admits his identity, forms another instance of generic rupture. They sit awkwardly, far apart on Helen's couch, each staring away from the other, again with operatic counterpoint. In an extremely slow take, he inches his hand towards her; what might in other circumstances be a moment of silent communion ends as she snaps "This isn't working". The music abruptly stops, terminating the scene's (illusory) romantic mood, and Allen leaves.

One other way in which the film first creates and then destroys conventional romantic structures is in Allen's encounter with neighbour Kristina, whose size marks her out as (in conventional terms, that is to say, in terms of fundamental gender inequality) as about as desirable as Allen, the sexual predator. As she comes to his door, ostensibly collecting money for Pedro the doorman she says has been found bludgeoned to death in his apartment, she asks him out, and is rebuffed. The generic-narrative implication here is that despite Allen's arrogance, he will eventually appreciate that he has found a more appropriate mate than Helen. Indeed, having put Allen to bed while drunk, her tender care despite his porn magazines and mumbles of "need pussy" implies that he has found the romantic connection he craves.³¹³ This implication is intensified when they slow-dance to romantic music; only to be undercut dramatically when Kristina reveals that she has in fact murdered rapist Pedro, and is gradually disposing of his body parts.

While Allen's "we all have our, you know, our pluses and minuses" response is measured, it is not the revelation that she is a murderer that ends any possibility of a relationship, but her admission that she hates sex. This both breaches the romantic convention of presumed sexual attraction between people of equal unattractiveness or low status, and, with Kristina's "It was a crime of passion. I'm a passionate woman" combined with the 'grotesquery' of her avid

consumption of ice cream while relating her story,³¹⁴ neatly decouples sex and passion, desexualising the only woman with whom Allen has a genuine link. His visions of hypersexualised femininity are fraudulent, and it is to Kristina, all chance of sexual fulfilment removed, he comes for consolation; they lie together but not touching, back to back and divided by bedcovers, as the song to which they danced plays again.

Thematically, multiple issues come into focus, most hinging on the contingent nature of knowledge: outwardly-ordinary – and crucially, suburban – characters have sinister secrets (Allen, Bill), are focused on maintaining appearances at the expense of reality, seek to use information as social currency, or confront the impossibility of truly knowing another (a sense in which the film comes closest to accusation of nihilism). The sisters' parents Lenny and Mona are newly-estranged because of Lenny's insistence that he "just want[s] to be alone", but their rejection or avoidance of actual divorce forms a recurring joke. Bill's wife Trish's insistence that she "has it all" not only belies the reality of Bill's pederasty, but conceals that their marriage is sexless and lacking in intimacy, and he treats her "like shit". The sibling rivalry between Joy, Helen and Trish is played out through a multitude of passive-aggressive barbs and pointed comments designed to ironically reinforce the speaker's superior status, from Trish's (later contradicted) syrupy admission that "I always thought that you would never amount to much, that you'd end up alone, without a career or anything. Really, it's what we all thought...somehow you always seemed doomed to failure. But now I see that's not true. There's a glimmer of hope for you after all" to Helen's cooing, insincere insistence that if Trish had managed to write a novel "I'm sure it would have been good." Helen herself is consumed with self-loathing, outwardly highly successful but describing her work as "shallow and superficial", and herself as "just another sordid exploitationist".

Contrary to the other Smart films I discuss, here the development or revelation of the real self is not coded as desirable or even advisable; crisis is foregrounded at all times, and strongly linked with sexual transgression. In a highly ironic fashion, only Bill who, in addition to his secret paedophilia, dreams about massacring random bystanders, and is painfully conscious that he is "sick", comes close to leading an 'authentic' or emotionally evolved existence. Where Trish brushes off son Billy's anxieties with a casual "Ignore him, he's just doing it for attention", Bill engages with his pre-adolescent fears, talking honestly and compassionately with him about masturbation. The scenes in which he does so are framed comedically,

particularly in the musical accompaniment which recalls that of network family television, transposing the (limited, and frequently suburban) emotional trials and resolutions of that model onto a resolutely transgressive and adult mode of sexual comedy, thus forming a sidelong critique of the conventional limits of media and social ‘propriety’ when it comes to sexual matters. The closeness of this relationship is therefore shattered when Bill embraces his own destruction, admitting – during a lengthy, forcefully still sequence, in which the mechanics of his predation are dissected in a manner which forces both Bill and the audience to fully confront his actions – to Billy that he has raped his schoolfriends.

We are made complicit by our narrative engagement with Bill’s moral torment, and compromised by the film’s privileging of his perspective – encouraged to identify more closely with his bumbling efforts to molest a child than we are with any other character – a ‘humanising’ of a type of character traditionally cinematically marginalised in emotional terms. While MacDowell sees the scene in which Bill first sees Johnny,³¹⁵ with its lush musical accompaniment as “an (ironic) affective invitation to share in Bill’s paedophilic lust...[as] we are hardly being encouraged to accept this invitation sincerely – this is what makes it ironically ‘amoral’ rather than ‘immoral’” (MacDowell, 2013, 58), I feel this reading misses the way in which Bill is almost embraced within the film, as a tragic figure; while there is tremendous irony in the fact that the most apparently functional, likeable member of the ensemble is a paedophile,³¹⁶ the tragedy is in his self-awareness, in contrast to the wilful self-blindness of the rest of the characters – his understanding of the horror of his behaviour, his seeming inability to resist his dark desires.

With its combination of irony, bleak pathos, tonal distancing, and complex audience positioning, *Happiness* provides a salutary example of the way in which framing within the media-industrial discourse operates. Textually and industrially the film had what might be described as impeccable indie credentials, produced as it was by Killer Films and Good Machine, under a distribution agreement with October Films, then the specialty division of Universal, which had itself been acquired by drinks distributor Seagram in 1995; even before production started it had become controversial.³¹⁷ Entered out of competition at the Cannes Film Festival, it received – mostly, apart from some perhaps equally celebrated pannings³¹⁸ – positive critical response and won the 1998 International Critics’ Prize for Best Film; however, before release in the U.S, the film ran afoul of the studio and was dropped;

precisely how this happened, admittedly, is unclear (see Brooks, 2001; King, 2005, 43; King, 2009, 214-215).³¹⁹ Good Machine bought the film back from October and released it independently; however this arrangement too highlights some of the inherent uncertainties surrounding how and why Smart cinema is framed in particular positioning circumstances. Schamus himself describes the transfer of rights not as an adversarial ‘battle of wills’, but as “a remarkably amicable and collegial transaction” (Schamus, 2001, 258) – indeed, it provided Solondz with a paradoxically convenient opportunity to release the film without any of the ratings battles that would surely have ensued, given its subject matter.³²⁰ Not only that, but Universal “helped, quietly and in the background, to secure the necessary bank loan.” (King, 2005, 43) from which it would itself directly profit should the film succeed (Newman, 2009, 27). In this incident we see some of the compromises and complexities inherent in the process of the corporate colonisation of what had been previously seen as solely the territory of independent film; while Universal itself might not have been able to tolerate the reputational risk the film represented, it was clearly content to be involved to the extent of maintaining a financial interest.

Following Cannes, the release strategy (under Bob Berney, who ran distribution for the film at Good Machine after its rejection by October) was to push the film heavily at festivals, including Telluride and the New York Film Festival (Vachon, 2006, 91). The pattern of its release is of some interest too. Opening in New York, then in Los Angeles, with fifteen more cities thereafter, it followed what Newman describes as “a typical ‘aggressive specialized rollout’ for a film being marketed on the basis of controversy, critical praise, and prestige.” (Newman, 2009, 27) In fact, *Happiness* would appear to have initially benefitted from the controversy; while the film eventually failed to break even on domestic sales alone, after four weeks on release, the film was playing in eighty-three American cities, and increasing its week-on-week gross.³²¹

For Berney, it represented something of a missed opportunity. While the film opened at first in only six (art-house-oriented) cinemas, making \$34,000 per theatre on average in the first week, it did not cross over into the mainstream suburbs and multiplexes (Vachon, 92), something he relates to an inability to capitalise on the press coverage in a way which could convert it to an attractive proposition to prospective viewers outside of established mainstream audiences. This was exacerbated by difficulties in placing an unrated film in the

home entertainment marketplace:³²² “We didn’t have... a way to change the campaign, and that might have affected the release. I’ve learned since that people will pay double to see a movie if you tell them Hollywood or the government doesn’t want you to see it.” (ibid.) However, this position neglects the complexity of the compromise agreement reached, and its illustration of not just the dependence of even large studios on prestige and cultural credibility, but also their specific vulnerabilities as conglomerated operations.

Seagram’s Universal, Schamus argues, could not simply dump the film or they would face opprobrium from the film community at a time of corporate vulnerability; to allow a competitor to directly take the film on could easily have resulted in an antagonistic press campaign emphasising the ‘saviour’ distributor’s action at Universal’s expense. Instead, the compromise of effectively funding *Good Machine*’s self-release allowed Universal to be seen, within the industrial network of the film industry, as (comparatively) “morally good and true... at the end of the day, we had a film that benefited in the marketplace by being both suppressed and promoted by one and the same system. ...we got to do what few filmmakers ever have the chance to do – control the distribution of our own film from beginning to end.” (Schamus, 1999, 35) This apparent rejection, therefore, served several functions. It allowed the studio to distance itself from controversy; it gave the filmmaker an unusual level of freedom; it acted directly as a positioning tool, in particular by generating media responses; and it reinforced the industrially-useful construction of wider *perceptions* of a binary opposition between indie and mainstream – again an example of a Smart film directly obscuring its industrial origins.

As the film became a media topic in and of itself, the controversy came to stand in as a synecdochic token of the film’s quality, of its status as creatively and socially transgressive, and by extension, as independent, authentic, and autonomous. Here the cues for a potential audience to self-position as available to it are not just strong, but anchored in an extra-textual discourse which predisposes the film as being ‘for them’, as “the audience for alternative culture is potentially reassured rather than threatened by subject matter tagged as morally inappropriate by the dominant social structure” (Newman, 2009, 25). *Happiness*’s industrial positioning – as contrasted with its actual financial arrangements – therefore exemplified the ur-myth of independent cinema, in which the clear and uncompromising vision of the filmmaker prevails against the creatively repressed, money-obsessed philistine studios, and

receives widespread critical acclaim as a result, even if not financial reward (the lack of which could, if desired, be blamed on ‘Hollywood’).

Andrew Lewis Conn makes the point, not simply in relation to Solondz, but to the entire discursive apparatus surrounding quasi-independent cinema, that it had been “granted critical immunity” (Conn, 1999, 70) through this process, in a manner that did not serve either the film itself, or wider cinema, well. He argues that it “had cultivated such an aura of dark hipness around itself, that critics may have been afraid to puncture it. A bleaker explanation is this: they were reviewing not the film they saw but the film they’d read about, the film they’d come prepared to see.” (ibid.) In this reading, it is not a question of taste which pertains. It is that the almost ‘perfect’ industrial positioning of a film like *Happiness* – as a legitimate but controversial work of art, beleaguered by the economic tyranny and creative deadness of the studio system – renders it textually unassailable, protected from legitimate analysis by a shield of gatekeeping critics who wish to prove their own cultural sophistication, and to defend the idea of independent film’s ‘autonomy and authenticity’, as much as they wish to defend the film itself. Here, the practice of critical analysis becomes an almost intolerable burden, trapping the text in an anaesthetizing web of urbane superiority, and halting opportunities for wider analysis, or the seeking of wider audiences.

This is a potentially valid criticism but neglects the extent to which the film functions as both a critique of contemporary media’s tendency to shy away from serious consideration of the film’s position-taking – as Solondz himself points out, “a movie like *Happiness* can only come out of a society with a repressive culture, and yet there’s nothing in the movie that isn’t in the tabloids or talk shows.” (Levy, 1999, 292), *and* as a critique of the audience’s avidity for transgression. It is undeniably problematic, as King points out, that sexual transgression is more easily commodified than alternative perspectives seen as problematically ‘political’, and that transgressors

turn up disproportionately often in indie films, partly because they raise issues independent cinema is more capable than Hollywood of treating with any complexity but also because they offer the potential for a frisson that can be marketable... a kind of exploitation cinema for those who situate themselves as more culturally/educationally discerning. (King, 2005, 200)

It is, finally, the film's tendency towards blankness, more than its transgressive material, which places the audience in the difficult – and rather 'Smart' – position of being rendered complicit with Bill and Allen through relatively conventional narrative strategies and generic cues, while the film retains a complexly doubled perspective of ironic distance and uneasy identification. In the final scene between Bill and Billy, therefore, it is the camera's fixity of gaze, its desire to make the audience confront its own viewing pleasures as much as it forces Bill to confront his, which turns the idea of 'authenticity' on its head, and constructs the audience *itself* as the problem.

Conclusions

The framing and positioning of each of these two films was strongly divergent. With financial support but not full conceptual buy-in from its studio, and a budget which ran high enough to effectively force it into being positioned as a major studio action film, *Fight Club* was a box office failure. I see this as largely due to its inability to engage its textual play, thematic ambiguities, and generic hybridity – as opposed to mobilising its more mainstream elements – in order to avail of a position farther along the perceptual continuum which would have seen it as more 'independent.' In this sense, the film found itself in an industrially confused position; its more flamboyant elements of textual play would not have been possible without the financial support of a major studio, and yet that studio's inexperience in positioning work of this nature greatly hindered its ability to generate audiences.

This position was reversed for home release as the film slowly 'found its place', not least due to its makers' attention to the growing importance of paratextual materials. The film's elements which more strongly called to cult drives were thereby able to emerge; the call to multiple viewing; the extended space for (individual or group) consideration of socially-problematic elements (the film's anti-conformist politics, its consideration of gender, its scopophilic pleasures and its complex engagement with suture) could thereby be reframed in a pleasurable way for audiences. The negative publicity the film received on release, as well as its temporal proximity to a tragic event which allowed discourse about media violence to be framed in relation to it, may have had a significant impact on its initial success. However, it was the film's positioning *as* a mainstream movie which enabled it to be mobilised as a

signifier within that discourse, which I do not believe would necessarily have happened had the film been either produced as, or framed as, a more ‘independent’ production. During release, the film’s combination of Smartness and transgressive material (particularly its violence) created a dominant reading of it as a violent action film rather than enabling an alternative reading as a blackly comedic satire. In its post-cinematic period, those readings were subsumed under the logic of oppositionality, with Fincher reframed as an adversarial figure as regards the studio, and the film taking on a cult appeal partly because of that same industrial positioning.

In contrast, the form and generic play of *Happiness* was so strongly positioned at the ‘independent’ end of that same continuum that the condemnation it attracted, and Universal’s feigned renunciation of it, functioned in an entirely different way. While arguably more morally problematic, it militates towards being seen as *less* problematic than *Fight Club* purely because of its discursive underpinnings. While Bob Berney notes that “[p]eople were almost afraid to say how much they liked it” (Vachon, 2006, 91) at the same time, the framing of the film as unapologetically transgressive served to place it within a discourse privileging transgression as a marker of prestige. In this way it was seen to exemplify an auteuristic stance of creative autonomy, something which substantively distanced the film from the kind of mainstream concerns which, due to the scale of financial investment involved, Fox were obliged to consider. However, both films are notable for the way in which they use their respective generic coding to positional advantage within their markets – for *Fight Club*, its action and thriller elements, and the coding of Jack/Tyler as a fundamentally disordered personality militated towards a ‘fantasy’ reading which mitigated allegations of nihilism or irresponsibility, and for *Happiness*, its coding as ‘art cinema’ drew away accusations of exploitativeness.

Chapter Nine: Conclusions

This research project has not been an attempt to produce a taxonomy of textual characteristics – a task I regard as futile, not because it is ‘impossible’ but because to undertake it would work to deny one of the fundamental qualities of Smart cinema, which is that it is as much an industrial mode as it is a textual one. Neither has it been a purely industrial account of the field, as to characterise Smart film in solely economic terms would not only fail to emphasise the textual complexity of the films themselves, but would conceivably result in a kind of siloing of works into ‘manageable’ compartments – and this compartmentalisation would undermine a richer potential understanding of the way in which these films operate. Instead, I have sought to link industrial and textual studies in order to attempt to clarify the nature of Smart cinema *and* the contexts in which it is both produced and received. I have concentrated on the period 1990-2005, a selection which identifies *sex, lies and videotape* as the last ‘independent breakout’ prior to the first real eruptions of ‘Smartness’, and halted my examination in 2005 with Rian Johnson’s *Brick*. Arguments about periodisation are, it seems, inevitable, but I feel this time-span constitutes the primary period of interest; a definitive moment of ‘closure’ cannot be identified, particularly in the light of continued crossing or intermeshing of Smart and mainstream tendencies. However, after this period, Smart cinema also displayed a strong tendency towards recuperation into the mainstream, by way of its intermeshing with ‘blockbuster economics’, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

My framing of Smart cinema as a ‘trans-generic mode’ works, I believe, to emphasise the way in which it functions both as an industrial grouping – and one which is subject to the same types of *processual* amendment that generic categories tend to be – and as a body of work which, while employing generic codes from a wide variety of traditions (melodrama, science fiction, comedy etc.) utilises a particular set of textual strategies which cross them. I hesitate to use the term ‘indiewood’ throughout, as the term, while it holds great power as a conceptual framework and has been a tremendously useful intervention within the field, to my mind also fails to adequately ‘contain’ the wide range of texts I bring together here – while some, certainly, can easily be described as embodying all that ‘indiewood’ implies, others fall either at the strongly independent end of the continuum, or are deeply embedded within the traditional studio system. For me, the term ‘trans-generic mode’ emphasises the

discursive nature of the contexts within which the texts operate and their fluidity over time, as well as the texts themselves, and while an industrial grounding is vital to an understanding of these contexts, too rigid an interpretation of the terms ‘independent’, ‘indie’, or ‘indiewood’ can result in a kind of hard-coding of definitions which obscures rather than clarifies.

Industrially speaking, my conclusion is that Smart film constitutes above all things a symptomatic historical ‘moment’, a manifestation of textual tendencies wherein the processes of industrial consolidation, and the mechanisms by which assimilatory practices draw filmmakers from the fringes to the centre of industrial production, are revealed. Smart encompasses both independent and studio production, but is probably best thought of as a largely mainstream-industrial phenomenon rather than an independent one, given that its products are largely distributed and exhibited via the mainstream industry even where they have originated outside it in a strict sense. Therefore it is not possible to directly regard Smart *as* independent cinema, although media-discursive representations frequently highlight textual and extratextual elements which privilege this framing.

A combination of industrial circumstances which themselves were largely a consequence of, or related to, the deregulation of the American media industries during the 1980s (international conglomeration, the unifying of production and delivery, increasing globalisation, raised production and associated marketing costs). This produced in the 1990s an impetus to reprioritise within the studios, and in several cases to utilise that reprioritization as means of revitalising or refocusing their brand, and brought forth larger (and more internationalised) markets which could be exploited through a strategy of product diversification. One result of this diversification was the drive – expressed in the industrially hybrid form of Smart – to appeal to not *only* mass international markets, but also diverse niche markets comprised of potential audiences who were more responsive to impressions of, respectively, prestige, independence, auteurial creativity, and stylistic innovation.

This constituted a form of industrial ‘colonisation’ of territory which had previously been considered the preserve of independent filmmakers, and is seen most clearly in the studio acquisitions of small producers and/or distributors, and the widespread establishment of quasi-autonomous production units within studios themselves. This was reinforced discursively by tendencies within the popular and industrial media to narrativise a process of

market segmentation into the idealised frame of a ‘New New Hollywood’, wherein auteurial mythologies obscured industrial practices. The financial risks undertaken were generally relatively modest, however the desired return on investment was not simply that of box office success: competition for symbolic dominance within these niche markets also contributed to status for the industry itself. While the more textually marginal an individual film is – the fewer generic or, sometimes, auteurial attractions it possesses – the likelier it is to have been produced independently and subsequently purchased for distribution, individually, the positioning of texts was accomplished through a variety of strategies.

In order to position themselves, some texts emphasised mainstream generic values, with varying degrees of success (*The Matrix*, *Fight Club*); others claimed a place within bourgeois prestige discourses (*American Beauty*, *Sideways*), or were associated with perceptions of contemporary ‘hipness’ (Wes Anderson’s films, *Lost In Translation*); some made appeals on the basis of strongly art-house, occasionally transgressive values (*Happiness*, *Safe*, *Welcome to the Dollhouse*). Others adopted more textually hybrid approaches, such as Paul Thomas Anderson, whose work has been positioned within generic, transgressive, prestige *and* auteurial framings; at one level an art-house film with a prominent low-budget aesthetic, *Pi* also carries strong associations of contemporary ‘coolness’, for example in its soundtrack; *Eternal Sunshine* contains a high degree of experimental complexity within the strongly mainstream generic environment of the star-led romantic comedy, and which is also inhabited by the auteurial ‘presence’ of Charlie Kaufman.

Therefore, while these strategies include tactical releasing and strategic publicity generation (indeed, elements of controversy tended to be parlayed into free publicity) as well as traditional advertising campaigns, the positioning of an individual film is also a function of the interplay between its textual and generic characteristics, and various (occasionally competing) discourses of prestige. Here, prestige constitutes the search for acclaim for the film text itself, usually for the (within this discursive context, often regarded as an ‘auteur’) director, and occasionally for the writer, but also for the production team and/or studio itself.³²³ When unpacked, the discourses of prestige and auteurism illustrate both the temporal trajectory of these films – the ‘progress’ of Smart cinema into the mainstream – and simultaneously show how framings of an art-house or ‘indie culture’ nature work to obscure its industrial underpinnings. This is something which emerges from my research into the

evaluative mechanisms which have worked to reinforce Smart within the industry. These include awards bestowed by festivals (which serve multiple functions, as sources of intra-industrial prestige, promotional tools, and physical marketplaces) and stand-alone awards systems (which function as sources of intra-industrial prestige, promotional tools, and as media events engaging public involvement, either in voting or as spectators), and which because of their multiple functions form a useful test-bed for analysis.

My conclusion is that when broken down in this way, Smart cinema encompasses a variety of different categories in terms of films' reception, and these categories are perceived in different ways by the prestige industry – a finding that I believe warrants further research. Some (those I describe as 'art-house/independent') are primarily valorised for non-classical attributes (in tone, theme, formal play and so on), auteuristic associations, and for industrial or material distance from the conglomerated studio system: that this grouping contains the majority of the films from the early part of the period under discussion suggests that discursively and economically, Smart film moved gradually towards larger budgets and more mainstream acceptance. Others (the 'hybrid indie/mainstream' films) show the transitional nature of the Smart mode, moving industrially into the mainstream during the early 2000s, and are dominated by comedic (including 'quirky') generic drivers; they are awarded prestige by youth audiences in particular.

The category of 'bourgeois/mainstream' films to me illustrates the assimilatory nature of the mainstream; these minimise cult and art-house elements, are strongly classical in their style, and are intensely focused on the male white middle-class. While Pardoe and Simonton conclude (2007, 380) that genre is not a factor in predicting Academy Awards winners, it may be in nomination selections; without further research I acknowledge that the point is speculative, but it does seem interesting to me that each of these films generically tends strongly towards the family drama (or indeed melodrama). In any case, the films which tend least towards the formally or narratively transgressive,³²⁴ are here the most likely to be rewarded with institutional approval. For me, the prestige bestowed by their inclusion at what we might call the 'top' of a notional hierarchy of prestige (signified by the dominance of the Academy Awards and Golden Globes) also represents an intra-industry symbolic reinforcement of the perceived institutional benefits of studios' colonisation of the quasi-independent field.

The two films which availed primarily of ‘cult/technical/genre’ prestige and audience-awarded prizes illustrate the extent to which, I assert, their strongly generic nature – and the possible cultural devaluing of science fiction as a genre among others – dominated other considerations and obscured a prestige-industries reading of them through a quality framework, effectively erasing the discursive sense of them as ‘Smart’. The ‘strongly hybridised’ group of films contains, in contradiction, the most directly ‘indiewood’ of films – those which employ classical generic drivers and star presence, and a high degree of formal experimentation. These are the films which I would regard as constituting the clearest illustration of the ground which Smart cinema sought to occupy: the fact that they are also awarded the widest *variation* in types of prestige to me demonstrates not just that they have become popular, but that they have indeed fulfilled the industrial desire to appeal to multiple ‘small but significant’ audiences.

An additional element in the fulfilment of this desire is the manner in which auteurist discourse works to symbolically unify the contradictions implied by Smart’s theoretical position as simultaneously ‘indie’ and mainstream. Auteurist discourse functions to contain Smart in an overarching narrative of creative innovation which does not just create a discursive framework of critical legitimation for its texts, or elide questions of independence and industrial origin, but also tends to downplay the generic elements which are a vital part of embedding them in a matrix of mainstream accessibility. Similarly, mobilising ideas of ‘cult’ not only creates a sense of distinction from the mainstream for Smart texts (albeit in a variety of different ways, given the disparity of texts under discussion here) and downplays industrial contexts, but positions them as works through which audiences produce cultural capital. However this is not the intensely codified cultural capital of the hardcore cultist, but an attenuated version of it, in which the idea of discovery or early adoption is foregrounded, rather than textual mastery as a process or goal in itself: Smart cinema’s fundamental embedding within the mainstream industry, and its propensity towards comprehensive generic accessibility, undercuts real tendencies towards cult status.

The question of how important independence is to the positioning of these films is a larger one. In Chapter Five I draw on the idea of ‘independentness’, which I describe as the tendency to emphasise *perceptions* of creative independence – expressed through textual strategies (such as Wes Anderson’s ‘quirky’ distancing, *Brick*’s opaque dialogue, *Fight*

Club's surface politicisation, *American Beauty*'s faux-transgressive sexual politics, or the aestheticised technology of *The Matrix*), as well as a reliance on the mythmaking power of contemporary auteurism (as when films written by Charlie Kaufman are framed as the singular product of an extraordinary mind, rather than the output of a collaborative industrial and creative process³²⁵) – while seeking to appear free of industrial contexts which might be seen to directly compromise such perceptions. However, this position is not without its contradictions.

While discursive attention drawn to these texts privileges notions of creativity and exception, the sociological context within which they are received and consumed can be said to have produced a more nuanced (or perhaps compromised) status for them. In this, the intervention of major studios into the independent or quasi-independent marketplace is not necessarily condemned as a ideologically 'fraudulent', or as representing a minimising of options for the non-mainstream audience, but (as per Newman's 2009 exploration of indie culture and the idea of 'selling out') as part of the late-capitalist rhetoric of consumer choice in which a mainstream audience is provided with a wider range of options from which to choose. In this context, the generic 'anchoring' of each Smart film as a mainstream-accessible text, within the context of an ongoing practice of corporate colonisation, forms part of an industrial drive to induce audiences to self-position in relation to structural aesthetics and generic drivers rather than industrial contexts. Primarily, the idea of the 'self-positioning' of audiences implies that viewers are responding to discursive cues about the status, cultural relevance, and 'coolness' of the auteur with whose creative work – and brand image – they have cultivated some sort of relationship.

Newman's assertion that 'indie culture' generally, as well as independent film specifically, generates its identity from a set of practices focused on making distinctions between 'indie' and 'mainstream' that are fundamentally economically- or industrially-based, highlights the contradictory nature of the cultural processes, or overall cultural system, via which Smart operates, and through which it embedded itself within Hollywood industrial output (and became accessible to non-fringe audiences). If 'indie' connotes "small-scale, personal, artistic, and creative" (Newman, 2009, 16) and was once conceived of as existing in specific challenge to the mainstream, with its assumed binary opposition the large-scale production less concerned with artistic quality and more concerned with financial return, then certainly

as regards Smart cinema the term ‘indie’ has become a social signifier rather than a marker of industrial origin:

a term whose meanings – alternative, hip, edgy, uncompromising – far exceed the literal designation of media products that are made independent of major firms...It includes social groups that cluster around these forms and the practices of entrepreneurship that produce and disseminate them. (ibid.)

The logical extension of Newman’s framing of this condition – that the idea of ‘independence’ has effectively been evacuated of meaning at a consumption level – should not be made too literally, however, as I believe it breaks down when we look at the extent to which industrial-discursive considerations still focus on emphasising the creative, auteuristic, and transgressive credentials of films.

My conclusion is that for Smart film, the drive to construct appeals to multiple audiences means that emphasising the idea of creative independence in positioning films continues to be tremendously important for some niches, and so the tendency to minimise industrial underpinnings continues, but that as the industrial movement towards semi-autonomous studio units developed, this movement was *itself* positioned not as colonisation or market saturation, but as a ‘new’ creative and innovative production tendency. As an example, by 2004 the semi-autonomous studio production units had become so embedded within a set of public or discursive assumptions about quality and creativity that a regional US newspaper critic discussing them could confidently declare that “the individual...quality from this new breed of ‘It’ names is enough to make me check a coming title’s distribution and/or production credits as one would any respected actor or filmmaker” (Schurr, 2004, 20). These apparently multiply-contradictory strands were in fact strongly reinforcing each other, and facilitating Smart’s movement into the mainstream.

At the same time, we can separate the notion of Smart cinema from ideas of ‘independent’ or even ‘indiewood’ filmmaking by acknowledging that it is a mode of cinema which produces different textual and discursive appeals to multiple constituencies. Therefore, despite its tendency to mobilise strong concerns about authenticity and identity directly within its textual formations as much as in its industrial contexts and discourses, I believe it would be a mistake to automatically attempt to define a notional Smart audience as being precisely the same as the notional ‘indie audience’ assumed to be highly motivated in their consumption

choices *by* those self-same concerns. A great deal more research needs to be done into the ways in which real audience constituencies approach and experience Smart film, but certainly I conceive it likely that not all audiences for it are similarly invested, or necessarily invested at all, in the kinds of rhetorical game regarding ‘real’ independence often assumed to be the territory of the ‘indie fan’.

Smart cinema’s integrational movement towards the mainstream over the period was heightened by the fact that it also constituted a training ground for filmmakers who were then assimilated into the mainstream (a tendency which has characterised the industry since its earliest days). Our notional ‘Hollywood’ functions as a social and professional as well as industrial network, and one in which the reputational capital provided by work produced under the Smart heading would later be parlayed as what Staiger describes as “authorial calling cards” (Staiger, 2013, 25) into bigger-budget forays into the mainstream industry. This was made possible partly by the transactional structure of the industry, in which

production communities themselves are cultural expressions and entities involving all of the symbolic processes and collective practices that other cultures use: to gain and reinforce identity, to forge consensus and order, to perpetuate themselves and their interests, and to interpret the media *as* audience members. (Thornton Caldwell, 2008, 2)

Smart in this sense functions as a training ground in practical or technical terms, and also in the sense through which it constitutes not just a strand of product diversification aimed at market dominance, but part of the self-reinforcing collective mythology of Hollywood. Here, establishing reputational capital through creative legacy is a cultural ‘demand’, although one which is frequently subordinated to profit motives.

The accumulated perceptions of creativity, innovation, transgression and quality which attend Smart are therefore harnessed in service both of market colonisation *and* reputational capital, the first being served by a given film’s financial returns, and the second by the sense in which Smart cinema availed of different kinds of prestige. Linked through a historical narrative with earlier New Hollywood filmmakers now ‘canonised’ by the passage of time, Smart thereby comes to be seen as a generational inevitability, in ways which serve to symbolically present the textually disparate work of different filmmakers as linked through the overlaying of a presumed shared creative perspective, or even ‘cultural movement’. This has significant

consequences (which I discuss below) for both the *type* of creative project later made available to Smart filmmakers, industrially speaking, and the way in which that later work is framed.

While, economically, the studios' increasing involvement in indie-style filmmaking counts as part of a strategy of product differentiation, it is possible that another element was the manner in which the rise of the 'high concept' film³²⁶ in the 1980s, and the targeting of ever-younger (and less culturally-powerful, if more financially liquid) audiences gave rise to accusations of dumbing-down and the death of the *art* of cinema, whatever about separate debates relating to its profitability. Even leaving aside the great question that is 'what role does and should film play in modern culture?' cinema in the 1980s became – as have, at various points, rock and rap music, television and computer games – a sociological site of contention in the light of the rise of the American right. A change in focus towards more potentially adult-oriented films was not, I would argue, strictly a response to representation of the film industry as one of the central locations of the 'moral panics' of the period, but a consequence of a more internalised loss of confidence – within the system – in the idea of Hollywood as part of the culture industries, with the emphasis on *culture*.

One element I view as particularly important in this study is the extent to which viewing Smart cinema as a trans-generic mode has highlighted the (previously, I believe, underexplored) way in which investigating generic concerns is vital in gaining an understanding how Smart cinema functions within the industry. I believe a consideration of genre here works to explain how Smart cinema gradually moved towards the mainstream, in that for each of the films involved, embedding more challenging art-house or cult tendencies in 'reassuring' or classical generic contexts has worked to make them more accessible to the mainstream. Through my exploration of the idea of 'double coding', I have explained how each film expresses its thematic and tonal considerations, and its textual strategies (which run the gamut from classical narrative structures to those which are designed to achieve a much more art-house effect) in a different way, but each does so by locating these in a framework of variable generic familiarity or accessibility. Interpreting these films also tends to require a strong element of intellectual or cultural viewer investment, which constitutes a gatekeeping mechanism in itself; viewers who are not motivated to invest accordingly may, perhaps, experience a degree of alienation from the texts.

Some of the films I have examined produce experimental narrative, temporal or visual effects, or a combination of them (*Pulp Fiction*, *Pi*, *Dark City*, *Malkovich*, *Fight Club*, *The Matrix*, *Adaptation*, *Memento*, *Magnolia*, *Primer*, *Huckabees*, *Eternal Sunshine*, *Brick*). These intersect with those which deploy non-mainstream or highly contingent identificatory contexts for their characters – sometimes through the unreliability of a narrator, through psychosis, or external forces which threaten psychosis (*Donnie Darko*, *Memento*, *Pi*, *Dark City*, *The Matrix*, *Fight Club*); at other times via the adoption of multiple – sometimes contradictory, and often ironised – tonal perspectives towards them (the work of Wes Anderson, *Election*, *Ghost World*); or through authorial – again, often signalled as ironic – distancing from moral position-taking, (*Happiness*, *Safe*, *Dollhouse*). In these cases the films can *also* be seen to produce appeals to mainstream audiences by virtue of their generic underpinnings.

In contrast, the films where classical generic concerns dominate over narrative or visual play – in effect, the films positioned more squarely as mainstream works (particularly here *American Beauty*, *Sideways*, *Boogie Nights*, and *Lost in Translation*) – produce a sense of Smartness predominantly through their sociological or ideological preoccupations rather than stylistic ones, in that theme rather than form dominates. The extent to which common themes present themselves indeed varies; however a preoccupation emerges with questions of personal identity, particularly identity lost or in crisis (*Pi*, *Dark City*, *Malkovich*, *Fight Club*, *The Matrix*, *Adaptation*, *Memento*, *Magnolia*, *Donnie Darko* *Eternal Sunshine*), and the negotiation of definitions of authenticity through personalised philosophy or creativity (*Huckabees*, *Adaptation*, the work of Wes Anderson). For many of the films (*American Beauty*, *Sideways*, *Magnolia*, *Happiness*, *Election*, *Safe*, *Huckabees*, the work of Wes Anderson, *Primer*, *Lost in Translation*), this preoccupation with identity is strongly linked with a focus on white middle-class experience, something which places them within a context of high availability to bourgeois prestige mechanisms, something I conceive of as having a distinct effect on the way in which Smart moved towards occupying a more mainstream position.

Many of these films use play with generic and diegetic conventions in order to deliberately complicate classical conceptions of genre, disrupt the sense of classical narrative equilibrium, and work against classical expectations of narrative resolution. This can work to

‘defamiliarise’ a film’s structure, however the location of these textual strategies within a more accessible generic framework grounds most of the films in more mainstream contexts than certain of the textual strategies might suggest. Again, the wide range of positions taken by individual films indicates that we are dealing not with a fixed set of formal, thematic and tonal characteristics, but with a set of (industrial and creative) position-taking decisions which exist along a continuum, from the more marginal art-house-inflected pieces to the much more mainstream-oriented works.

Individually, therefore, each film takes a singular place along the continuum from ‘alternative’ to ‘mainstream’, and mobilises quality- or prestige-based audience expectations via textual strategies (see Chapter Five) as well as paratextual or extra-textual references, most frequently to art-house or independent cinema, or in a generational sense through musical soundtrack. Collectively my conclusion is that Smart films are characterised by the productive tension caused by this double coding across and between classical generic structures, art-house-leaning and independent-influenced textual strategies such as narrative and diegetic play, and a tonal register ranging from the observationally distanced to the dynamically ironic. In the sense in which Smart cinema can be regarded as an industrial intervention through the process of product differentiation, therefore double-coding forms part of an embedded position-taking process which occurs at the level of writing and production, whereby these films are constructed to appeal to multiple audiences on the basis of both mainstream and marginal tendencies, as part of an industrial drive to cultivate and develop new products and new audiences.

This process of colonisation was, however, not to continue, with the entertainment industry having to some extent retrenched following the global financial crash of 2008. The decade saw a progressive closure of the studio semi-autonomous units, a development that gained speed towards its end, when during the period 2008-2011 the industry “witnessed the closure (or sale) of more than half of the studio specialty film divisions” (King, Molloy and Tzioumakis, 2013, 4; see Tzioumakis, 2013, 28-30, King, 2013, 42-44 or Schatz, 2013, 137-138). This was not necessarily due to the crisis itself; as King (2013, 41-52) argues, it is hard to assess whether the “particular signs of ‘crisis’ are related to specific factors – such as a particular economic downturn – or the broader pressures often felt by those operating in the more marginal parts of the industry” (King, 2013, 42). Motivations for the closures

themselves are also subject to differing interpretations. Schatz argues that as the decade wore on “the risk-averse conglomerates found it increasingly difficult to rationalize their indie operations” (Schatz, 2013, 137), implying that proportional returns might be the key to this retrenchment.

On the other hand, Tzioumakis makes the point that the increasing convergence of operations (or what I might describe as the success of the industrial assimilatory process) is also a factor; citing MPAA figures indicating that by 2007 the average cost of producing/releasing through a specialty division had reached \$74.9 million, just \$30 million less than the same costs for the average studio film that year, he concludes that

it comes as no surprise that the parent companies of the specialty film divisions started questioning the seeming evolution of their subsidiaries into studio-like organisations....In this respect it made little sense for the major entertainment conglomerates to maintain these divisions, as their main studio distributors could now handle the distribution process (Tzioumakis, 2013, 37-38)

Regardless, few large autonomous units have been left standing. Notably, Sony Pictures Classics remains, the one unit which most strongly resisted the drive to move from distribution into production.³²⁷ James Schamus’s October 2013 exit from Focus Features and the relocation of the operation’s headquarters from New York to Los Angeles perhaps a symbolic ending to that particular era (see Stewart, 2013). His description of “the successful integration of the independent film movement into the structures of global media and finance” (Schamus, 2001, 254) may indeed, it appears, have reached its logical conclusion.

At the same time, it would be too simplistic to regard this as a simple narrative of economic failure and withdrawal; while King acknowledges that if there is a crisis, it is within the quasi-autonomous units, he points out that the relationships between those and their studio parents had never been “entirely stable or comfortable in some cases” (King, 2013, 44). Indeed, he goes so far as to assert that the narrativising of crisis tends itself to form *part of* the discursive framing of ‘independence’ in this part of the market, and as such the withdrawal of the studios from the sector has been represented as a highly favourable development in some quarters, in that it can be construed as a corporate withdrawal which presents ‘space’ from which (romanticised) ‘truly authentic’ work can emerge. When ‘indie’ is framed as an oppositional concept in which emotional investments are made, then “within the prevailing

discourse, the indie sector almost needs to be seen as existing in a permanent state of crisis; that this is, in a sense, part of its definition. To be truly indie, in this view, is not to be too stable and secure” (ibid., 45).

Of the independent studios, as Alisa Perren points out, “Lions Gate was the *only* major independent film company to survive the entire decade” (Perren, 2013, 108). This achievement she ascribes as much to its ‘mini-major’-style diversification into television and digital media – and, crucially from my perspective, its move *away* from the Smart model, by producing niche or genre work “in marked contrast to...the remaining studio-based indie divisions, which tended to trade on discourses of distinction as a means of product differentiation” (ibid., 117) – as to healthy capitalisation. Independent cinema itself arguably has the potential to become ‘ghettoised’ as a result of these developments: however, that is not to say that opportunities have simply been withdrawn as a result of the industrial retrenchment which has to a certain extent presented itself. While the availability of production capital through quasi-autonomous units and independent studios may have become more limited, several writers (King, 2013; Tzioumakis, 2013) have emphasised the potential of crowdsourcing, digital production and distribution media, the continuing importance of the festival circuit, and above all the “partial self-distribution model” (Tzioumakis, 2013, 38). Technological innovations aside, this would theoretically represent an overall independent production context much more akin to that from which Smart cinema emerged; that is, the production context of the late 1980s.

However, we are not simply speaking here of the ‘closing off’ of options, but also of the consequences of the Smart mode’s rise to prominence. The reduction of studio involvement is perhaps an indication that studio ambitions, which had decreased substantially by 2008, were always limited; to attracting and developing talent, and to infusing larger studio pictures with certain of the more widely accessible elements of Smart; the *impression* of quality, prestige, independence, and edginess created by the adoption of those textual strategies that had proven profitable in the grand laboratory of the Smart experiment of the 1990s. While production and distribution contexts may have changed, if anything the textual (and in some cases generic) amendments prioritised within Smart texts have not disappeared but have passed into the mainstream, both through the assimilation of its progenitors into the industry, and through the adoption of aspects of Smart’s ‘means of address’ to audiences. This is the

case both for studio films and for independent productions, and a few broad trends appear to be displayed over the ten-year period since the influence of Smart cinema began to spread.

The first is for what might seem, industrially, the greatest departure: for action films (including action-adventure, superhero or graphic novel adaptations, action thrillers and science fiction, whether produced inside or outside the studio system) to display more self-conscious temporal and narrative play, sometimes involving the unreliable, duplicitous or unpredictable narrator (often with a markedly problematised identity), and evincing a tendency towards a distinctly darker, more ‘philosophised’ or occasionally even politicised tone. These films include but are not limited to *Sin City* (2005), *V For Vendetta* (2006) *Children of Men* (2006), *Cloverfield* (2008), *Jumper* (2008), *Vantage Point* (2008), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Gamer* (2009), *Shutter Island* (2010) *Kick-Ass* (2010), *Inception* (2010), *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (2010), *Limitless* (2011), *Source Code* (2011), *Hanna* (2011), *In Time* (2011), and *Drive* (2011). Here we also see a leaning towards more ambiguous or open-ended resolution, even allowing for the industrial drive to sequelisation which tends to pervade the genre. Indeed, Christopher Nolan’s *Batman* trilogy forms a particularly interesting example within this context, as discussed in Chapter Four: not only did Nolan oversee a financially successful franchise, but I believe his reputation as a Smart filmmaker allowed a certain recuperation of credibility for the superhero genre which had to a certain extent been lost.

One of the most significant features of this set of solidly mainstream – aimed at mass and/or youth audiences – films is a tendency towards the visual spectacularisation of narrative complexity: that is, within industrial contexts which would historically have tended to eschew intricate narratives as limiting to mass-audience comprehension, complex and difficult narrative elements are being foregrounded as ‘evidence’ of stylistic innovation, and sold as markers of generic distinction. Most prominent, and most financially successful, in this group is *Inception*, where narrative play, and most specifically temporal play, is set within a convoluted action diegesis. One could also note films outside of an action context, where we see similarities: *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008), *500 Days of Summer* (2009), *The Time Traveller’s Wife* (2009); again, this is a tendency that appears across a variety of genres.

The second trend is for a mobilisation of ‘Smart’ elements of blank style and, in a narrative sense, distanced perspective (particularly related to moral ambiguity) moving towards the mainstream, across a variety of genres, and with varying degrees of success. The observational comedy style of crossover *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) seems a world away from *The Happening*’s (2008) emotionally-flattened sci-fi, or the intense domestic drama of *Blue Valentine* (2010), but they are linked by this distancing technique, which privileges tonal considerations over narrative dynamics. Others within this grouping (and again one should note their generic disparity, in addition to their origins outside as well as inside the studio system) include *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *No Country For Old Men* (2007), *There Will Be Blood* (2007), *Juno* (2007), *The Wrestler* (2008), *The Killer Inside Me* (2010), *Winter’s Bone* (2010), *Another Earth* (2011), *Take Shelter* (2011), and *Martha Marcy May Marlene* (2011).

Both of these trends are replicated to a certain extent in American television of the period, which has thus both normalised and domesticated some of the original ‘aesthetics of strangeness’ which Smart employed, absorbing them into the material fabric of daily media consumption. This can be seen in the innocuous quirkiness of series such as *Pushing Daisies* (2007-2009), *Scrubs* (2001-2010), *Joan of Arcadia* (2003-2005), and others. In a sense, however, the evolution of Smart has been a parallel process; *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990) was arguably as influential an ‘origin text’ for Smart cinema as any of David Lynch’s film work: the links between Smart cinema and television still remain underexplored, and I identify this as a further research opportunity of major significance.

There are a host of different perspectives that can be taken on the industrial nature of a set of films as textually – and commercially – wide-ranging as those I am engaged with here. To summarise, however, I believe the following points apply. In terms of production, while investigating Smart cinema as a whole in terms of its industrial origins has been a worthwhile and productive task, to attempt to classify individual Smart films by distinguishing between them as more or less ‘authentic’, at some qualitative level, by virtue of their respective origins in independent production company, quasi-autonomous subsidiary, or major studio, is futile. To do so fails to take into account the fact that even aside from production origins, engaging with the mainstream exhibition system – at the cinema or through home viewing – controlled by the major entertainment networks was the only real way, during the period in

question, to encounter Smart cinema.³²⁸ Indeed, to define a film in terms of its supposed ‘moral distance’ from the mainstream exhibition process is the kind of binary thinking that reinforces textual and structural divisions between the mainstream and the fringes, which is not necessarily helpful in understanding how the texts themselves operate.

A significant gap remains, when we discuss how these texts operate, in relation to the manner in which audiences approach and consume them. My tentative conclusion is that audiences call upon a variety of self-positioning strategies not simply related to the appeals each film generates, but additionally depending on their own perspective. While it is possible that audiences for Smart range from art-house fans and cultist novelty-seekers, to those who value discursively-sanctioned measurements of prestige, to the ‘hipsters’ often associated with this form, for whom distinction-maintenance through cultural consumption is a constitutive element of their identity, to almost ‘accidental’ encounters between texts and audiences for whom mainstream films constitute the bulk of their cinematic consumption, without significant further research it is simply too large a question with which to directly engage.

As mentioned previously, I also believe the nature of prestige mechanisms and how they are constituted – and how prestige is mobilised by audiences – also warrants further research. So too, does the role of studios as distributors rather than producers, in terms of their function as gatekeepers for particular styles and forms. In addition, I believe there is an argument for considering the possibility that Smart cinema has introduced variations to pre-existing ‘classical’ genres, producing formal and thematic amendments within several groups (in particular the teen film, neo-noir, and science fiction). In this respect I believe that a thorough exploration of how these amendments have functioned might be of some significance to genre theory itself. Finally, as throughout I emphasise that the notion of Smart cinema is at all points ringfenced by quasi-industrial discourse which privileges the exceptionalist mythology of auteurism (the discursive power of the myth of American independent cinema cannot, it seems, be disrupted by inconvenient industrial factors), and which is fed into by the studios, which utilise it to position their texts, I believe a great deal of research is needed into exploring how this process operates.

In summary, my conclusion is that the major studios, as a result of their agglomerated drive to vertical and horizontal expansion, and whether through their production, distribution or

exhibition arms singly or in a more unified manner, attempted through Smart cinema to colonise newly-significant audiences identified as lying somewhere between cult and art-house. One significant way in which they did so was by figuring in a process of ‘double-coding’ – at both production and positioning stages – which appealed on the basis of both mainstream and marginal tendencies, and whereby ‘classical’ generic framings were mystified and complicated. All of this was made possible by the introduction of new (at home and in-cinema) technologies and industrial practices which facilitated targeting small but specific – previously disparate and difficult to locate – market segments.³²⁹ Double coding, here, works to do several things. The first is to cultivate potentially mainstream-resistant audiences, by positioning the texts as distanced from the industrial circumstances which produced them. The second is to ground these in a fundamental framework of generic commonality which may more easily render them accessible to audiences not familiar with alternative film forms, and from which they can generate a sense of intellectual investment through experiencing them as novelty. The third is to accrue cultural capital for the studios who produce the films by emphasising traits perceived as non-mainstream; that is, to produce cultural capital, as distinct from financial reward, which clearly they also seek.

While certain textual similarities do emerge, the tendency of Smart to shy away from the extremes (textually and in audience terms) adopted by cult film tend towards framing Smart more as a parallel form: one which calls upon audiences to view themselves as consumers of a less-than-mainstream form, but which by remaining generically fundamentally accessible, does not call attention to textual or industrial characteristics which contradict this mode of viewing. Where individual texts contain thematic, stylistic or structural elements which can be positioned at, and interpreted along, a variety of loci on the continuum from mainstream to independent, the discourses of auteurism and prestige form a framing mechanism which obscures their sometimes contradictory industrial underpinnings. This allows the texts to be positioned according to territory, marketing channel, prevailing discursive trends and related industrial demands. All of this was made possible by the introduction of new (at home and in-cinema) technologies and industrial practices which facilitated targeting small but specific – previously disparate and difficult to locate – market segments.

Chapter One

¹ The term did not gain popular traction during the 1990s, and where it continues to be used in more popular contemporary contexts, such as press accounts, the term's looseness is apparent. At the same time, a nearly two decades on it still appears in ways which reflect or parallel the academic usage: as a marker of critical approbation for specific types of film, particularly those which engage in cross-generic play (Edwards, 2011; Solomons, 2011; Puig, 2012), hinge on crises of personal identity (Solomons, 2008), or are seen as controversial or transgressive in some way (O'Hagan, 2010); as a descriptive term which serves to position the work of specific filmmakers within a context of prestige (Malcolm, 2009; Puig, 2009; Kermode, 2012); and as an antithetical framing device, an idealised benchmark against which 'Hollywood' film is measured and, it is implied, found wanting (Dargis, 2012; Muir, 2012).

² Not all accounts neglect genre: King explores it in his 2009 analysis of the treatment of Steven Soderbergh's *Solaris* and *Traffic* (King, 2009, 141-189), following from his earlier statement that while "familiar genre location is sometimes abandoned, complicated or undermined in the independent sector, it also forms an important point of orientation in many cases." (King, 2005, 166)

³ As an example, see the enthusiastically millennial zeal which attends this *Entertainment Weekly* cover story, published just before 1999's end: "Someday, 1999 will be etched on a microchip as the first real year of 21st-century filmmaking. The year when all the old, boring rules about cinema started to crumble." (Gordinier, 1999)

⁴ Schatz's listing of the top-performing box office hits to the end of 2006 conveys something of this sense of inter-relationship of genre and industrial 'type', as well as the globalised nature of the industry: "[a]s of October 2006, 47 of the top 50 all-time worldwide box-office hits had been released after 1990 (all but *E.T.* and the first two *Star Wars* films), and 90 of the top 100. The majority of these were franchise films, with the *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Harry Potter* series accounting for 10 of the top 20 all-time global hits. Moreover, the vast majority of these top hits, including 33 of the top 35, earned far more overseas than in the US." (Schatz, 2008, 29)

⁵ Or at least that which can reliably be contested as such – one can discuss whether the Paramount decrees constitute the end of the *ancien regime*, or WWII, but I am locating the birth of the New Hollywood at the end of the 1960s and the coming of the 'Movie Brats'.

⁶ A few examples include James Schamus, David Linde, Ted Hope and Anne Carey, all Good Machine executives who went on to make significant contributions to the general independent and quasi-indie field. Others include: Stephanie Azpiazu and Anthony Bregman (formerly also of This is That) who co-founded Likely Story films, the producers of *Synecdoche New York*, Charlie Kaufman's 2008 directorial debut; Glen Basner (formerly also head of sales for The Weinstein Company and Focus Features) founder of FilmNation, working with filmmakers including Sofia Coppola and Steven Soderbergh; Ross Katz, who produced *Lost in Translation* (2003) and *Marie Antoinette* (2006) for Sofia Coppola; and Mary Jane Skalski, producer of *The Station Agent* (2003) and *The Visitor* (2007).

⁷ This rolling text, which has something of the character of a public service announcement noticeably foregrounds Miramax as a brand in itself.

⁸ As Susan Hayward defines art cinema, "narrative codes and conventions are disturbed, the narrative line is fragmented so that there is no seamless cause-and-effect storyline. Similarly, characters' behaviour appears contingent, hesitant rather than assured and 'in-the-know' or motivated towards certain ambitions, desires or goals. Although these films are character-rather than plot-led, there are no heroes – in fact this absence of heroes is an important feature of art cinema. Psychological realism takes the form of a character's subjective view of events; social realism is represented by the character in relation to those events. The point of view can take the form of an interior monologue, or even several internal monologues...Subjectivity is often made uncertain...and so too the safe construction of time and space. This cinema, in its rupture with classic narrative cinema, intentionally distances spectators to create a reflective space for them to assume their own critical space or subjectivity in relation to the screen or film." (Hayward, 2006, 28) While clearly Smart cinema shares certain elements with art cinema, it cannot be defined as art cinema due to its industrial underpinnings which remain focused on more mainstream objectives than would usually be the case.

Chapter Two

⁹ Stam also sees a danger in of rooting them too strongly in Hollywood traditions (for example, omitting Bollywood in considerations of 'the musical').

¹⁰ I also note Brown's contention in discussing the 'family film' that a disconnection exists "between scholarly and popular discourses on film genre, in which numerous generic forms widely recognised by producers, exhibitors, trade writers and fans remained wholly unrecognised by formalist genre theorists." (Brown, 2013, 22) a position that illustrates, perhaps, a gap between audiences' experience of genre and critics' theoretical framing of it.

¹¹ Sconce categorises the films (loosely) as follows: "arch emotional nihilism" [*Storytelling* (Todd Solondz, 2001), *Happiness* (Solondz, 1998) and *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (Solondz, 1995), *Your Friends and Neighbors* and *In the Company of Men* (Neil LaBute, 1997)]; "'blank' political satires" [*Election* (Alexander Payne, 1999) and *Citizen Ruth* (Payne, 1996)]; "postmodern screwball comedies" [Hal Hartley's *The Unbelievable Truth* (1990), *Trust* (1991) and *Henry Fool* (1998)]; "post-Pulp Fiction black comedies of violence" [*Very Bad Things* (Peter Berg, 1998), *Go* (Doug Liman, 1999) and *2 Days in the Valley* (John Herzfeld, 1996)]; "bittersweet" [Wes Anderson's *Bottle Rocket* (1994), *Rushmore* (1998) and *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001)], "operatic odes to the San Fernando valley" [PT Anderson's *Magnolia* (1998) and *Boogie Nights* (1997)]; "'cold' melodramas" [*The Ice Storm* (Ang Lee, 1997), *The Sweet Hereafter* (Atom Egoyan, Canada, 1997) and *Safe* (Todd Haynes, 1995)]; "'matter-of-fact' surrealism [*Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze, 1999) and *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001).]

¹² Sconce does not engage in specific considerations of postmodernism, but explorations of postmodern theory may indeed have value in unpacking Smart cinema, whether looking at the circumstances in which a pop culture-immersed audience interprets these 'game-playing' texts, deconstructing the significance of specific recurring themes, or examining the visually and structurally rich worlds these films create. Rather than describing postmodern texts as inclined to be self-referential, to "have a methodological self-consciousness...[a] tendency to scrutinize its own instruments." (Stam, 2000, 151), Sconce relates these tendencies to the influence of art film, particularly in regards to narrative causality and the increasing use of multiple protagonists and episodic structure, noting that "unrealistic coincidences have morphed into the new realism of synchronicity, an overarching belief in the fundamentally random and yet strangely meaningful structure of reality (even if that 'meaning' is total absurdity)." (Sconce, 2002, 363)

¹³ For Sconce, Smart's shift in emphasis from a single protagonist to a loosely-connected ensemble cast, with exposition withheld to a level at which we see only a limited picture of each, triggers the presence of synchronicity as a causal agent: he suggests that the contemporary smart cinema protagonist has become "even more listless than his or her European forebears. More acted upon than acting, these contemporary protagonists are often prisoners of emotional abuse, sterile environments, or just fate itself" (363-364). It is possible that the strong presence of ideas of synchronicity and fate in Smart film relates to a (perhaps postmodern?) morphing of religious/spiritual discourse, with concerns related to an ill-defined 'fate' replacing traditional fears structured around heaven and hell, and synchronicity replacing the 'God' figure of classical narrative (perhaps with the exception of *Fight Club*, a film with more explicitly theological references). The search for a clearly-formed personal identity in an apparently ideologically-unanchored world dominated by what Sconce describes as "the logic of the random" (ibid., 364) here forms the material for a spiritual quest.

¹⁴ Casually stereotyped, for Sconce, as a postmodern, relativist generation of 'slackers', habituated to ironic position-taking rather than possessed of their own ideals, focused on the camp appropriation of existing pop icons in place of creating an innovative culture of their own, and politically inclined to mocking cynicism towards authority rather than direct action.

¹⁵ Sconce's quote neatly summarises the political 'problem' such cinema poses: "From the perspective of traditional leftist politics, smart cinema seems to advocate irresponsible resignation to the horrors of life under advanced capitalism and an attendant disregard for the traditional villains of racism, sexism and class division. For the Right, these films seem to advance an irresponsible world view where truth and morality are no longer of concern." Sconce, 2002, 368). Not simply apolitical, the Smart generation supposedly conducts its political protests in the terrain of consumer behaviour rather than via traditional party politics. In this sense, they appear to function as 'experts in semiotic distinction', who feel more free to exercise their identity via the free market

than they do as constrained ‘citizens’. This is why Sconce can make the assertion that “irony... is not a passive retreat from politics but a semiotic intervention within politics.Irony [is not] a disengagement from belief, politics and commitment, rather, it is a strategic disengagement from a certain terrain of belief, politics and commitment.” (ibid., 369)

¹⁶ For Sconce these films are a kind of social litmus paper, subtly revealing important preoccupations of American culture of the period; as he argues, “[e]ngaging this smart sensibility in recent American cinema thus requires attention to both the sociocultural formation informing the circulation of these films (a ‘smart’ set) and a shared set of stylistic and thematic practices (a ‘smart’ aesthetic)” (ibid., 352).

¹⁷ Tzioumakis (2011b, 327) notes that “some of the terminology she uses is open to criticism (calling, for instance, New Line Cinema both a ‘mini-major’ and a ‘major independent’ [Holmlund 2005b, 6])”; given the fluidity of debate on the topic at this point, a certain degree of ambiguity or confusion is understandable.

¹⁸ For example, he erroneously states that independent cinema has only been discussed tangentially “as an aside or a footnote to a bigger picture” (Berra, 2008, 11) and his assertion that “the term has only gained cultural significance in the 1990s” (ibid.) is quite tendentious, although his qualification that “now the term carries with it a cultural, as well as economic significance.” (ibid. 11-12) may have some merit, in terms of the form’s reach into popular culture. Similarly, he conducts some useful audience research including case studies of independent filmgoers, but does not provide detailed information on sample size or other empirical data.

¹⁹ For Berra, certain filmmakers (John Sayles, Abel Ferrara, Jim Jarmusch, Spike Lee) he sees as adhering to the independent “rhetoric” (ibid., 94), while others (Soderbergh, Bryan Singer, Doug Liman, David O. Russell) he conceives of as “independent graduates” (ibid., 109) of the “finishing school” (ibid.) of independent film.

²⁰ Berra produces a theoretical definition of the ‘cinophile audience’ but problematically this is not backed up with detailed references, although he states that he conducted primary research at art-house cinemas over a period of eighteen months. He distinguishes a set of cinophile groups as follows: students and graduates; single young professionals; professionals without children and with disposable income; “serious-minded filmgoers” (ibid., 181) who consciously seek socially or intellectually provocative material; filmgoers with an appetite for new films and filmmakers; and filmgoers who routinely see multiple films each month (ibid.). He characterises younger cinophiles as demanding audiences searching for novelty, “with a need to be surprised, challenged, stimulated, and even shocked, as well as entertained.” (ibid., 183) and older ones as “jaded with the conventions of the Hollywood mainstream... The cinophile audience is not obsessed with the avant-garde, but it is seeking the ‘independent spirit’” (ibid.) Additionally he sketches a sort of ‘ideal’ viewer, possessing or seeking “(1) Cultural hopefulness. (2) Narrative enthusiasm. (3) Individual assertiveness. (4) Urban life expectation.” (ibid., 195), however these assertions are not rooted in verifiable empirical detail.

²¹ As he argues, ‘indie’ work might be regarded as being situated “somewhere between the poles of Indiewood and the more radical end of the art-cinema spectrum.” (King, 2009, 273); he acknowledges Indiewood has drawn criticism for theoretically drawing financing and audiences away from more strictly independent production, he argues that “[i]t is questionable how far the development of Indiewood has reduced the number of genuinely radical or disturbing independent productions that achieve distribution, given how limited their numbers have always been in any kind of significant commercial release.” (ibid.)

²² King notes the importance of conceptions of auteurism, not just in relation to Kaufman, whose increased public profile over the period marked “the consolidation of a reputation for the creation of a particular kind of fictional universe offering distinctive pleasures.” (ibid., 84) but also Soderbergh. Here King argues that investment in the idea of the director as auteur is mobilized across the mainstream/Indiewood/indie spectrum in different ways, and that auteurism forms part of “the frame through which Indiewood features of this variety are mediated to the potential viewers (ibid., 179). However, while he acknowledges that the figure of the auteur plays an important role in many Indiewood examples, both in developing and selling projects, it does not always arise, and often presents “in combination with other major points of orientation.” (ibid., 248)

²³ At the other end of that scale, a film like *Shakespeare in Love* fits into particular ‘quality’ parameters, including a mix of appeals including broad comedy and light satire, yet contains a certain requirement for ‘cultural competence’ through which to interpret it, offering viewers “numerous ways to mark their cultural competence, beyond what is signified by their initial choice of such a film against others” (ibid., 98).

²⁴ Interestingly, King argues that the acclaim given to *American Beauty* by audiences and critics alike may have related to a sense in which they “shared something of the central value-structure embodied in the film; and that it could act as a vehicle for their own assertions of opposition to its vision of shallow suburban materialism and their openness to the more positive values the film propounds.” (ibid., 208), something he argues links to the commodification of countercultural values. This leaves *American Beauty* in a somewhat compromised ideological position, where “[f]ilms of this variety are designed, if only implicitly, to flatter more than to challenge the existing assumptions of their target (and, potentially, wider) audiences, a process that functions through a combination of thematic emphasis and aesthetic qualities” (ibid., 209).

²⁵ This degree of recognition is linked in a complex way with Kaufman’s tendency to distance himself from the industry, whereby his “disavowal...of the notion of ‘product’ to be packaged and sold is itself, however genuinely meant, functional to the selling of particular varieties of product” (ibid. 57) and therefore demonstrates “the kind of tension and explicit negotiation that exists between the ‘creative’ and ‘commercial’ processes involved in production in the Indiewood sector.” (ibid., 73)

²⁶ King’s speculation that this constitutes a defensive reaction against the potential pigeon-holing of critics, in light of the early-career significance of Soderbergh’s *sex, lies and videotape*, is of particular interest: this strategy would provide him “licence to range more freely across the indie/Hollywood divide, even if certain stylistic traits can be identified in works located at very different points in the cinematic spectrum.” (ibid., 178)

²⁷ In his case study of thirty-four films released in the first four years (2002-2005) of Focus Features’ somewhat ‘middle-market’ operation, King asserts that part of the dynamic was “the articulation of what sets out to be a distinctive brand image for the division” (ibid., 235). Taking from key staff statements and promotional materials, he notes that “an attempt is made to identify a position somewhere between Hollywood and the farther reaches of independence: something ‘specific’ that involves ‘original, compelling cinema’ (read: not generally the same as Hollywood), but that can also reach ‘mainstream’ or ‘pretty substantial’ audiences (in other words, not *too* far away).” (ibid., 241) Therefore, Focus articulates its desire to be framed as producing work of distinctive and artistic quality, in which auteurs are accorded “privileged space” (ibid., 255). At the same time, he notes that indie subsidiaries are
very clearly part of a broader capitalist media and wider commercial enterprise.....[designed] to maximize the extent to which a larger film industry unit is able to exploit a particular range of relatively or potentially substantial niche markets...those which carry the potential to break through to relatively larger audiences (ibid., 263).

²⁸ Perren’s analysis of the marketing for the film (Perren, 2012, 33-36) illustrates how it targeted traditional art house audiences (exploiting the film’s status as a festival award winner), *and* wider Gen X/boomer audiences, through positive press quotes from high-profile publications, reinforcing both quality and genre; therefore as well as emphasising the film’s sexual content, it “was differentiated as being more serious than its summer blockbuster counterparts even as it was drawn closer to studio product by its association with comedy.” (ibid., 34).

²⁹ For Perren, the success of *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992) – a film she regards as under-explored purely because it complicates the narrative of Miramax and *American* cinema – made Miramax an obvious target for Disney, “providing the conglomerate with heightened prestige and adult-oriented material at a relatively low cost. For the most part, Miramax product complemented, rather than competed with, the films generated by Disney’s other divisions.” (ibid., 71). Additionally, she regards it as important “not only for the impact the deal had on its primary participants, but also because of the extent to which it motivated a high degree of introspection on the part of the industry and its observers.” (ibid., 73)

³⁰ In this sense, for her the 1999 Academy Awards (dominated by Miramax films *Shakespeare in Love* and *Life is Beautiful*) functioned as a simultaneous high and low point for the company. As she puts it, Miramax had become dominant as a niche operator in an industry increasingly populated by well-capitalized indie divisions, where it had “cultivated a clear brand identity that remained distinct from its parent company. It had altered the way that low-budget films were acquired, produced, distributed and marketed.” (ibid., 178); however, its awards also “had the unintended effect of drawing initial scrutiny to the company and its marketing practices...it was being depicted with growing frequency as a belligerent brute that used money, relationships, and fear tactics to dominate the marketplace.” (ibid.)

³¹ She cites a November 1996 *Variety* study, commissioned by the studios, which confirmed that “the least and most expensive films to make were the ones that typically earned the most.” (ibid., 157) meaning that mid-range films “were increasingly viewed as ‘pariahs’.”(ibid.)

³² This strategic adoption of an ‘outsider’ position is of course not confined to film or indeed cultural production, as can be seen, for example in the explicit positioning of Apple Computers as producing computers for ‘free-thinking’ individualists during the 1980s, something Heath and Potter describe as an almost perfect instance of “the rebel sell” (Heath and Potter, 2004, 230).

³³ As she states convincingly, given the depth of her research, “What is particularly notable is the extent to which the increasing incorporation of specialty distributors under studio supervision heightened – rather than diminished – the attention given to the rise of independents. In fact, not *until* the major studios entered into the low-budget film business did many articles about the rise of independents appear in the mainstream press.” (ibid., 75)

³⁴ Perren argues that this strongly masculinist and genre-based ‘cinema of cool’ marginalised filmmakers like Jane Campion, Nicole Holofcener, and Allison Anders, and limited their access to funding and related publicity, contributing to “the increased marginalization of films that proved more challenging for specialty divisions to market.” (ibid., 80)

³⁵ As she notes, Miramax didn’t *necessarily* handle controversial material, and indeed its international imports were becoming increasingly safe and reassuring, but it had “built up its profile by exploiting controversial content and by creating artificial controversies through its marketing practices.....The number of times the company engaged in battles over content was far eclipsed by the number of times that films were *sold* as being controversial.” (ibid., 124-125)

³⁶ Similarly, and in a way that relates to some of my own contentions about the place of genre within Smart film, she argues that Miramax’s move into genre pictures with Dimension films, and the press’s reaction to them, “exposed a great deal about cultural hierarchies, critical distinctions, and assumptions operating about the media sphere during this time.” (ibid., 115). To maintain distinctive brand identities for both labels, Harvey Weinstein repeatedly evoked a ‘Robin Hood myth, in which Dimension’s ‘disreputable’ genre profits were seen as funding Miramax’s more ‘alternative’ activities; however in reality, “Miramax had never been heavily invested in producing and distributing ‘art cinema’...Miramax was rewriting its own history, erasing the presence of Disney money and downplaying the substantial sums generated by [its hits].” (ibid., 136) Crucially, Perren relates this to a wider cultural and media uncertainty about genre, suggesting that the divergent nature of discourses around Miramax and Dimension indicate that “critics and scholars have remained unsure of how to categorize genre films, and thus (if discussing them at all) have placed them in a separate box – one that is almost always perceived to contain inferior product to that found in the Miramax/specialty film box.” (ibid., 142)

³⁷ She particularly asserts this in relation to underperforming studio films like *Go*, *Election*, and *Rushmore*, stating that they would have been better-served by more specialist subsidiary positioning. (ibid., 220)

³⁸ Indeed she argues that the extent to which “‘Independent’ became a blanket term for many writers.” (ibid., 153) in a discursive sense, effectively obscured these shifts.

³⁹ For Perren a certain degree of fluidity did indeed exist, and it was “largely due to the existence of this grey area that the use of the term ‘independence’ continued to be so imprecise and contradictory at this time.” (ibid., 160) This she also relates to the increasing fragmentation of international film financing, in which the increasing divergence of sources of funding meant that “the web of institutional allegiances of any given movie became even more complex.” (ibid.)

⁴⁰ “In total, well over fifty such films were released from May to August.” (ibid., 219)

⁴¹ She argues that the Sundance festival also became a key factor in solidifying the quasi-independent model; those “lacking name talent, edgy content, an identifiable marketing angle, or explicit links to Hollywood narrative and generic conventions experienced the same fate that met most independently distributed features

throughout history: marginalization.” (ibid., 150) as studios trying to create brand identities in a crowded market increasingly pursued a single demographic, that of the urban professional.

⁴² In what she describes as a post-2008 decline, she cites global economic crisis, the decline in DVD sell-through and failure to monetise online replacements, a greater focus in cable TV on original production, and the availability of more non-film media consumption opportunities, but fundamentally argues that “the business model for specialty divisions grew increasingly untenable. Too many companies spent too much money acquiring and producing too many films for which there was not a large enough market.” (ibid. 231)

Chapter Three

⁴³ “Where at one stage conglomeration resulted in the studios becoming part of corporations with wide and diverse portfolios of operations, from the 1980s onwards the Hollywood studios came under the ownership of parent companies more squarely focused on media and communications.” (McDonald and Wasko, 2008, 4)

⁴⁴ This can be seen, for example, in the article “Box office heading toward record despite economy” (Richwine, 2011) wherein the contradictory nature of Hollywood’s 2011 position is visible: a revealing segment reads [s]ummer ticket sales in the domestic (U.S. and Canadian) market through last weekend stood at an estimated \$3.8 billion. Attendance was up 2.8 percent, though that was compared with last year’s 13-year low, according to figures from tracking firm Hollywood.com. Premium charges for 3D films and slightly higher average ticket prices helped raise revenue. ‘If we keep at this pace, we should wind up with \$4.5 billion,’ the highest summer total ever, said Paul Dergarabedian, box office analyst with Hollywood.com.”

⁴⁵ See for example industry commentary from March 2013 describing the “slumping 2013 box office...2013 is going to take a beating in the year-over-year comparison and it is already \$100 million behind last year’s pace.” (Strowbridge, 2013)

⁴⁶ In the 1930s, “[n]o one studio had the capacity to produce a year’s supply of pictures.....Because these theatres required as many as three hundred pictures a year, the majors needed supplemental products, particularly inexpensive class-B pictures to fill the bottom half of the double bill.” (Balio, 1995, 7-8) – a situation analogous to the manner in which the contemporary studio system seeks out additional resources from beyond its own direct reaches to add variety to its schedules.

⁴⁷ Drake (2008, 67) is particularly interesting on how film marketing changed as the market became more youthful: faced with competing leisure activities including television, studios had to market more intensively (including on television), thus raising costs even as more ‘reach’ was gained. This locates the upswing in production and marketing costs earlier than some other writers place it.

⁴⁸ As regards some of the more influential or pertinent films of the period, the studios’ respective slates unfolded as follows – Paramount: *Rosemary’s Baby*, *Love Story*, *The Godfather*; Columbia: *Easy Rider*, *Five Easy Pieces*, *The Last Picture Show*; Warner Brothers: *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Bullitt*, *The Wild Bunch*, *Woodstock*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *Dirty Harry*, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, *Klute*, *Deliverance*, *Mean Streets*, *Badlands*, *The Exorcist* (Schatz, 2008, 18).

⁴⁹ He identifies among these *Dances With Wolves*, *Schindler’s List*, *Braveheart*, *The English Patient*, *Titanic*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Thin Red Line*, and *Gladiator* – which I would regard as a somewhat conservative list – it is important to remember that Hall’s focus is more on the ‘blockbuster’ than on the ‘prestige’ aspect of the industry.

⁵⁰ He notes that for many of the new conglomerates (e.g. AOL Time Warner, Viacom, NewsCorp, Disney) by the end of 1999 “filmed entertainment became one of many profit centres and today contributes around a third of the total proceeds of its respective parent companies.” (Balio, 2002, 165). One might also point to MCA head Lew Wasserman’s disastrous sale of Universal to Japanese electronics manufacturer Matsushita, who subsequently themselves sold an 80% stake to Edgar Bronfman Jr., head of distilling giant Seagram (his family business); on Seagram being sold to French water utility and media company Vivendi, Vivendi Universal was created – it was then sold then to General Electric, also owner of NBC. The current incarnation, NBC Universal,

is part-owned by General Electric and part-owned by telecoms giant Comcast, and can only be described as a 'super-conglomerate'. It owns Focus Features, formed from the 2002 merger of USA Films (itself a 1999 union of October Films, Rogue, and Gramercy Pictures), Universal Focus, and Good Machine; the tiny comparative scale of a division like Focus Features must be taken into account.

⁵¹ "The majors released close to thirty features a year at the start of the 1990s and about half that on average at the end. (Subsidiaries such as Miramax and New Line released a comparable number of low-budget films each year.) (Balio, 1998, 165)

⁵² Douglas Gomery argues convincingly that insufficient attention is paid to the analysis of ownership, control, and operation of studios, compared to that which is lavished on film directors; in an interesting example from this period, he asserts that what some call the "collapse" of the Hollywood studio system, he regards as its reinvention. (Gomery, 2005)

⁵³ Or as Eileen Meehan's work in relation to television, relevant nonetheless, puts it, the Reagan administration's work was simply the start of a process (continuing to today) whereby neoconservative deregulation has facilitated a radical reorganization of media industries and operations... Undergirding that reorganization has been the FCC's dismantling of regulations designed to keep television a separate industry and the Department of Justice's gutting of antitrust legislation, including the Paramount decree... Deregulation has also fostered vertical and horizontal integration within each industrially based operation such that media conglomerates may own multiple studios or networks. (Meehan, 2008, 108)

⁵⁴ Drake cites a Merrill Lynch report indicating that "Box-office takings currently account for less than a quarter of total revenues and have become increasingly 'front-loaded', earning the majority of receipts in the opening two weeks of exhibition... by the early 2000s as much as 50 percent of theatrical box office was generated in the first week of release, compared to only around 20 percent in 1990" (Drake, 2008, 64).

⁵⁵ "Two factors boosted the foreign box office: better cinemas and more effective marketing. Outside the US, nearly every market was under-screened. Western Europe, for example, had about one-third the number of screens per capita as the United States, despite having the same population." (Balio, 1998, 60)

⁵⁶ As Drake points out, this is a process that has been in train since the changes wrought during the 1970s: "These factors also brought changes in film distribution, with a national saturation release replacing the road-shows that once toured films across the US slowly building audiences. 'Platform releasing', running a film in a few key cities before gradually widening the release to provincial areas, is still used for films which primarily recruit audiences through word of mouth, or art-house films with a limited P&A spend" (Drake, 2008, 67).

⁵⁷ Miramax has been discussed elsewhere, but New Line has often not been afforded the same level of attention, perhaps due to its lack of attractively controversial Weinsteins: "In 1990 New Line branched out from its traditional slate of inexpensive niche films and created a division called Fine Line Features to produce and distribute art films and offbeat fare. Within two years, Fine Line rose to the top independent ranks by backing such American ventures as Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), James Foley's *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1992) and (66) Robert Altman's *The Player* (1992) and by releasing such English-language imports as Derek Jarman's *Edward II* (1991) and Mike Leigh's *Naked* (1993). Acquiring New Line Cinema and Castle Rock Entertainment, Turner Broadcasting manoeuvred itself into the front ranks of Hollywood and positioned itself for global expansion." (ibid., 66-67)

⁵⁸ As Holt sees it, "in 1987 there were accusations that independent producers stood less than a 50 percent chance of having their films distributed to neighbourhood theatres, and 11 of Hollywood's largest distributors were taking in 96 percent of the domestic box-office revenues. This produced what *Variety* called 'a stranglehold on the market' when compared to the 20-25 percent market share that the independents had held just 15 years earlier." (Holt, 2001, 28)

⁵⁹ Holt speculates that "[t]he growing reliance on blockbuster filmmaking initially made the business significantly more unstable... The well-documented *Heaven's Gate* fiasco that nearly destroyed United Artists in 1981 was an ominous example of the enormous risks associated with this mode of production and the increasing volatility of Hollywood's infrastructure during this period." (Holt, 2001, 23)

⁶⁰ King (2005) points to the American stock market crash of 1987, which I believe may have some relevance, as it “brought an abrupt end to the easy availability of capital, making money harder to raise and usually on stricter terms.” (King, 2005, 24)

⁶¹ “Considering all films receiving MPAA ratings, independent films increased from 193 in 1986 to 277 in 1987 and to 393 in 1988. The figures for 1989 through 1991 also remained close to the 400 mark.” (Wyatt, 1998, 74)

⁶² Wyatt cites Vestron, which doubled production after *Dirty Dancing* grossed \$63m domestically in 1987, Cinecom, which acted similarly after *A Room With A View* (1986), and Skouras, after *My Life As a Dog* (1987).

⁶³ Unless stated otherwise, figures throughout are triangulated from a number of sources, including www.the-numbers.com, www.boxofficemojo.com, and trade publications such as *Variety* and *Screen Daily*.

⁶⁴ Wyatt argues that New Line “has continually favoured gradual expansion and diversification only following breakthrough successes [whereas] Miramax’s presence is based much more on marketing and targeting audiences beyond a narrow art house niche.” (Wyatt, 1998, 76) Perren (2012) provides a thorough contextualisation of Miramax’s activities; Betz’s 2003 account of the marketing in America of European art cinema in the 1950s and 1960s, interestingly, is strongly reminiscent of the tactics of the Weinsteins.

⁶⁵ See Wyatt, 1999, for a more thorough consideration.

⁶⁶ In particular his complaint is that “America’s youth transferred its allegiance to the ‘personal’ cinema of the seventies’ auteurs without realizing how corporatist and impersonal it had become.” (Cook, 1999, 35)

⁶⁷ Although Quentin Tarantino, with his (heavily-embroidered) slacker history effectively counts as the poster-child for this cultural tendency, it can also be seen early on in the promotion of the likes of Robert Rodriguez. While not a Smart film, his *El Mariachi* (1992) is relevant in illustrating the positioning strategies employed by the studios; promoted internationally as an ‘American Dream’ tale of the infiltration of the corporatized studio system by a \$7,000 wildcard, Columbia Pictures’ investment in the film was perhaps hundreds of times greater. Rodriguez’ deal to complete and cover distribution and exhibition “amounted to hundreds of thousands of dollars, taking it closer to the conventional definition of a ‘microbudget’ film, meaning anything under \$2 million.” (Grainge, Jancovich and Monteith, 2007, 509) Of course, studios have often constructed or emphasised ‘origin myths’ in the promotion and positioning of their work; a clue to the extent to which the treatment of *El Mariachi* reveals a wider cultural preoccupation at the time can be seen, for example, in Chuck Kleinhans’ description of the prominence given in bookshops to Rodriguez’s book “Rebel Without a Crew: How a Twenty-three-year-old Filmmaker with \$7,000 Became a Hollywood Player” (Rodriguez, 1996) (Kleinhans, 1999, 308).

⁶⁸ For example, David Cronenberg had long been associated with the genre which tends to most distinctly evade considerations of prestige, that is, horror; however, 1999’s *eXistenZ* and *Spider* (2002) must be considered potential candidates for ‘Smartness.’ Both have to be considered in light of Cronenberg’s unexpected anointment as establishment figure via *A History of Violence* (2005). One could argue that the unexpected and temporary elevation of character actor Viggo Mortensen to screen idol status via the *Lord Of The Rings* trilogy (Peter Jackson, 2001-2003) may also have been a factor in Cronenberg’s revival. Similarly, the Coen brothers, whose idiosyncratically ironic folk storytelling had been critically well regarded, but reaped at best modest rewards at the box office, found themselves ideally positioned in 1997 with *Fargo* to capitalise on the apparently increasing palatability of ‘eccentric’ work to both mainstream audiences and the academy, and positioned the filmmakers squarely within the Hollywood mainstream in a manner that must have seemed quite unlikely even a few years previously. The mischievous *The Big Lebowski* (1998) became a cult favourite, and while several of the Coens’ subsequent films can be regarded as failed experiments (in particular a 2004 remake of Alec Guinness classic *The Ladykillers*), the critical and commercial acclaim they received for the comparatively bleak and sombre *No Country For Old Men* (2007) – a bona fide blockbuster taking over \$170 million worldwide – clearly solidifies their place as insiders, not filmmakers of the margins.

⁶⁹ Jin’s breakdown of the risk-based nature of film production is worth noting: “production involves high levels of investment in a heterogeneous, highly perishable product, for which demand is uncertain, while exhibition involves the projection of that product to relatively small numbers of people in geographically scattered locales

paying individually small sums that bear no necessary relationship to either the cost or the quality of the film.” (Jin, 2012, 416)

⁷⁰ Economies of scope include the production of synergy effects across the conglomerate, accumulated organisational knowledge and experience (e.g. at identifying suitable target markets and budget specification, or ‘internal’ tie-in partners) of the kind actual independents might not be able to access.

⁷¹ See as a related example, Caves’ chapter on the ‘apprenticeship’ of visual artists, where he cites the difficulties of breaking into the marketplace when galleries (the gatekeepers of this particular industry) heavily on the work of already-established artists, resulting in disproportional difficulties in entry to market for newer artists (Caves, 2000, 21-36).

⁷² It is worth noting that while for an audience familiar with Smart cinema, the temporal games of a piece like *Inception* (2010) will not hold innovatory thrills, it could easily be experienced as a profoundly shocking departure for a notional audience accustomed *only* to action films founded on a classically-driven three act structure with the only frills coming in the form of spectacular set pieces. Similarly with *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) which privileges its ‘straight’ romantic comedy leanings and minimises its potential for a Smart reading, to the extent that it must be regarded as a “Smart-influenced rom-com” as opposed to a “smart film which also happens to function as a rom-com” which would be the case with *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. This illustrates, I think, the way in which the presence of Smart features work to rupture traditional notions of genre which rely exclusively on iconography and thematics rather than tone and sensibility.

⁷³ With the necessary caveat that the funding for this primarily came from (aside from alliances with other production companies, e.g. Working Title in the UK), profits from the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series and one of the most successful independents of all time: the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* series, whose franchising success gave New Line a great deal of financial independence. This allowed them to divide themselves; *The Player*, *Shine*, *Hoop Dreams* and *Short Cuts* on one side, with *The Mask* and *Dumb and Dumber* on the other, until the behemoth that was *The Lord of The Rings* emerged. But as Wyatt points out, “By separating product between the two arms, [Bob] Shaye has been able to create a market identity for each company and to allocate advertising/distribution expenditures consistent with each film’s potential pay-off.” (Wyatt, 1998, 78)

⁷⁴ King identifies a few salient examples: “indie/specialty-oriented distributors and/or producers owned by the major studio companies: either studio-created subsidiaries (such as Sony Pictures Classics, Fox Searchlight and Paramount Classics) or formerly independent operations taken over by the studios (Miramax under the ownership of Disney from 1993, or Good Machine, taken over by Universal Pictures in 2002 as part of the basis of its subsidiary, Focus Features).” (King, 2009, 4).

⁷⁵ The likes of Waxman and Biskind have given thorough, albeit gossipy, accounts of the period (utilising the first-person accounts of industry figures), and King also identifies particular individuals within the studio system as having had a specific impact on the direction production was taking (King, 2009, 200-201).

⁷⁶ Bill Mechanic’s staunch defence of *Fight Club* in the face of studio befuddlement at its apparent ‘unmarketability’ led to a serious deterioration of relations between him and Rupert Murdoch. See for example Lyman, 200b.

⁷⁷ Gondry’s move to the superhero form was regarded as unsuccessful, but still earned almost \$228m worldwide; the critical and public resistance shown to his transition is rather interesting in itself, as indicated by this quote from a contributor article on Yahoo!, one of many seen around the time of *The Green Hornet*’s release: “When you think of French director Michel Gondry, you think of lower budget quirky films like, ‘The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind,’ [sic] or ‘Be Kind, Rewind,’ you don’t think of big budget superhero movies. While Gondry is a good director in his own right, his interest in this genre seems either an act of desperation by a studio that needed to replace the original director Stephen Chow, or an experiment to veer away from the time tested method in which superhero movies are made.” From the blog “Five Reasons Why ‘The Green Hornet’ will Flop at the Box Office (The First Box Office Flop of 2011)” November 23rd 2010 (<http://voices.yahoo.com/five-reasons-why-green-hornet-will-flop-the-7250166.html> accessed 15/05/2012)

⁷⁸ See Jin, 2012 for an account of horizontal integration in the context of neoliberal globalisation.

⁷⁹ See Ellexis Boyle (2010) for a fascinating account of the transition of one action star's image from 'foreigner and alien' to deliberately Americanized masculinity in Hollywood action films of the 1980s. Interestingly, his image's further alteration to what she describes as "'New Age Guy' and family man" (Boyle, 2010, 42) rests on a movement away from action and into comedy and family films in the 1990s and 2000s via strongly-visualised parodies of his previously implacably hyper-masculine image, which is rather in keeping with structural tendencies towards parody and intertextuality displayed throughout the period, as well as with amendments to interpretations of masculinity.

⁸⁰ While Susan Jeffords (1994) and Fred Pfeil (1995) argue that masculine representations shift cyclically or periodically, with a more domineering masculinity evident in the 'hard body' aesthetic of the 1980s and a softer, more sensitive representation available in the 1990s 'New Man', Peberdy contends that "[s]eeing divergent examples of masculinity dominating at different historical moments...ignores the part each male trope plays in the identity formation of the other...[these framings] do not address the possibility that male identity exhibits both hard and soft masculinity at the same time." (Peberdy, 2010, 237) Instead she posits a mode wherein "hard and soft masculinities depend on the existence of the other for definition. Representations of masculinity are inherently bipolar, moving between hard and soft modes.....Hard and soft masculinity should instead be seen as a sliding scale; a hierarchy of masculine tropes demonstrated both across roles and within them." (ibid., 237-238) While from the perspective of identity formation itself, I agree with her, I am inclined to think that representations of masculinity experience flux across time as well as within a specific block of time.

⁸¹ For a consideration of the changing face of race in action cinema and in relation to multicultural audiences, see Beltrán (2005).

⁸² This would not be the first or last time Cruise worked outside of his original persona – his character in *Born On The Fourth of July* (Oliver Stone, 1989) an interesting exception to the self-assured and over-confident characters he had played during the 1980s. However his role in *Magnolia* was significant in its sense of parodic masculinity or self-referential display; in a fascinating article Donna Peberdy (2010) notes that Cruise's later work utilises metaphorical – and sometimes literal – masks to an extraordinary extent, which she sees as relevant to his celebrity status, and to his conflicted, paradoxical, or 'bipolar' representations of masculinity.

⁸³ As Barry King discusses in his consideration of celebrity culture and the commodification of stardom, the position of actors/stars has changed within the industry as well as in the surrounding culture: "[i]n contemporary Hollywood stars have become producers and entrepreneurs pitching projects to the major studio distributors. They are no longer habitually associated with particular genres that invest them with particular personalities but rather with the concept of efficient performance in any genre, which is the creative analogue of financial performance.Although ostensibly more than ever is known about the intimate existence of the celebrity or star, this is not concrete knowledge of the person but knowledge of the persona as a market-tested exchange value and object of abstract desire." (King, B., 2010, 15)

⁸⁴ Celeste, 2005, argues that understanding the emergence of the modern celebrity is crucial to understanding the structure of popular culture, and that the modern celebrity is a creature of the camera and mass communication technologies, who draws on figurations of tragedy, heroism and loss. (Celeste, 2005). See also Gorin and Dubied (2011), particularly on the idea of the 'celebrity meltdown', and Barry King (2010) on the commodification of the celebrity.

⁸⁵ Popular culture website www.vulture.com runs a regular feature, Star Market, which provides fascinating theoretical analysis based on a star's persona-based aggregation, combining industry discourse and past financial performance of projects in order to provide a theoretical 'market value' for them. <http://www.vulture.com/news/the-star-market/>

⁸⁶ For Florida, the 'creative class' constitutes *the* potential source of change and growth for modern economies, arguing that what the working class was to the early 20th century, and the service class to the late 20th century – the main engine for social and economic development – the creative classes will be for the 21st. Educated, mobile and information-driven, but individualised and without collective bargaining power, the creative classes may form a theoretical category for both producers and audiences of Smart cinema; it is important to note that the idea of the 'creative class' is a site of the exploitation of cultural capital in itself. As John Hartley points out, the creative class is simultaneously producer, consumer, and mediator of creative work, and "[t]he creative industries are enterprises that monetize (creative) ideas in a consumer economy....beneficiaries of the drift from

production to consumption, public to private, author to audience. They exploit the commercialisation of identity and citizenship. They broker the convergence and integration of entertainment and politics” (Hartley, 2005, 114)

⁸⁷ I note that Schatz is not convinced as to whether one can consider ‘millennial Hollywood’ a distinct period, arguing that it remains to be seen.

⁸⁸ Scott prefigures Schatz’s position by acknowledging that a more diffuse process may be at issue than simple bifurcation, saying “the two [major studio and independent producers] tiers...are actually complemented by a more indistinct circle of companies as represented by independents strongly allied to the majors together with the majors’ own subsidiaries. This middle tier provides a shifting but evidently widening bridge between the two more clearly definable segments as represented by the majors proper and the pure independents.” (Scott, 2002, 964) It is that middle tier which would come to provide what King understands as ‘Indiewood’.

⁸⁹ Scott avers that “the growing complexity of these conglomerates can be ascribed in large degree to attempts to internalize the synergies that are frequently found at intersections between different segments of the media and entertainment (and hardware) industries.” (Scott, 2002, 961) This includes technological synergies, and it is hard to escape the conclusion that no major conglomerate has yet found a way to protect itself from loss via innovation, as much as benefit from it. In that light, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the ways in which conglomerates utilise their differing media divisions as wardens, ring-fencing commercial prospects for valuable film texts by contributing to continuous media discourse about them, and ways in which they act as ‘simple’ gatekeeper to a channel.

⁹⁰ I would argue that only the first exhibits ‘true’ Smart characteristics textually, however the industrial attributes and production conditions of the other two are very similar.

⁹¹ See for example, as per Steve Neale, the argument that “New Hollywood can be distinguished from the old by the hybridity of its genres and films. Most argue in addition that this hybridity is governed by the multi-media synergies characteristic of the New Hollywood, by the mixing and recycling of new and old and low art and high art media products in the modern (or post-modern) world, and by the propensity for allusion and pastiche that is said to characterize contemporary artistic production.” (Neale, 2001, 248)

⁹² See also Grainge, Jancovich and Monteith (2007) on Austin’s work; as they note, his work focuses on “the means by which film creates appeal not through any singular or unified style, as might be implied with the marketing theories of high concept, but through ‘promotional and conversational processes of fragmentation, elaboration and diffusion’.....the idea that there is nothing innate about the identity of film, that its status relies on particular ‘discursive formulations’, also has a bearing on the definitional fluidities of ‘cult’, ‘independent’, and ‘mainstream’ cinema.” (Grainge, Jancovich & Monteith, 2007, 513)

⁹³ Manjunath Pendakur (2008), for example, argues beyond that – that the MPA/MPAA functions as a cartel internationally, adhering to the classical definition of a cartel’s goals, that is “to contain inter-capitalist rivalry and the antagonisms that develop out of the contradictions within capital. Cartels engage in anti-competitive trade practices such as fixing prices of the commodities its members buy and sell, and gaining exclusive access to markets (and thereby monopoly profits) for its members.” (Pendakur, 2008, 183)

⁹⁴ That is, as per Staiger’s contention: “I see Hollywood’s industrial structure, modes of production, signifying practices, and modes of reception as an intensification of monopoly capitalism.” (Staiger, 2000, 74)

Chapter Four

⁹⁵ Rosenbaum makes a few acidic points on the way in which audience opinion and value judgements are cultivated and calibrated, noting that grosses for films are a ubiquitous feature of non-industry coverage of cinema, including weekly box office tables, where these details would not necessarily have been singled out historically (Rosenbaum, 2002, 14-15), indicating that the discourse of cinematic ‘success’ has changed at a public level. This co-exists with what Edward Buscombe described in 1970 as “auteur-hunting” (Buscombe, 1970, 10) – in a modern context, the (often fan-originated) search to produce textual justifications for ascriptions of quality and distinction to a particular film or its maker.

⁹⁶ Comparisons between the two periods may be even more relevant, in that the 1960s-1970s directors also emerged following a protracted period of industrial uncertainty, followed by a series of far-reaching mergers and takeovers (see Langford, 2010, 107-129). This should not encourage us to adopt too simplistic a view – while casual 1960s /1990s analogies were encouraged by the film industry, music industry, fashion industry and others, the economic, political and sociological realities were a great deal more complex.

⁹⁷ As Gallagher puts it, “[i]nvoication of the practices, output and abstracted spirit of this age repeatedly serves to legitimate contemporary films and filmmakers working firmly in the Hollywood mainstream as well as at the furthest margins of independent American cinema.” (Gallagher, 2013, 84)

⁹⁸ Or as Perkins, who draws heavily on Elsaesser’s work in her analysis of Whit Stillman, points out of Bergman, Antonioni, Rossellini, and Truffaut: “All of these directors have been understood as auteurs in a way that is at least partially determined by the fact that they have all been understood, at various times, as representative national voices.” (Perkins, 2008, 19)

⁹⁹ Clearly this does not account for all textual models; for example a strongly distinctive subset of films has long existed concerning the adventures (often comedic or horrific) of Americans abroad, and the ongoing use of locations in Canada, Australia and elsewhere to double for US locations confirm that ‘America’ is as much a fictional – or psychological – construct on film as it is a geographic location.

¹⁰⁰ Perkins’ reading of Elsaesser emphasises again, however, the transnational nature not of production or reception, but of recognition, saying that “[t]he figures understood as contemporary European and American auteurs are no longer national auteurs: their work constitutes an international art cinema that expresses similar concerns and styles across a wide spectrum of settings. The group of directors who, for Elsaesser, seem to have more in common with each other than with directors of their respective national cinemas includes Lars von Trier, Wong Kar-Wai, Tsai Ming-Liang, Tom Tykwer, Abbas Kiarostami, Hal Hartley, Richard Linklater, and Paul Thomas Anderson, among others.” (Perkins, 2008, 20)

¹⁰¹ The extent to which auteurist perspectives have been adopted, or incorporated into viewing strategies, by an increasingly networked fan culture may be an additional factor here. Christopher Nolan, for example, constitutes a particular instance of this process, whereby ‘auteurism’ can be seen as a mechanism of legitimisation linking film texts and fan cultures. If questions of auteurism, and the responsibility for ‘crowning’ any particular filmmaker as an auteur, can be evacuated onto fan cultures, the term itself becomes industrially ‘innocent’; the industrial mobilisation of auteurism as a marketing or positioning strategy can thereby be minimised by industry and audiences alike. The casual adoption of auteurism as a popular framing device also places filmmakers in an unusual situation; several of them seem to feel the need to address it in their work, most particularly as we have seen with Wes Anderson. In this sense, as Perkins outlines, directors become “highly conscious of the way they are positioned as auteurs by those processes that force them to reveal the[ir] signatures... In these contemporary works, the repetition of characters, actors, themes, and settings is less about the establishment of a signature and more about the narration of that signature. In an approach that often seems more playful than deterministic, authorial remaking becomes a subject as well as a function.” (Perkins, 2008, 20)

¹⁰² I believe this links with Andrews’ assertion that “auteurism in mainstream criticism often seems authorized by academic authority despite the fact that mainstream critics regularly cast aspersions on academic sectors of film studies, which may seem inaccessible or just flaky.” (Andrews, 2012, 48) in that traditional media, fast losing its grasp on the material of public intellectual discourse, may see a benefit in adopting historically ‘authorised’ framings in order to bolster its own authority.

¹⁰³ Nolan’s involvement with the Batman franchise possibly counts as something of an irony here, given the historical position of Tim Burton’s 1989 *Batman*, an early example of the direction the film industry would take in the 1990s. Nolan is now also involved with Superman, as writer and producer of *Man of Steel* (2013).

¹⁰⁴ It must be noted that, Bond aside, budgets for his films have grown steadily smaller and proportional returns have fluctuated wildly, with the \$70 million *Jarhead* (2005) grossing \$60 million, and \$35 million *Revolutionary Road* (2008) taking \$75 million.

¹⁰⁵ The still-evolving career path of Rian Johnson suggests a similar and familiar track to be followed; from critically lauded low budget (under half a million dollars) independent *Brick*, through to *The Brothers Bloom* (2008) a mid-level (\$20 million budget) co-production venture with an indie major (in this case The Weinstein Company) with a cast associated with ‘quality’ productions (Rachel Weisz, Adrien Brody) rather than box-office attraction, before moving on to *Looper* (2012). This cannily unites a somewhat larger (although still relatively modest, at \$37.5 million) budget with a big-name star in the form of Bruce Willis, and a known ‘Smart’ name (Joseph Gordon-Levitt, whose indie credentials are well-established) in order to construct an action/sci-fi film which can appeal to multiple constituencies. The industrial positioning used to make these appeals is illustrated in the catchline quote used to topline one film poster: “This decade’s The Matrix” (available at: <http://broadcast.rcs.ac.uk/2012/10/screen-looper-and-the-art-of-thinking-for-yourself/looper-poster-11/> accessed 03 March 2013), promising diegetic unpredictability and narrative play in an action-based, kinetically stylised package, but requiring a degree of intellectual investment. Other Smart filmmakers seem to plough a steadier industrial furrow. With the exception of the ill-fated \$50 million *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou* (2004) and costly animation *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009), Wes Anderson’s commitment to a particular form of quirky observational comedy has kept budgets squarely within the \$15-20 million category. David Fincher has continued to work squarely within the mainstream, with budgets for his work rarely dipping below the \$50 million mark, and most recently taking on global publishing phenomenon *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* (2011), after 2010’s \$90m *The Social Network*. Others again have moved away from the mainstream; since *Adaptation*, Spike Jonze has worked mainly in music video, short film, and documentary, apart from the highly stylised *Where The Wild Things Are* (2009) which cost \$100m, and barely broke even internationally. Not all enter the mainstream; Todd Solondz’ *Life During Wartime* (2009) and *Dark Horse* (2011) were distributed strictly on the art-house and international festival circuit, as was the case with Shane Carruth’s *Primer* follow-up, *Upstream Colour*.

¹⁰⁶ This can be seen in the manner in which popular/industry/academic discourses repeatedly privilege the notion of Nolan’s Batman as ‘darker’ or more ‘serious’ than previous iterations. A random selection of examples of review articles includes such phrases as: “A Batman that plumbs the violence of the mind is a risk. But true fans should revel in the fact that the Dark Knight just got darker.” (Travers, 2005, 87); “very serious... too dark and talky to appeal to kids” (McCarthy, 2005, 19); “a resolutely grim outlook which takes the Dark Knight to darker places.” (Newman, 2008, 59); “a brooding and pessimistic vision of Gotham City. Nolan and his team depict a city riddled with corruption.” (Macnab, 2008, 10); “the unrelenting nightmare atmosphere” (Tyree, 2009, 31). See also Robert P. Arnett’s 2009 “*Casino Royale* and Franchise Remix: James Bond as Superhero” which discusses the contemporary franchise ‘reboot’.

¹⁰⁷ Such as when we are told “on the phone Kaufman, unlike his screen alter-ego, comes across as confident and assured.....He is reclusive to the point of obsessive, perhaps sensing that if you create a mystery about yourself, you also create a mythology around yourself. To this end, he often refuses to be photographed, is reticent about divulging too much autobiographical information, and, in a recent *Esquire* profile, refused even to divulge the type of car he drives” (O’Hagan, 2003, 10) or “I interviewed him on stage at the London Film Festival last year and it was one of the toughest interviews I’ve ever done. He is nervous and awkward, but don’t let that fool you into thinking he’s vulnerable...shyness is a form of aggression, and Charlie Kaufman uses his social ineptitude like a very precise form of karate.....as soon as I could, I invited members of the audience to ask questions. His response to them was so different it was as if someone had thrown a switch. He was all sweetness and light. If I then tried to follow up, Mr Happy would vanish and it would be back to Mr Grumpy. The difference in his responses was so profound, it was almost comic.” (Young, 2009, 5) In each case, the undeniable intrusion of any confident, sociable, or warm behaviour, attitude, or perspective, must be recuperated back into the myth of ‘Kaufman’.

¹⁰⁸ As King says, these are films for a particular niche market, but they are still also creative products; the salient point is that the niche itself is defined by perceptions of creativity which frequently obscure or deny ‘the commercial’: “[t]he whole point of this niche is, in some cases, the selling of a particular notion of ‘the creative/artistic’ as a source of product and, consequently, viewer distinction. In this case, the disavowal by the filmmaker of the notion of ‘product’ to be packaged and sold is itself, however genuinely meant, functional to the selling of particular varieties of product.” (King, 2009, 57)

¹⁰⁹ Similarly, yet with some contrasts, Steven Soderbergh plays a game of auteurial margins; his work is positioned as ‘auteurial’, i.e. presented for marginal-audience self-selection, when such cachet is deemed important for strategic or marketing purposes (*The Limey*, *Traffic*, *The Good German*) – a clear use of the

auteurial position – but these considerations are elided when questions of prestige or distinction are deemed moot (The *Ocean's* series, *Contagion*, *Haywire*). It seems, therefore, as if these somewhat diffuse notions are themselves hard-coded into the notion of ‘niche’ filmmaking. A more complex figure here is Christopher Nolan, whose work reminds us that filmmakers themselves continually complicate this nexus of power and prestige; for reasons not yet clear to me, his auteurial preoccupations are continually foregrounded in public discourse, especially when producing such otherwise mass-market work as the Batman films or *Inception*. Perhaps this is a case of the industry eating its own, but it may be a strategic attempt on behalf of the industry at recuperating its tangential outcroppings back into the ‘monolith’. There are contradictions everywhere here; the ‘strain’ between auteurial image and mass-marketing that seemed to emerge with Jonze’s *The Green Hornet* was in clear contrast to the lack of similar strain regarding Nolan’s work.

¹¹⁰ Noting the variation between paratextual materials, which at various points include or exclude the “with Steve Zissou” part of the film’s name, Orgeron (2007, 57-58) makes an interesting link between Anderson’s auteuristic image, the fictional auteur of Steve Zissou, and Corrigan’s assertion that since the 1970s, the embedding of an auteur’s ‘signature’ within the frame of the title – for example Bernardo Bertolucci’s *1900* (1976), David Lean’s *Ryan’s Daughter* (1970), or Michael Cimino’s *Heaven’s Gate* (1980) – has been a vital part of “guarantee[ing] a relationship between audience and movie whereby an intentional and authorial agency governs, as a kind of brand-name vision whose contextual meanings are already determined, the way a movie is seen and received.” (Corrigan, 2003, 97)

¹¹¹ For Zoller-Seitz, this recalls Scorsese, again linking the 1970s New Hollywood auteurs with their assumed ‘successors’.

¹¹² Olsen argues that Anderson is tonally out of step with his contemporaries, saying that “Unlike many writer-directors of his generation, Wes Anderson does not view his characters from some distant Olympus of irony. He stands beside them – or rather, just behind them – cheering them on as they chase their miniaturist renditions of the American Dream... In a climate where coolness reigns and nothing matters, the toughest stance to take is one of engagement and empathy. Anderson seems to have accepted the challenge..... Maybe it would be going too far to see him as the vanguard of the New Sincerity, but he is clearly out of step with many of his contemporaries.” (Olsen, 1999, 12) The confidence of this perspective, coming as it does essentially mid-period chronologically, is particularly interesting, given the later tendency to view Smart auteur figures as broadly similar in approach. My conclusion is that this view became less prevalent as the Smart era wore on and greater discursive priority was accorded to interpretations which emphasised the diverse group of films and filmmakers as a coherent ‘movement’.

¹¹³ She convincingly claims that “Anderson often seems to include a variety of racial and ethnic characters, but the ways in which he does so ultimately underline and emphasize the unmarked whiteness and white privilege of the primary characters in all five films.....[it] upholds and maintains the supposed “normative values” of whiteness, by contrasting it against the seemingly diverse casts that surround his protagonists. However, the power and privilege always rests in the hands of the white characters, in ways that are never complicated or dealt with by the films themselves. The films create a seemingly unproblematized view of American culture in both their presentation and reception by critics and audiences, and merely perpetuate the myth of the normalcy and unmarkedness of the category white.” (Dean-Ruzicka, 2013, 25-37)

¹¹⁴ Dean-Ruzicka notes, almost in passing, a single but distinctive example of the way in which Anderson’s auteur image is repeatedly reinscribed into considerations of his work, regardless of the context:

those who work with Anderson on projects...note his skill and specificity as a director, notably Bill Murray in a 1999 appearance on Charlie Rose. Murray explains his choice to sign on with the then virtually unknown Anderson because ‘the script was so precisely written you could tell this guy knew exactly what he was doing. He knew exactly what he wanted to make. Exactly how each scene would go. I’ve never really seen one that was that precise.’ Murray then comments on Anderson’s very precise understanding of *Rushmore*’s scope and details. From this interview, the perspective on Anderson is clearly painted as being aware and in complete control of his projects, and Murray’s words offer the opportunity to critique Anderson as the one responsible for the ideologies of his texts, as he does have this incredible specificity and focus on detail. (Dean-Ruzicka, 2013, 27)

¹¹⁵ While outside of the time period at issue here, Dorey’s account of the “For Your Consideration” campaign ad designed for Anderson’s *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009) following the announcement of the 2010 Academy Award

nominations, is still of interest, in illustrating how Anderson's auteurial image is discursively reinscribed. Emphasising 'ingenuity' and 'skill' in its textual elements, the poster image shows Anderson himself, physically manipulating one of the tiny human puppet characters

as he stares intently at the line of human figure puppets while adjusting the arm of one of them who looks conspicuously like the director. This image reflects a major component of Anderson's auteur persona combining both his signature at the formal level of his films and their narrative focus on attempted-auteur characters. ...The emphasis on the omniscient, controlling figure presiding over what is seen within the frame is a function of the formal elements of Anderson's style and his signature as an auteur...In situations such as these, the director, for the initiated viewer, becomes an implied author in narratological terms, a matter of belief where viewers construct it (Lanser 2001, 154)." (cited in Dorey, 2012, 177)

The implication is, clearly, that the image of Anderson as auteur is entwined with how the auteur image performs within a given audience context; here, the context being, the film industry itself.

¹¹⁶ See www.rushmoreacademy.com as an example, a long-running fansite which declares its purpose as follows: "With the release of *The Royal Tenenbaums* in 2001, we began the tradition of enshrining each Wes Anderson in our hallowed halls." The phrasing is telling, both the use of the word 'enshrining', implying the virtual canonisation of the filmmaker, and the exclusion of the word 'film' from the sentence. Here, the term "each Wes Anderson" clearly identifies the text as synonymous with its director.

¹¹⁷ Of the filmmakers within this Smart 'sample', Soderbergh, Fincher, Zwiggoff, Jonze and Solondz also have work featured in the Criterion Collection.

¹¹⁸ Orgeron's contention that Anderson is (or at points has been) greatly concerned about his credibility to me rings true, as "[a]t the conclusion of the audio commentary for *The Life Aquatic*, in fact, Anderson and Baumbach articulate their hope that they do not sound "phony or pretentious," admitting that they spend a good portion of their time talking about themselves; indeed, this is the very nature of DVD commentary...Anderson, in what appears to be a whimsical and comedic gesture, an extension of the childlike aesthetic that governs his cinematic heroes, does not pull a gun but controls the situation in a manner more familiar to him and his collaborators (audience included) with a pen, a camera, and a crew. Anderson's interviews, in other words, are equally signed and authored." (Orgeron, 2007, 60) This is in contrast with the auteurial impression created for and by Charlie Kaufman; where Anderson inscribes himself within texts via fictionally distanced proxies, but materially controls the 'reality' of his auteur image by creating paratexts in ways which fictionalise his personality, Kaufman's absencing of his own personality (as distinct from his presence – see <http://moviecitynews.com/2009/01/dp30-charlie-kaufman/> accessed 10/04/2012 for Kaufman's own complaint that journalists erroneously believe he 'doesn't do' press) from paratexts creates a gap for the fictionalisation of his personality by third parties, such as journalists, while he simultaneously invests his fictional creations with a literally indexical 'personality' of his own, such as in *Adaptation*.

¹¹⁹ This particular advert is one of a series for American Express: "Starring a range of well-known American personalities, three of the spots feature filmmakers sending themselves and their own products up while pitching another: Martin Scorsese, the perfectionist, picks up and critiques processed photos from a drugstore; M. Night Shyamalan, the dreamer, attempts to dine at a restaurant where strange things happen." (Orgeron, 2007, 61) However, Anderson has moved repeatedly between the worlds of advertising and cinema in the past two decades, making ads for corporations including Hyundai, Stella Artois, IKEA, AT&T, Sony, and Prada. See ad on Youtube at parkerbros channel, accessed 22/05/2013 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spCknVcaSHg>

¹²⁰ Orgeron, interestingly, and in an at first apparently contradictory manner, argues that Anderson's impression of auteurism is created not by the 'singular figure' effect which the likes of Sarris might have emphasised, but by Anderson's tendency to emphasise the collective nature of filmmaking, which Orgeron contends is made transparent by paratextual materials. In this interpretation, "the reborn auteur as exemplified by Anderson appears more prominent than ever; but his centrality – one might say his celebrity, his authority – remains in spite of attempts to document the many collaborative layers of the filmmaking enterprise....With images of overpopulated sets filled with cast and crew, interviews with and commentary by cinematographers, costumers, set designers, and the like, Anderson's strategy to foreground the collective has, interestingly, buoyed his reputation as auteur. (Orgeron, 2007, 59) This dovetails with Elsaesser's exploration of European cinema, in which he argues that "the European 'auteur' – as if to compensate for the absence of pre-defined genres and stars – requires often a 'trilogy' or a steady cast of players in order to have his universe recognized as not just

personal but belonging to cinema history.” (Elsaesser, 2005, 136) and illustrates both the resemblances between Anderson and the ‘classic’ auteur figure, and the contradictions inherent in the positions he takes.

¹²¹ See Jancovich: “The cult movie is often seen as a particular and even subaltern scene but it is precisely its sense of itself as a kind of oppositional and underground culture that it shares with the European art cinema. Not only do both the art cinema and cult movie fandom emerge out of similar developments in both exhibition and the academy...but they have therefore frequently interacted and even overlapped with one another.” (Jancovich, 2003, 11)

¹²² Along the lines of Frank’s idea of ‘hip consumerism’, where “[n]ot only does hip consumerism recognize the alienation, boredom, and disgust engendered by the demands of modern consumer society, but it makes of those sentiments powerful imperatives of brand loyalty and accelerated consumption.” (Frank, 1997, 231)

¹²³ The list of films following *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* which can be easily described as ‘Tarantinoesque’ is lengthy; many of them are derivative, or at least could be and were described as such, given their temporal place; *Things To Do In Denver When You’re Dead* (Gary Fleder, 1995); *8 Heads In A Duffel Bag* (Tom Schulman, 1997); *The 51st State* (Ronny Yu, 2001); *Go* (Doug Liman, 1999); *Snatch* (Guy Ritchie, 2000) and the slew of British and Irish gangster films which followed including the work of the respective McDonagh brothers); *Sin City* (2005, unsurprisingly, given Tarantino’s direction of one segment – Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez responsible for the other two); and *Smokin’ Aces* (Joe Carnahan, 2006). Newman notes that Wes Anderson is regarded not only as (for good or ill) “the quintessential hipster auteur, but also for having inspired a wave of indie cinema that bears his influence.” (Newman, 2013, 73)

¹²⁴ This is not to minimise the very real tendency for studios to push the term ‘cult’, as a market-positioning signifier, at even the most broadly mainstream films, in an attempt to garner extra-textual credibility (see Joe Bob Briggs, 2008, on *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes!* (John DeBello, 1978), which he describes as the first “self-conscious attempt to create a cult through titling and marketing” (Briggs et al, 2008, 44)).

¹²⁵ Jancovich discusses the ‘subcultural ideology’ which underpins the practices and perspectives of cult audiences, but the Smart audience may more closely resemble what Hawkins (2003) calls “the downtown avant-garde” – a description which recognises the ways in which cult film and art-house cinema, and the cultural communities around them, support, reinforce and cross-pollinate each other. She describes both an audience sector and a set of filmmakers (Todd Haynes and David Lynch as well as more marginal directors), which despite differences in political perspective, have “a common urban lifestyle, a shared commitment to formal and narrative experimentation, a view of the human body as a site of social and political struggle, an interest in radical identity politics and a mistrust of institutionalised mechanisms of wealth and power.” (Hawkins, 2003, 223) This constitutes a reasonable attempt at identifying a shared set of values and behaviours around and from which Smart cinema evolved, although without further audience-specific research in the area, all is speculation.

Chapter Five

¹²⁶ This is an intensively researched piece in which they cite almost two dozen separate studies.

¹²⁷ Conversely, Holbrook and Addis argue that “an attempt to encourage positive evaluations would be hurt by excessive spending on aspects of marketing clout that can work against the impression of excellence. Indeed, opening a low-budget film on a small number of screens appears actually to enhance the favourability of its evaluations.” (Holbrooke and Addis, 2007, 102) They fail to expand on this provocative statement beyond intimating that public perception of a film’s industrial origin may have a relationship with that public’s assessment of its quality, in that films “of the type found in the scattered specialty houses that show art films are perceived as better in artistic quality” (ibid.). However, while this may prove a jumping-off point for future research, there is insufficient data here to make full determinations on the basis of audience opinions.

¹²⁸ See for example Gemser, Leenders & Wijnberg, who conclude that while statistically buying decisions for independent films are more influenced by ‘expert’ opinion in the form of critical reviews and awards, and suggest that “consumers give different degrees of credibility to different types of awards” (Gemser, Leenders & Wijnberg, 2008, 27), that “the influence of signals of quality on consumer choice is dependent on the type of movie involved” (ibid., 28), and that “expert-selected awards are the most effective for the independent film

segment (in terms of increasing box office revenues and screen allocations” (ibid., 44) but note that empirical research comparing different types of ‘quality signal’ is scarce. Hennig-Thurau, Houston and Walsh (2006, 2007) concluded that “[a]wards have the strongest direct and total impact on profitability” (Hennig-Thurau, Houston, and Walsh, 2007, 85).

¹²⁹ To clarify the nature of ‘roadshowing’, Balio expands: “[a]t the exhibition level, prestige pictures were given splashy premieres and the roadshow treatment...Prestige pictures, with their longer running times, were particularly suited to roadshowing, which entailed twice-a-day performance, intermissions, and reserved seats. Because the practice also meant higher ticket prices, higher film rentals, and extended runs, this pattern of release had the potential of recouping production costs much faster than normal...[but its high cost] increased a company’s exposure when a picture met resistance at the box office.” (Balio, 1995, 180)

¹³⁰ Without wishing to damn with faint praise, the work of Steven Spielberg in the 1990s and 2000s would be a good example of this kind of solid, nominally prestigious, thoroughly classical filmmaking.

¹³¹ “In 2003, FIAPF, the International Federation of Film Producers Associations, has estimated the overall number of international film festivals at 700–800 (www.fiapf.org), and their number has probably further increased over the last decade—industry experts estimate that nowadays up to 3500 film festivals are held in the world each year.” (Rüling & Pedersen, 2010, 318)

¹³² For clarity I have excluded purely regional or specifically technical awards (for example, those presented by the Costume Designers Guild) unless there seems a compelling structural reason to include them, for example the New York-based Gotham Awards which take a national view on submissions and have a strong focus on independent film.

¹³³ Contrasting perspectives on the importance of ‘quality’ as measured in awards to box office returns are common; Terry, Butler & DeArmond (2005) found that Academy Award nominations were worth over \$6 million in film revenue per nomination, and Simonoff & Sparrow (2000) found that for a film opening on fewer than ten screens, an Academy Award nomination increased its expected gross by close to 250% (for films opening on more than ten screens, it increased gross by nearly 30%) However, following from a study by Austin (1984) which concluded that there was no significant relationship between awards and overall box office success, Smith and Smith (1986) for example found that the relationship between awards and performance was time-dependent, only influencing box office results in certain years, which seems probable. A problem is presented, however, by the intense concentration of the empirical research in this field on the Academy Awards, as opposed to other evaluative systems.

¹³⁴ It is worth noting too that award acknowledgments in this category broadly appear to follow in agreement with critical attention and box office; *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou* and *I ♥ Huckabees* are the least awarded films here, and through awards systems more ‘indie’ than mainstream.

¹³⁵ This illustrates why, for example Negus can argue as late as 2006 that an emphasis on the cultural or creative industries *as* industries is important, insofar as it is part of “a concerted attempt to move away from a short-term over-emphasis on audiences and the polysemantic interpretation of texts during the 1980s and early 1990s.” (Negus, 2006, 200-201)

¹³⁶ With the proviso that DreamWorks were not an established major at that point.

¹³⁷ Kim Newman’s retrospective review points out that: “When it opened in America to somewhat disappointing business, there was a widespread misjudgement that *Fight Club* was an action movie about underground bare-knuckle boxing contests — perhaps an inflated, star-powered version of Jean-Claude Van Damme vehicles like *Bloodsport* or *Kickboxer*.” (Newman, n.d.)

¹³⁸ Not all would take this position: Jonathan Rosenbaum, for instance, notes that in the periodic arguments which erupt for the supposed ‘decline’ of cinema, much of the blame is levelled at the audience, whose overall ‘coarsening’ is supposedly a function of their decreased literacy, their youth, or a prevailing sense of anti-intellectualism. (Rosenbaum, 2002, 1-2). He argues instead that while there may be a grain of truth in some of these ideas, and that the loss of theatrical experience inherent in home entertainment has reduced expectations of what a film ‘is’, the films to which audiences are exposed are responsible for them lowering their expectations.

From Rosenbaum's position, studios are at fault for replacing 'individual' studio heads with conglomerate accountants driven by spurious 'market research' which produces self-fulfilling test results, and who adhere to (in his view) wrong-headed assumptions (teenagers hate black and white films, Americans hate subtitles) without challenging them.

¹³⁹ For example, the popular evaluative matrix for the blockbuster sometimes appears more dominated by financial considerations (in the form of the ubiquitous box-office figure tables of newspapers, entertainment magazines, and websites) than by critical perspectives or audience commentary.

¹⁴⁰ The phrase "Must See TV" was originally a commercial slogan for NBC but has been widely co-opted to describe "shows that are not simply part of a habitual flow of television programming but, either through design or audience response, have become 'essential viewing'...distinguished by the compulsive viewing practices of dedicated audiences who organise their schedules around these shows." (Jancovich and Lyons, 2003, 2)

¹⁴¹ The extent to which critics and commentators (and perhaps publics) seek to apportion 'blame' for a supposed decline in quality of films *and* audiences forms a fascinating type of position-taking in itself, and deserves further exploration. See, for example Rosenbaum's gloomy conclusion to his interesting but frequently self-contradictory work, that "people went to the movies out of habit and as a matter of course, so the main aim of the industry was to service that taste and furnish theatres with a lot of product. Today they'll only go to a movie if something or someone guides them there – advertising, 'coverage', a review, a general buzz, anything that makes the appearance of that movie an event." (Rosenbaum, 2002, 202-203)

¹⁴² Following Todd Gitlin, Nancy San Martin argues that, for example, the sitcom has moved into urban (from suburban) space, and "absents poorer, isolated, or rural regions, a rejection informed perhaps by the network's desire to disassociate itself from the provinciality, backwardness, or cultural homogeneity it associates with then displaces onto those regions...[its] preponderance of affluent, white, well-appointed white bodies produces just such an erasure of difference...This sensibility makes it safe for 'America' to 'come together' in viewership through an appeal to white audiences that whitewashes urban and sexual subcultures." (San Martin, 2003, 33). One can argue that this is in contrast to the privileging of the 'traumatic suburb' of Smart cinema, but the similarities of representational approach are still quite striking; the key difference here is that Smart at least superficially attempts to interrogate these presentations of a safe, (internal or outer) conflict-free America, whereas the television sitcom structurally works to erase conflict, to present a reassuring vision of continual resolution.

¹⁴³ As Jennifer Holt says on the much-vaunted notion of 'synergy' in media,
[t]he companies that control the airwaves today are...a high-powered cabal of entertainment empires, dominating film, television, publishing, cable systems, home video, music, merchandising and theme parks – all at the same time...the CEOs of these conglomerates are constantly redefining the art of vertical integration in a new and paradoxical market – one that is simultaneously driven by segmentation and unified vision, broad range and specific demographics, localism and global scope, expansion and consolidation. (Holt, 2003, 11).

She also argues, as I have outlined in relation to cinema, that the changes in television rest on similar political and regulatory foundations, whereby "the concept of 'must see' can also be interpreted as a mandate of industrial economy and government regulation as opposed to solely a marketing design or textual paradigm." (ibid., 12)

¹⁴⁴ In the sense in which American television series such as *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men* are both widely watched, and discursively valorised as high-status cultural artefacts – in this sense, a somewhat niche channel like HBO can be regarded as possessing a similar social valence to that of the Smart environment. Jaramillo (2002) explores some of these elements.

¹⁴⁵ These patterns are easier to see when viewed 'vertically', through the continuing evolution of a single channel (HBO), than when seen through the more 'horizontal' prism of Smart film, which, as a body, diverse work from a multiplicity of origins, consumed through a variety of exhibition platforms. Looked at logically, audiences tend to have a greater level of practical engagement with television network 'branding' than they do with that of specific film studios, as choosing to view a specific network channel entails precisely that – engaging with a channel's branding in order to activate a channel of content supplied by a single *distributor*, with a known and set location (a predictable setting on the remote control). By contrast, choosing to view a film involves

engaging with distribution via a single *exhibitor* (the cinema location of choice), and the production origins of any film may not make themselves known until the film begins and the credits roll.

¹⁴⁶ See, for example Jaramillo's note that "pay cable chauvinism not only holds broadcast TV to a different standard but also implies that pay cable consumers can handle graphic language, sex, and violence in a more thoughtful and productive way than broadcast viewers." (Jaramillo, 2002, 66)

¹⁴⁷ The emphasis on differentiating Smart or quality television texts from the mainstream is also crucial industrially. Not only, in both cases, does an emphasis on deviation from classical norms form a tool for the positioning and marketing of each text, but it also serves to elide genuine questions of industrial difference. As we have seen, most Smart films come from squarely within the conventional Hollywood industrial structure, and as such find themselves 'competing against' sister films from their own studios, which is to say, they are texts used by studios for targeting niche audiences whilst simultaneously laying claim to the rhetoric of independence. This is similarly the case with HBO, which, as part of the Time Warner conglomerate, finds itself closing the political economy loop where it competes against sister channels – and most specifically, against Time Warner's The CW Television Network, itself the result of a merger between The WB Television Network, and UPN (a CBS Corporation holding).

¹⁴⁸ The term describes a cultural state which has historical precedents in the co-opting of 1920s bohemian culture and the counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s but is latterly more culturally embedded within the mainstream.

¹⁴⁹ Bearing in mind that what constitutes 'indie' alters over time; Newman refers to Tzioumakis (2006) when he notes that use of the term has remained fairly stable during the period from the 1980s to date, while noting "There is no transcendent 'American independent cinema' that spans the history of film; rather, in each era, a new discourse of independence arises in response to industrial, technological, and cultural configurations." (Newman, 2009, 18)

¹⁵⁰ Although Newman is careful to point out that this is not a binary opposition, there are indie and mainstream texts, *and* indie and mainstream audiences; although he does not elaborate on this it seems clear to me that these may encounter each other in a variety of different ways.

¹⁵¹ As per Aronofsky himself, "It was always a creative choice, not really a budgetary constraint. Actually some people think black and white is cheaper. So few films are done in black and white these days that it's actually more expensive. So it actually cost us more money to do it. It cost us even more than most black and white movies because we decided to shoot a film stock called 'black and white reversal' which no one has ever shot for a narrative feature film before. And it's this very sort of hard to get film stock that actually comes up very, very, contrasty." See interview at <http://aronofsky.tripod.com/interview14.html>

¹⁵² See Sarah Thornton's *Club Cultures* (1996) for a music industry parallel.

¹⁵³ He cites the mainstreaming of previously fringe dance acts such as Moby and Fatboy Slim, who permitted widespread licensing of their music for film and commercials. What would once have been regarded as an unseemly capitulation to 'the man,' was instead "seen as a way of finding exposure for interesting music that would be unlikely to break into the increasingly safe and homogeneous radio and MTV playlists controlled by the major labels." (Newman, 2009, 21). He also cites the complex signifier of Kurt Cobain wearing a handmade t-shirt reading "Corporate Magazine Still Sucks" on the front of *Rolling Stone*.

¹⁵⁴ See Gallagher, 2013 for a discussion of the highly-mobile Steven Soderbergh.

Chapter Six

¹⁵⁵ This is broadly in line with Thomas Schatz's interpretation of the film sector's history, as he attempts to coherently place this 'industrial world' within a wider economic context. Schatz does acknowledge that personalities play a part, insofar as individual executives' and filmmakers industrial positions dictate which film gets made, and in what manner; indeed he places a great deal of faith in the ability of top executives to "protect

the interests and autonomy of their production operations and ensure the creative freedom of top filmmaking talent.” (Schatz, 2009, 28).

¹⁵⁶ Sources conflict significantly on the final cost of *Rushmore*, to an extent not seen with any other film within my selected group. Originally budgeted at \$9 million (see Petrikin, 1997) www.boxofficemojo.com cites its final cost at \$20 million, www.the-numbers.com at \$10 million, www.imdb.com at \$11 million, and Emanuel Levy at \$15 million (Levy, 1999, 4). In any case, the final cost was still over the \$10 million border I have here employed to indicate a ‘larger’ budget.

¹⁵⁷ As Langford points out, “the blockbuster ‘tentpole’ films around which a year’s schedule is organised, and which can make or break a balance sheet...are dominated by effects-laden SF spectaculars.....SF has risen to industrial pre-eminence both as a function of and a driving force in the rise of the ‘New Hollywood’...in ways that could not easily have been anticipated prior to the 1970s.” (Langford, 2005, 182-183)

¹⁵⁸ *Dark City* may have suffered for its temporal position, slightly ahead of the Smart curve; it may have been just as hampered by finding itself in direct competition with the behemoth that was *Titanic* (1997); the latter, released in America 19/12/1997, was still topping box-office lists weeks later when *Dark City* came out, on 27/02/1998 – the film continued to take top spot until the beginning of April.

¹⁵⁹ In ranking the major awards for which each film was nominated and which each film won (94 wins and 74 separate nominations for *American Beauty*, 108 wins and 39 separate nominations for *Sideways*), out of the set of films selected, these ranked respectively first and second.

¹⁶⁰ To give just a few examples: “Gondry earns plaudits...for eschewing expensive special effects in favour of the inventively mechanical visual solutions which characterised his pop videos....A devotee of the tricks of early cinema (many of which have been forgotten in today’s digital age), the French-born Gondry is living proof that music video directors can bring much more to the movies than flashy visuals and rapid-fire ‘MTV editing’..... Crucially both Spike Jonze and Michel Gondry learned their trade in advertising and music videos, learning their craft and breaking new ground in both fields before venturing on to the big screen.” (Kermode, 2004, 5); “While big-studio films employ banks of supercomputers and armies of programmers, he does most of his magic tricks with egg cartons, cellophane, toilet paper rolls and imagination..... ‘I would rather do the effects by finding tricks to do it physically with construction and mechanics,’ he said. ‘I get more excited to do it physically because it’s more like a playground to me. I can play with texture and physics and mechanics. When it’s digital, it’s elements that are not connected together.” (Covert, 2007, 24); “With this adamantly lo-fi visionary [Gondry], Kaufman has found a shrewd marriage of conceptual sophistication and fanciful, childlike imagery. Together, they skew clunky instead of sleek, low-tech instead of high-, analog instead of digital.....Gondry instead opts for low-tech, painstakingly wrought effects – labours of love rather than Industrial Light and Magic.” (Norris, 2004, 21); “High on ambition, and vigorously low-budget” (Christopher, 2004, 4).

¹⁶¹ Feeny’s account of the digital production work on the film illustrates the general perception of Gondry’s perspective as being somewhat anti-digital techniques, but, as the article is for the *Videography* journal, different editorial considerations are allowed to weigh more heavily in the balance, with digital effects work foregrounded in a way not found anywhere else:

Gondry went into production without a digital effects team on set...The film’s effects work was split between Buzz and Custom Film Effects, based in Burbank. Morin runs SOFTIMAGE|XSI on PCs and uses Discreet Inferno for compositing. The team renders with Mental Ray...about 15 of the 25, including CG artists, composers and matte painters, were working full time on *Eternal Sunshine*.....Initially, Gondry wanted to give the deterioration a stylized, stop-motion feel. ‘We worked for a month on it and even then I wasn’t 100 percent sure that it was working,’ says Morin. ‘Michel looked at it and asked us to try another route.’.....Buzz Effects had received a beta version of SOFTIMAGE|XSI version 4, and Morin experimented with the software’s hard body dynamics capabilities. He and his team used XSI to make the chimney of the house collapse in CG. ‘When Michel saw this, he liked it so much that he wanted more collapsing,’ says Morin. The team re-built the house in 3D and based their animation of its collapse on earthquake footage. ‘Looking at the shot now, I think we made the right decision,’ says Morin. ‘I am proud of it, because Michel is not usually fond of CGI.’ In fact, Buzz Effects had to dirty up their shots to match the grainy 500 ASA stock that

Director of Photography Ellen Kuras had used in that scene. ‘We realized that we were trying to make it too clean,’ says Morin. Smiling, he adds, ‘I guess that’s our professional flaw’. (Feeny, 2004, 54)

¹⁶² This was soon after Village Roadshow, which had been in the Australian film business at production, distribution and exhibition points since the 1950s, formalised its partnership with Warner; *The Matrix* signalled Village Roadshow’s transition from producer of an endless series of instalments of family dolphin drama *Flipper* to an international production institution. Bruce Berman, President of Worldwide Theatrical Production at Warners from 1991-1996 became Chairman and CEO of Village Roadshow Pictures, a measure of the strategic importance in which the marque appears to be held.

¹⁶³ These include: “all-star comedy about an environmental campaigner who hires a couple of ‘existential detectives’ to solve the riddle of his existence. It’s got a touch of the Andersons (Wes and Paul Thomas) and sometimes looks like a zany-brainy episode of *I Dream of Jeannie* or *Bewitched*. But the main resemblance is obvious. Russell has been hugely influenced by screenwriter Charlie Kaufman’s trademark flights of surreal fancy. . . . The movie’s batsqueak of complacency is effaced by these funny and intelligent performances.” (Bradshaw, 2004, 30); “may tap pockets of ardent critical support to buoy its status among upscale fall releases. . . The group of young filmmakers that included Wes Anderson, Alexander Payne, Paul Thomas Anderson, Spike Jonze and Russell, as well as screenwriter Charlie Kaufman, were collectively hailed a few years back as the new saviors of creatively moribund Hollywood. Since then it has become apparent just how much the group has in common.” (Rooney, 2004b, 56); “a romance of ideas for our troubled times. . . . sweet and buoyant. . . despite its seemingly excessive stylization. [Russell shows] even more audacious whimsy than before, and with a less conventional narrative structure. . . way more ‘out there’ than any other American movie you are likely to see this year.” (Sarris, 2004, 23); “extraordinary and truly delightful new comic panorama, the improbably titled and unfashionably heartfelt *I love [sic] Huckabees*. . . . an attempt to envisage a cinema of ideas in a multiplex context. . . a dialectical film. . . unavoidably part of the millennial reality-upending *zeitgeist* that has given us *The Matrix* and the collected works of Charlie Kaufman. Moreover, you could read [it] as a Zen-influenced response to the ironic nihilism of *Fight Club*, another reality-warping meditation on materialist discontent and psychic anomie.” (Smith, 2004, 28); “As with Russell’s other films, *Huckabees* moves its audience from initial bafflement to a broader apprehension of a situation rife with complexity.” (Walters, 2004, 34-35) “If you left David O. Russell’s intellectual farce scratching your head, this two-disc, bonus-packed set is your way to enlightenment. Sort of.” (Travers, 2004, 77)

¹⁶⁴ Negative reviews of the film often refer to its industrial positioning, interestingly: “This anti-corporate comedy is almost beyond a stinker. If it weren’t directed by David O. Russell, one would be tempted to call it unreleasable – actually, I still am tempted. . . . a philosophical mishmash that needs rewriting, not to mention some laughs. Its whimsy might win it a cult following, but it couldn’t qualify as fun.” (Quinn, 2004, 7); “Clever but distancing. . . largely an intellectual pleasure with a hollow core. A definite specialty item despite its more mainstream accoutrements. . . . basically a hipster head trip about life’s big questions, and, as a result, is a more rarefied entertainment.” (Rooney, 2004b, 56); “a big dustbin of a movie, filled with throwaway details, whimsical ‘plants’ designed to bemuse and bedazzle us. Hardcore *Huckabees* fans will doubtless whip up an internet debate about the significance of the cardboard cut-outs of Shania Twain, the Magritte bowler hat, the cantaloupe melon and the swimsuit photos of a young Jessica Lange. . . . one of those films that you either take to or you very much don’t; that you see either as a teasing cornucopia of philosophical profundities, or as a farrago of half-baked freshman posturing. . . a film that plays at ideas, rather than with them. The philosophical content is grindingly banal.” (Romney, 2004, 14)

¹⁶⁵ See in particular Tzioumakis 2011(a and b), who conducts a close review of scholarly work on the field, revealing the assumptions made about independence and its constructions. He points out in particular that “American independent film’s own trajectory, which moved progressively closer to Hollywood cinema (especially from the late 1980s onwards), in tandem with the expansion of Hollywood cinema courses in university curricula, inevitably made the discourse that saw American independent film as related to Hollywood more visible and therefore dominant. In this respect, academic film criticism after the 1990s (‘Takes Four and Five’) increasingly looked at the nature of the (symbiotic) relationship between American independent film and Hollywood, the latter’s co-optive practices and impact on the former and the potential for critiquing the system from within. . . . No wonder then why the flurry of activity in the 2000s insisted on approaching and defining American independent cinema and film in ‘relation’ to Hollywood.” (Tzioumakis, 2011b, 335-336)

¹⁶⁶ The prevailing tendency is to link *Boogie Nights* with the work of Martin Scorsese, and *Magnolia* with Robert Altman's, in particular the sprawling ensemble piece *Nashville*: "vaguely Altman-esque (*Short Cuts*, *Nashville*) in the size and number of its cast and plotlines" (Udovitch, 2000, 46); "If *Boogie Nights* was unmistakably influenced by Scorsese's style, *Magnolia*...invites comparison to Altman's *Short Cuts* and to John Sayles' political drama *City of Hope*, two mosaics of American life woven through a series of darkly comic vignettes" (Levy, 1999, 105); "Once again, Anderson's master is Robert Altman...as with Altman, the flaws are inseparable from the flourishes." (Quinn, 2000, 10); "Altman-by-way-of-Scorsese-and-Tarantino pop melodrama" (Doherty, 1998, 40); "slicker, quicker and less complex than something by, say, Robert Altman, but it does show tendencies in that direction...he does not hesitate to steal from his elders, such as Scorsese." (Klawans, 1997, 36); "*Nashville* meets *GoodFellas* meets *Pulp Friction*." [sic] (Corliss, 1997, 88); "the one *Magnolia* most resembles is Robert Altman's *Short Cuts*" (French, 2000, 7); "The film's unofficial family group is immersed in exploitation movies, which becomes the same collective eccentricity that country music was for *Nashville*. Mr. Anderson, who begins his film spectacularly with a version of the great Copacabana shot from *Goodfellas*, has no qualms about borrowing from the best" (Maslin, 1997, 1); "Anderson freely appropriates from his personal pantheon of post-studio-system maverick film-makers (chiefly Altman, Demme and Scorsese) while at the same time striving to bring his own original vision to the screen." (Olson, 2000, 26)

¹⁶⁷ This is not to say that Anderson fails to live up to early claims of auteurship, merely to suggest that it would have been a premature conjecture to make after *Magnolia*, which in 1999 became just his third feature film. On the contrary, I believe that *There Will Be Blood* (2007) and *The Master* (2012) confirmed these suspicions, and position him as producing a distinctively-styled type of modern American psychological epic.

¹⁶⁸ This was not simply a theoretical movement towards the mainstream: as Schatz points out, in 1992, Miramax and New Line combined shared 3.2% of the US market; in 1994, their first full post-acquisition year, New Line alone took 6.2%, and in 1996 their David Fincher film *Se7en* took \$300 million worldwide "roughly on a par with *Batman Forever*, the designated summer blockbuster from New Line's sister studio, Warner Bros." (Schatz, 2013, 136) thus moving themselves into the 'mini-major' – or major independent, if one concurs with Justin Wyatt (1998) – category. New Line and Miramax would together dominate the field for much of the decade.

¹⁶⁹ Music is strongly emphasised throughout, and the film produced not just one but two soundtrack albums on the Capitol record label, the first in 1997 and the second in 1998.

¹⁷⁰ This echoes Newman's contention that "[h]ipsters are defined by their striving to be hip, but among the crucial components of hipsterism are frequent failures at hipness, and the rejection of hipsterism as inauthentic. Hipsters thus comprise a culture in pursuit of hip rather than a hip culture...so much of the discourse of indie hipsterism is negative that denial and de-authentication must be a key structuring principle of hipsterism." (Newman, 2013 72-73) In this sense, if the fact that Anderson's films are made by Disney constitutes an audience concern at all, it can be seen as either a fact which has been 'successfully denied', or can be appreciated through a consumption framework which renders it ironic.

¹⁷¹ This is certainly the conclusion industry writers at the time had come to, such as Bing, 2002: "major studios continue to invest in the specialty arena and not just for the prestige factor...they're nixing midrange pics in favour of event films that cost more than \$80 million and niche films that cost less than \$10 million, many of which come with foreign financing and minimal risk." (Bing, 2002, 1)

¹⁷² Sources differ on the budget; as the final total is either way sufficient to classify it within this grouping, I do not believe this uncertainty is problematic.

¹⁷³ As per an account of the time "insiders say MTV faced resistance from some quarters when it began shepherding its subtly subversive satire *Election* through the Par machine. While studio chairman Sherry Lansing and production VP Dede Gardner are said to have been big supporters of director Alexander Payne's dark comedy, others at the studio were less enthusiastic about *Election*, which continually scored poorly in test screenings." (Hindes, 1999, 7)

¹⁷⁴ See Tzioumakis, 2006 222-245 for a history of Orion Classics as a mini-major.

¹⁷⁵ Schatz emphasises the importance of the global wave of mergers and acquisitions at the time, arguing that it was Sony's purchase of Columbia Pictures "which in turn induced Sony's arch-rival Matsushita to acquire MCA/Universal in 1990" (Schatz, 2013, 131); while Sony Pictures Classics therefore constitutes a small cog in a very big financial machine, as can be seen from the rapid expansion of Universal's Focus Features division, each conglomerate was anxious to colonise this particular industrial space.

¹⁷⁶ See, for example, Schatz's optimistic outlook on its fortunes: "As the indie market surged, however, the subsidiaries moved increasingly into financing (or co-financing) their films, and moved steadily away from an 'art film' orientation as the commercial stakes went up. The sole exception was Sony Pictures Classics, which continued to operate primarily as a distributor and to sustain its commitment to art films and imports – and which may well stand not only as the first of the conglomerate-owned indies but possibly the last of them as well." (Schatz, 2013, 137)

¹⁷⁷ While Live Entertainment would be better known as Artisan Entertainment in the future, both titles appear to be in common use at this time.

¹⁷⁸ Live/Artisan would in 2003 be absorbed into Lions Gate, which earns special note here, distinguishing itself from the rest of the 'third wave' of indie production and distribution companies, in that it was "much better capitalised than the smaller boutique companies that had entered the market in the early 1990s" (Tzioumakis, 2013, 36), a fact which he too relates to increasing costs of production and distribution). Alisa Perren's case study (2013, 108-120) provides a full consideration of the place of Lions Gate as a mini-major in the contemporary marketplace; as of now "the largest autonomous film production and distribution operation in Hollywood." (ibid., 108). While it falls outside of the time period under discussion, her argument that it has much in common with pre-Disney Miramax, in its eschewing of prestige-led discourse – and associated popular profile – in producing "commercial genre fare targeted to clearly defined and often underserved demographic groups such as young adults, African Americans, Latinos and ageing boomers." (ibid., 109), and emphasising home media, on the basis that the Smart (aka white, middle-class, predominantly male, quasi-art-house) audience was oversaturated, is relevant. In that Lions Gate also capitalised on work too controversial for the increasingly-corporatised quasi-independents (taking *Fahrenheit 9/11* from Miramax-Disney in 2004), I would regard this as an indication of that sector's growing rigidity during the period.

¹⁷⁹ See King, 2009, 235-277 for a fuller consideration of Focus's output and its place within Indiewood; his conclusion, with which I broadly agree, is that it demonstrates "a clear leaning towards the territory of Indiewood, as a particular kind of hybrid form, as opposed to the wider independent/specialty landscape." (ibid., 258).

¹⁸⁰ Th!nkFilm released an unusually broad slate of off-beat feel-good films (Mongolian fable *The Story of the Weeping Camel* and spelling bee documentary *Spellbound*), work by filmmakers with art-house pedigree or existing name recognition (Gus Van Sant's *Gerry*, *Bright Young Things*, comedian and writer Stephen Fry's directorial debut), and controversial or difficult material which seemed likely to generate comment (documentary *Born Into Brothels*, scatological comedy history *The Aristocats*, and explicit sexual comedy *Shortbus*). Its most prominent moment was 2006's *Half-Nelson*, for which rising star Ryan Gosling was nominated for an Academy Award; however, it filed for bankruptcy in 2009, along with several other of founder David Bergstein's companies including Capitol Films.

¹⁸¹ This brief survey – which neglects through lack of time and space any significant internet research, given that a search for "Darren Aronofsky Pi" generates 480,000 hits – was conducted through a Lexis-Nexis search focused on English-language newspaper accounts from 01/01/1997-31/12/1999. The resulting 280 records were cross-checked for duplicates (e.g. for the same piece running in different regional newspapers owned by a single publisher) and 'Listings' pieces were excluded unless they included significant commentary on the film (although it should be noted that almost all of them contained references to the film as a Sundance award-winner). I have included only a few industry accounts (e.g. those running in *Variety*) and those only to establish the film's pre-release 'credentials' and positioning. This left seventy-six different press pieces, coming from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Japan and Australia and comprising national and regional press, from which I have drawn my conclusions.

¹⁸² *Pi*'s artwork reinforces this positioning as an art film/thriller; the background directly replicating the film's grainy black-and-white stock, it features a single eye framed and shadowed in a manner which recalls both *Un*

Chien Andalou and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* as well as calling upon associations with surveillance and paranoia, interrupted by a large red pi symbol in which digits are inscribed, with the ambiguous tag line “faith in chaos”. Aronofsky’s name is more prominent than might be expected for a first-time director, and his status as a Sundance winner takes centre position within the frame; a quote from critic Janet Maslin emphasising its generic traits – “a bizarre and ingeniously paranoid thriller” – takes a strong position at the top of the frame.

¹⁸³ Tzioumakis indicates that ‘autonomy’ is a relative concept during the period, Fox Searchlight having a production budget threshold of \$15 million over which production decisions must be approved from the parent arm; Focus Features’ budget ceiling was twice that at \$30 million, but with approval required for individual pictures (Tzioumakis, 2006, 264). King argues that they still have a “significant degree of autonomy from their studio/corporate parent.” (King, 2009, 6), noting that “the heads of the division were quoted in 2004 as saying the studio had in no case blocked a project Focus wanted to pursue.” (ibid., 240)

¹⁸⁴ King also explores generic contexts in a more elaborated sense in his earlier work *American Independent Cinema* (2005).

Chapter Seven

¹⁸⁵ The industrial position generated for these films was partially dependent on their textual qualities, but was sometimes linked to, as we have seen, discourses of autism and prestige, and sometimes on public controversy, often generated by conventionally ‘inappropriate’ position-taking around issues of sex or violence (see Chapter Eight). For a fascinating related discussion, see Sally Bachner’s *The Prestige of Violence* (2011), which argues that in American fiction from the 1960s to date, violence carries “a peculiar prestige... These novels do not merely insist that violence lies at the centre of American life and of the project of fiction. They locate in violence the ultimate source and site of authentically unmediated reality” (Bachner, 2011,2)

¹⁸⁶ Jackrabbit Slim’s combines *Scalextric*, a Richard Nixon lookalike as maitre d’, booths made from vintage cars, 1950s music performed by ‘Ricky Nelson’, themed food, and servers who resemble old Hollywood stars, like James Dean, Jerry Lewis, Marilyn Monroe, and Buddy Holly.

¹⁸⁷ In one sequence, boxer Butch returns to his apartment to retrieve his treasured gold watch. From the beginning of this scene to its conclusion with the unexpected death of (we have supposed) central character Vincent, is a period of almost six minutes without dialogue, added sound, or incidental music, although diegetic sound – most notably a toilet flushing and toaster ‘popping’, triggering Butch’s shooting of Vincent – is used to tremendous effect.

¹⁸⁸ The timing of Christopher Walken’s delivery of lines such as: “Five long years he wore this watch, up his ass. Then he died of dysentery, he gimme [sic] the watch, I hid this uncomfortable hunk of metal up my ass two years... Now, little man, I give the watch to you” foregrounds comedic elements, thereby deflecting attention from the more problematic aspects.

¹⁸⁹ Here, the insults ‘faggot’ and ‘lesbian’ are not insults related to sexual preference so much as tools reinforcing high school caste structures; sex is about power and rank, not pleasure or identity.

¹⁹⁰ Newman notes that Solondz mentions TV sitcom *The Wonder Years* in relation to *Dollhouse*, as a work he could not ‘recognise’ or relate to, linking that to the ending, where the “bitter note amidst an ostensibly positive scene... is offered as the antidote to the idealization and distortion of reality in one mainstream other, the sitcom, with its routine of problems solved, of weekly happy endings.” (Newman, 2011, 123)

¹⁹¹ Music is used to strong effect in the film, in particular the provocative combination of highly sexualised and childish imagery in the music of the boys’ garage band. This reflects the way in which popular music links male sexual power with the infantilisation of women. Dawn’s sexual awakening arrives as she listens to Steve singing about love being like “taking candy from a baby”, strongly paralleling the dominance/submission dynamic of her relationship with Brandon. The film’s title comes from a later song containing the lyrics “Love’s a confusing thing, in my suburban home, I feel so alone... little girl... Welcome to the dollhouse, I’ve got it all set up for you”. Sung in a sexually suggestive manner, the darker side of the way in which sex and youth are

linked in popular culture is highlighted; later, the ‘real’ paedophile who abducts Missy is positioned as *less* emotionally destructive and sinister than the psychosexual drama in which Dawn is engaged.

¹⁹² Such as when Mark insinuates that Dawn is not attractive enough to be abducted, or the pretty and popular Mary Ellen Moriarty recounts her abduction story at a school assembly.

¹⁹³ The film falters in its exploration of the weight of gendered sexuality in its brief depiction of Ginger Friedman, a counterpart of Dawn’s. Solondz appears to make the mistake of equating biological maturity with sexual maturity in what we see of Ginger: lying on a car kissing a much older man, with others drinking, and apparently in total control of her own sexuality despite her youth. Here, while the visual shorthand is perhaps understandable for such a short scene, its straightforward perpetuation of the ‘jailbait’ myth jars when the film challenges so many other positions on youth, sexuality, and the nature of coercion.

¹⁹⁴ Her piano ‘serenade’ of Steve does indeed flip conventional gendered cinematic expectations; however, due to this reversal as much as because of Steve’s lack of interest Dawn, it fails to have the kind of effect it might have in a more mainstream teen film like *Say Anything* (Cameron Crowe, 1989).

¹⁹⁵ There is no triumphal arc for Dawn, who achieves merely a wary solidarity with Mark, and an acceptance that she will never be truly ‘seen’ by her family.

¹⁹⁶ While not strictly a generic element, it is worth mentioning the film’s soundtrack. Taking a strongly techno or electro form, with work from electronic music pioneers such as Orbital and Autechre, links can be seen between this explicitly mathematically-based music (one might describe it as the contemporary musical expression or experience *of* maths for many listeners), and the fixation with the digital which it here underpins. This can be seen in the opening sequence, where electro music backs a display of numbers and neurons in a style resembling an underground club lightshow, or in the way in which it counterpoints abrupt jump cuts. The soundtrack is the sole periodising agent of a narrative which occurs in a curiously timeless space. Here, it functions as a positioning tool, signified as relating to a particular generational or taste grouping. In this sense it forms both a route of access to the film and a restriction on its wider accessibility.

¹⁹⁷ This is in stark contrast to much other sci-fi; the form often privileges a clean and modernist, or at least a ‘digital’ aesthetic, and this more self-consciously retro mechanical style prefigures that of *The Matrix*, where the ‘real’ world has strong resemblances to that of *Dark City*. This is a matter of industrial as well as stylistic interest – both were partially shot at News Corporation’s Fox Studios Australia.

¹⁹⁸ Higley, 2001, notes their strong resemblance to the eponymous *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau, 1922).

¹⁹⁹ Conventional in many ways, it is worth noting that these are not uncomplicated representations for a sci-fi/action film, drawing as they do on the history of the female noir character. ‘Bad girl’ prostitute May is a devoted mother figure and indeed performs a mothering function for Murdoch, for which she is punished with death; ‘good girl’ Emma/Anna is a nightclub singer, a sexually-charged and historically-weighted role in the history of noir cinema, albeit an oddly asexual one in this case – Emma’s child-like singing voice is atypically ‘innocent’.

²⁰⁰ It is worth here mentioning the design’s conscious attempt to compress architectural history and geography into one unpredictable locus, calling to mind the phrase “all that is solid melts into air”. Mike Wayne describes the strangers as “postmodernist *bricoleurs*” (Wayne, 2003, 216), and as production designer Patrick Tatopoulos describes the city’s layout, “the movie takes place everywhere, and it takes place nowhere. It’s a city built of pieces of cities. A corner from one place, another from some place else. So, you don’t really know where you are. A piece will look like a street in London, but a portion of the architecture looks like New York, but the bottom of the architecture looks again like a European city. You’re there, but you don’t know where you are. It’s like every time you travel, you’ll be lost.” (Wagner, 1997, 64) More tellingly, as the rebellious Mr. Hand, whose hive-mind is strongly affected by the implantation of Murdoch’s human ‘memories’ says: “The city’s ours, we made it... We fashioned this city on stolen memories. Different eras, different pasts, all rolled into one. Each night we revise it, refine it, in order to learn... what makes you human... We need to be like you.” Here, history is rendered unstable, and geography mutable; ideas of the transcendent human ‘soul’, supposedly eternal and precious, form the crux of the film’s moral code.

²⁰¹ The film gained cult status not simply in its own right but also in relation to the on-set death of young actor Brandon Lee.

²⁰² Class featured prominently in teen pictures during the 1980s and particularly within the work of John Hughes. However, as Shary points out, by the end of the 1980s “teen movies in general had lost much of their social and financial momentum. . . . class became just another issue in the comprehensive conflicts that inevitably influence young romantic struggles.” (Shary, 2011, 577) *Rushmore*'s – albeit very low-key – inclusion of class as an element is significant. However, Anderson's disinclination to engage directly with Max's class status, using it instead as colourful background material, lays the Smart film open to accusations of middle-class smugness.

²⁰³ Max and his companions stride slowly, in a manner reminiscent of the *nouvelle vague* or Tarantino's homages to it, across campus as his extra-curricular activities are outlined. Many of them are very marginal activities, or Max's performance in them clearly mediocre, not that he appears to care: editor of the *Yankee Review*, French Club president, Russia in model UN, stamp and coin club vice president, debate team captain, lacrosse team manager, calligraphy club president, astronomy society founder, fencing team captain, track and field junior varsity decathlon, 2nd chorale choirmaster, bombardment society founder, Kung Fu club yellow belt, trap and skeet club founder, *Rushmore* beekeepers president, *Yankee Racers* founder, Max Fischer Players Director, Piper Cub flyer 4.5 hours logged. This intense desire for activity marks him out clearly as a kind of ‘anti-Slacker’, although of course one could argue that psychologically Max's tendency to busy himself beyond all reasonable expectations signifies an avoidance tactic of its own, a search for continual distraction as much as for community.

²⁰⁴ He is in some ways, for example, reminiscent of Ferris Bueller in his position as a trickster figure who sees himself as above and/or outside of the adult social world.

²⁰⁵ Speaking at a school assembly, factory owner Blume emphasises that although from a blue collar background, he is sending kids there because it's one of the “best schools in the country”. He then goes on to say “Now, for some of you, it doesn't matter. You were born rich, and you're going to stay rich. But here's my advice to the rest of you: take dead aim on the rich boys. Get them in the crosshairs. And take them down. Just remember: they can buy anything. But they can't buy backbone.”

²⁰⁶ Kaveney (2006, 19, 41-42) regards this trope as important: in *The Breakfast Club* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, as well as *Rushmore* and *Election*, authority figures become embroiled in petty rivalries with teenagers, showing a mean-spiritedness, and/or lack of appropriate ‘adult’ perspective, necessary for narrative conflict.

²⁰⁷ The Blume brothers leave *Rushmore* for military school; in most teen films this would be coded as punishment or abandonment, however for the thuggish insensitive twins, Max's diametric opposites, this counts as a happy ending. Clearly this ending avoids any potential slur to Blume's ‘good (symbolic) father’ status, however it is also similar to the conclusion of another quasi-Smart teen picture, *Election*. In this, lesbian Tammy is ‘punished’ for being a “troublemaker” by being sent to a Catholic all-girls school, where she falls in love. Here, the traditional punishment of being sent to a convent in fact functions as a triumph or reversal, emphasising the classical teen film gap between adolescent and parental values and expectations.

²⁰⁸ As in many teen pictures, the idea of life as a masculine competition for sexual resources, and the lack of female entitlement to agency (passed from one male competitor to the other), are reinforced. We see a high degree of intentional absurdity, as the object of Max's affections is both a teacher and a grieving widow with fragmented personal boundaries. Max is surrounded by a culture of sexualised bragging, where sexual activity is seen as an obligatory rite of passage, and his pursuit of Rosemary Cross is marked by his adoption of models of masculine behaviour which reveal themselves as both misogynistic and ineffectual. Courting her with self-consciously cool references to opera and wearing a red beret, Max utilises his comparative – although clearly inscribed as misguided and humorous – verbal sophistication and desire to behave in a socially-prescribed ‘adult’ manner to wrong-foot and manipulate his target. His behaviour would be described as aggressive, sinister and controlling in an adult or non-comedic context, but here is marked out as the product of a counterfeit adopted persona, exonerating Max. It is also linked with Max's conflicting desires to avail of the autonomy of adulthood, and to remain sequestered at *Rushmore*, producing an effect of distanced or complicated empathy for the obsessive and confused teenager. It is only when Cross punctures Max's sense of himself as an adult, sexually powerful male that she manages to defuse his sense of entitlement to her, and Max's fantasy of

ownership and ‘perfect’ intellectual harmony collapses in the face of her adult sexuality. At the end Max courts Margaret, providing a rather pedagogical note on the importance (crucial within the teen picture genre) of aspiring to ‘appropriate’ sexual partners. It is useful to note, too, that the romantic climax takes place at a prom-style dance, the traditional teen picture location for elaboration or recuperation of romantic ‘destinies’.

²⁰⁹ Maxine, in fact, is visually a rather contemporary noir figure, with her stark black-and-white clothing, dark lips, sharp haircut and omnipresent cigarette, in some ways she resembles a more hard-edged New York Mia Wallace.

²¹⁰ In its linking of comedy with gender confusion and gendered roleplay, the film is part of a lengthy American heritage, along with films as diverse as *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959), *Tootsie* (Sydney Pollack, 1982), *The Birdcage* (Mike Nichols, 1996), and *Big Momma’s House* (Raja Gosnell, 2002).

²¹¹ The academy is represented here by Malkovich’s ‘biographer’, and fictional Los Angeles Times National Arts Editor Christopher Bing (played by David Fincher), who describes him as “a technical genius”. It is also represented by the – seen as self-referential and seeking its own cultural capital above other considerations of authenticity – ‘artsy’ wing of Hollywood; this is seen in a parodic interview with Sean Penn, worried that if he moves into puppeteering too quickly “I’ll be deemed an imitator” but “once we all get the courage to just follow through on our instincts like Malkovich has, a lot of us will move into puppetry.” The framing of Penn in front of a French poster for “*The Crossing Guard, un film de Sean Penn*” has clear semiotic underpinnings here – Penn’s public persona tends to be associated with both a kind of pretentious over-seriousness, and the crossing over from low to high(er) culture (as a former ‘Brat Pack’ member-turned-director). The sly implication here is that Hollywood aspirations to art are related more to a desire to be seen as ahead of new trends than genuine creative conviction.

²¹² The phrase does not appear in any of Shakespeare’s known works, and the earliest reference to it I have found is in the title of the 1932 Arlen/Koehler song later made famous by Frank Sinatra.

²¹³ The title *American Beauty* references several underpinnings of U.S. culture; as well as having a certain indexical likeness to the phrase ‘American Dream’, the rose for which it is named, and which recurs throughout in a series of highly sexualised fantasy sequences, is also known as ‘Miss All-American Beauty’. The official flower of Washington D.C., it has a certain minor iconicity to its credit, and has featured in china patterns, lipstick names, and Frank Sinatra songs. Potently, it is also the subject of a J.D. Rockefeller quote which equates, in a quasi-Darwinist fashion, the rose’s growth to the development of capitalism, in a manner which clearly means to align capitalism with supposed ‘natural law’: “The American Beauty rose can be produced in the splendour and fragrance which bring cheer to its beholder only by sacrificing the early buds which grow up around it. This is not an evil tendency in business. It is merely the working-out of a law of nature and a law of God.” (cited in Arthur, 2004, 131)

²¹⁴ Asked to produce a job description with the understanding that an unsatisfactory evaluation of his own attributes and contributions may result in dismissal, Lester’s response is to produce the following: “My job consists of basically masking my contempt for the assholes in charge and at least once a day retiring to the men’s room so I can jack off while I fantasize about a life that doesn’t so closely resemble hell.” As in *Adaptation*, masturbation presents here as a particularly masculinised symbol of the loss or waste of individual autonomy, personal creativity, or independence.

²¹⁵ Kevin Spacey’s Oscar acceptance speech summarises the film’s preferred reading: “We got to see all of his worst qualities and we still got to love him.” See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WCjt7PME5_E (Oscars channel).

²¹⁶ While recognising that the film provides more space for Carolyn’s character development than might be the case in a more obviously mainstream film, a fuller reading of *American Beauty* from a feminist perspective could conclude that the only real ‘challenge’ to Lester’s personal autonomy is his wife’s success, and her determination to be *seen* to succeed. It would also cast Lester as a sexual predator whose apparent change of heart regarding his fantasies of Angela is fuelled only by her virginity; that is, seeing her as another man’s future sexual property deters him, not her obvious vulnerability. The framing of Jane and Ricky’s characters also provides for a reading of it as misogynistic. For distant father Lester, the primary threat Jane presents is her potential lack of compliance. Taunts of “You’d better watch yourself, Jane, or you’re going to turn into a real

bitch, just like your mother” reveal Lester’s true agenda: his assertion of victimhood, which must be transcended by the achievement of dominance over the women in his life. Similarly, Ricky feigns compliance in order to survive his abusive family, and is rewarded for doing so (with Jane’s affection, and with an improbable \$40,000 stash earned through drug-dealing), and symbolically colludes with Lester in minimising Jane’s pain. In a sequence which exists primarily (cynically?) to provide misdirection as to Lester’s killer, this is made clear through Ricky’s statement that his father is not ‘bad’, merely weak and afraid. While he attempts to explain Jane’s repugnance towards Lester in Oedipal terms, Jane replies “I know you think my dad’s harmless, but you’re wrong. He’s doing massive psychological damage to me.” We are however not encouraged to read Jane’s pain as centrally *meaningful*, because of the narrative demand that Lester remain dominant, and the inevitable comparison which must be made between Lester and Ricky’s father, the violent, closeted Fitz. The implication is clear: if Ricky can forgive his bigoted authoritarian father, then Jane should adore hers, and resume her subservient position within the family hierarchy.

²¹⁷ I would argue that the deep unpleasantness of Lester’s desire for Angela is partially suppressed by the casting of Kevin Spacey, whose fey, unthreatening persona and lack of excessively ‘masculine’ musculature directs attention away from his inappropriate actions and intentions towards her.

²¹⁸ Christian figures feature throughout, with many of the characters given specific messianic functions; Neo as Christ, resurrected following ‘death’ at the hand of the Agents; Morpheus as John the Baptist, or at one point during his capture by Agent Smith, Lazarus; and Cypher as clearly-signalled Judas figure, betraying his comrades for the opportunity to return to oblivion. Trinity’s character is somewhat more complicated, and indeed her final major act within the narrative is to declare that Neo “can’t be dead...because I love you” and provide a fairytale kiss, with Neo as Sleeping Beauty. In addition, the Oracle is clearly taken from Greek mythology – the film employs a promiscuous range of archetypes, in keeping with its rather pick-and-mix attitude elsewhere.

²¹⁹ In particular the film references the wave of wire-work films which dominated Hong Kong martial arts cinema during the 1990s. Following from the more contemporarily-framed Triad films of the decade prior (for example the work of John Woo), wire-work films were often embedded in traditional *wuxia* fiction, almost analogous to the Japanese Samurai tradition. Throughout the 1990s considerable cross-fertilisation of American and Asian cinema occurred, as increasing economic liberalisation in Asia led to its identification as a greater potential market, and the Hong Kong studios lost on- and off-screen talent to the opportunities Hollywood budgets could provide. The likes of John Woo, Jet Li, Michelle Yeoh, Ang Lee, Zhang Ziyi and Chow-Yun Fat moved into Hollywood production and Hong Kong fight choreographer Yuen Woo Ping worked on the *Kill Bill* films as well as *The Matrix*. However the flow has not been all one-way. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee, 2000) was an American-Chinese-Hong Kong-Taiwanese co-production which became an unexpected international hit, as did Chinese production *Hero* ([Zhang Yimou](#), 2002). While these films are in many ways different to *The Matrix*, they share common visual elements, and I do not believe it is too outlandish to suggest that the Wachowskis’ film may have paved the way for them outside Asia in more mainstream audience terms. See Cheuk (2008).

²²⁰ That the film has inspired a rash of popular philosophy books surely indicates its accessibility as a ‘teaching tool’, for all that it does not contain any terribly sophisticated thinking.

²²¹ One of the more interesting perspectives the film shows us is that of (oddly conflicted) Agent Smith, who hyper-rationally asserts that humanity was judged by the machines and found wanting, saying “I tried to classify your species. You’re not actually mammals. Every mammal on this planet instinctively develops a natural equilibrium with the surrounding environment but you humans do not....[you are a] virus. Human beings are a disease, a cancer of this planet. You are a plague, and we are the cure.”

²²² Without wishing to draw unfair comparisons, and acknowledging that 1999 was a comparatively unusual year in the depth and breadth of work which came to prominence at the box office, *The Matrix*’s real counterpart that year was perhaps most obviously *Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace* (George Lucas), and to a lesser extent the likes of *The Mummy* (Stephen Sommers) and *Wild Wild West* (Barry Sonnenfeld). To me the comparative sophistication of *The Matrix* is clear.

²²³ While Morpheus explains to Neo that he will die in real life if he dies in the Matrix, meaning that Neo and Trinity are indeed ‘killing’ the constructs with whom they battle, his earlier note that “many of them are so inert,

so hopelessly dependent on the system, that they will fight to protect it” can be interpreted more as an absolution of guilt more than as sociologically-based critique.

²²⁴ This calls to mind *Fight Club* more clearly than any of the other texts, in particular in the emphasis on the instability of the natural environment (or the psychological manifestation of such), the messianic cult of personality, the quasi-mystical references (although these are more quasi-political in *Fight Club*) which privilege belief over thought, the structuring of both films around various ‘tests’ which must be passed in order to access the authentic self.

²²⁵ Note: my references are taken from the original release version of the film. While the subsequent director’s cut, released in 2004, adds a great deal of background information, giving the narrative a more worked-through science-fiction rationale, I believe that what it adds in clarity, it minimises in tone, atmospherics and intensity.

²²⁶ To give a flavour of the cult appreciation the film continues to inspire, multiple still-active fan sites are associated with the film, its ideas, and its aesthetics. These include not just the labyrinthine official website, itself originally a paratextual adventure extending far beyond the film (now available at <http://archive.ires.net/donniedarko/>) but also *para*-paratexts, such as this guide on extracting maximum utility from the site itself:

<http://everything2.com/title/How+to+navigate+the+Donnie+Darko+website+with+some+degree+of+success>
This is in addition to the more ‘usual’ fandom hubs such as <http://www.donniedarko.org.uk/> a site on which all manner of alternative interpretations of the film are posited. Booth (2008) also produces a consideration of the intermedial relationship between website and film.

²²⁷ This was particularly the case in Europe; the song which concludes the film, Tears for Fears’ *Mad World*, performed by Michael Andrews and Gary Jules became an international hit, reaching the coveted Christmas number one chart position in 2003. The film joins *Pulp Fiction* and *Lost In Translation* as a one whose cross-generic modal appeal was converted into cross-media appeal.

²²⁸ Catherine Driscoll includes it in her analysis of the contemporary teen picture, saying that “Donnie Darko may be a story about time travel, or about mental illness, but it is certainly a story about the disempowerment of youth.” (Driscoll, 2011, 106)

²²⁹ I see the opening sequence as directly referring to Smart forefather David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* (1986), where the idyllic suburbs of Lumberton are disrupted by the discovery of a severed human ear.

²³⁰ This scene, while emphasising the period aspects and the importance of pop culture to teenage culture, and teen (hyper)sexuality, is reminiscent of a similar set-piece in *Reservoir Dogs* where the characters discuss Madonna and the homoeroticism of *Top Gun*; the ironic reappropriation and manipulation of culture is a recurring trend in these films.

²³¹ See Fontenot and Harris, 2010, for a history of the PMRC as public-interest group.

²³² See for example Kaveney, who describes Ferris Bueller as a ‘trickster figure’, and notes that in *Pretty in Pink* and *Some Kind of Wonderful* “personal autonomy is threatened by the pursuit of status and approval [and characterised by] Hughes’ identification of moral uprightness with the anarchic and eccentric” (Kaveney, 2006, 32-33). She identifies various archetypes or motif within the teen film, of which *Donnie Darko* mobilises several: “the Lord of Misrule, the Humiliation of the Obsessive Authority Figure and that Authority Figure’s Persecution of the Weak...the Hierarchy of High School – in forms that crystallise them for later use.” (ibid., 45). There are also links with what she describes as *Heathers*’ ‘satirisation of therapeutic culture’. The major absence from the film is the representation of “dysfunctional families and the way that parental expectations cripple adolescents” (Kaveney, 2006, 45). Donnie’s family are supportive and affectionate, his parents concerned less with expectations than with managing the fallout of their son’s ‘paranoid schizophrenia’ diagnosis. This is another indication that it functions not as a teen film per se, but grants teen film tropes a high degree of complexity and experiential ‘density’ in nostalgic recollection.

²³³ The police visit, during which each student is required to take a handwriting test to match against the perpetrator’s, can be related to ‘the frame-up and locker search’ which as Kaveney points out, is “a stock device

of teen films and television, obviously reflecting a genuine anxiety about the intrusion of authority figures into the private.” (Kaveney, 2006, 96)

²³⁴ In the director’s cut, it is worth noting that an extra scene features where Cherita is taunted with the phrase “Hey, Porky Pig? I hope you get molested”; this is reminiscent of the sadistic sexual taunting of *Welcome to the Dollhouse*.

²³⁵ Additionally, if we refer to the director’s cut, Donnie’s acceptance of his fate will, it is implied, save the world from being sucked into a wormhole, giving his early exchange with Gretchen – “Donnie Darko, what the hell kind of name’s that, it’s like some sort of superhero or something.” “What makes you think I’m not?” a resonance the original version does not have; here, the exchange serves more as courtship ritual, and prefigures only his saving of Gretchen, not the world.

²³⁶ Indeed, Pomeroy’s defence, “it’s meant to be ironic” is directly reminiscent of Sconce’s note that “[t]o speak in an ironic tone is instantly to bifurcate one’s audience into those who ‘get it’ and those who do not. The entire point of ironic address is to ally oneself with sympathetic peers and to distance oneself from the vast ‘other’ audience, however defined, which is often the target of the speaker’s or artist’s derision.” (Sconce, 2002, 352)

²³⁷ In the teen film, property destruction is often framed as a strategy of resistance to forces beyond teenage control, and sometimes (although not here) carries distinct references to social class.

²³⁸ Bordwell regards ambiguity as the key unifying principle of the art film – “Thus the art film solicits a particular reading procedure: Whenever confronted with a problem in causation, temporality, or spatiality, we first seek realistic motivation...If we’re thwarted, we next seek authorial motivation...Uncertainties persist but are understood as such, as *obvious* uncertainties, so to speak. Put crudely, the slogan of the art cinema might be, ‘When in doubt, read for maximum ambiguity.’” (Bordwell, 1979, 60)

²³⁹ The film is to a certain extent factually based: “Kaufman did indeed have a contract to adapt the Orlean book, but he developed a severe case of writer’s block, broken only when he conceived the idea of thematizing the screenwriting struggle itself. Thus *Adaptation* is simultaneously an adaptation and an original screenplay, one which turns a non-fiction book into a fictional adventure...for the neo-Aristotelian McKee, stories should be about realities, not the mysteries of writing, yet the mysteries of writing are precisely the focus of *Adaptation*.” (Stam & Raengo, 2005, 1-2)

²⁴⁰ An aspect of this, too, is the casting of Nicolas Cage as Charlie and Donald. His early career had been characterised by self-consciously ‘quirky’ performances, such as those in *Peggy Sue Got Married* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1986) and in the work of such proto-Smart filmmakers as the Coen brothers (*Raising Arizona*, 1987) and David Lynch (*Wild At Heart*, 1990), and Oscar-winning for his work in *Leaving Las Vegas* (Mike Figgis, 1995). In the years immediately prior to *Adaptation*, Cage had been best-known for a variety of idiosyncratic, over-the-top action performances. These included roles in *The Rock* (Michael Bay, 1996), *Con Air* (Simon West, 1997), *Face/Off* (John Woo, 1997) and *Gone In Sixty Seconds* (Dominic Sena, 2000). In that sense, his performance as flabby, ineffectual Charlie and naïve buffoon Donald was somewhat at odds with his persona during that period, for all that it does not constitute a particular departure when his career as a whole is taken into account.

²⁴¹ Sconce’s, “bespectacled audiences” (Sconce, 2002, 349) of Smart film.

²⁴² The psychoanalytic device of locating Charlie’s identity crisis as much in his sibling relationship as in his personal environment (primarily his creative work) means that the film’s identity politics are actually more submerged than might be expected, given Charlie’s simultaneously self-absorbed and questing, philosophically-adrift, personality. However it is worth noting in relation to resemblances with many of the rest of these films, that Charlie is *reacting* to what appears to all intents a somewhat successful career, or the prospect of impending success (which the self-selecting Smart viewer will ‘know’ he has attained). Similarly, Orlean has achieved a high degree of professional success within a specifically bourgeois intellectual environment. Their various acts of fear, self-loathing, and self-destruction therefore function as the kind of middle-class rejection of conventional social or professional mores which also attend films like *Fight Club* and *American Beauty*, for all that they are subtext here rather than text.

²⁴³ An example of the way in which *Adaptation* calls upon diverging/doubled perspectives on film is the way in which the phrase “Laroche, he’s such a fun character, isn’t he?”, or variations of it, recur. The first time we hear it is during Charlie and Valerie’s early script lunch, during which he is positive and enthusiastic about the prospect of adapting that “great, sprawling *New Yorker* stuff”, and about his own prospects of remaining faithful to Orlean’s source material. The second time follows a scene in which Laroche and Orlean have an intimate phone conversation in which he reveals (and which we see in an ‘insert’) the poignant details of the crash in which his mother and uncle died, and following which his wife left him. Orlean too reveals her emotions, her sense of being trapped, saying “I think if I almost died I would leave my marriage too...Because I could. Because it’s like a free pass. Nobody can judge you if you almost died.” This scene links directly to Orlean’s lunch meeting with Valerie, during which the executive repeats the ‘fun character’ phrase; if the previous scene is about deep emotional connection, this is about the commodification of that connection, revealing the deeply ambivalent perspective the film takes on the practice of movie-making. The phrase occurs one last time, as Orlean relates it to Laroche, whose response is “No shit, I’m a fun character”, and the conviction that he should play himself in the film; in this last instance the film presents this complex, doubled view of itself, but still makes conventional claims on the idea of a logic-bound, cohesive diegesis.

²⁴⁴ Richard Armstrong describes it as a “narrative of displacement” (Armstrong, 2010, 139) and marks its resemblance to art cinema classic *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959), as well as noting that it combines road movie and melodrama elements.

²⁴⁵ As Justin Horton points out, the restriction of audible dialogue renders the final conversation between Bob and Charlotte forever mysterious, constituting a significant disruption of the classical ending, as “few cinematic conventions are as doggedly adhered to as the insistence on clarity of speech. Audiences, it seems, can tolerate fractured chronology, ellipses, or narrative irresolution, but the withholding or occlusion of the voice is experienced as an unusual and unsettling disruption.” (Horton, 2013, 4)

²⁴⁶ Todd Kennedy describes Coppola’s work as having “an aesthetic that simultaneously invokes foundational gaze theory, comments upon postfeminist concerns about consumption as a ‘feminine’ ideal, and attempts to mirror and reverse macho tropes from the 1960s and 1970s male auteur movement, which includes her father...critics and audiences themselves struggle with what to do with Coppola’s films, placing her in the middle of categories that have always remained at odds within film criticism: male and female, mainstream and independent, feminism and auteurship.” (Kennedy, 2010, 37-38) Not least due to the marginalisation of many female directors, his sense of Coppola as occupying a liminal space contributes to the ‘independent’ framing of her work as much as the texts themselves. That notwithstanding, I believe certain aspects of her approach are distinctively female-oriented, from the opening shot of Charlotte’s underwear-clad buttocks, which both eroticises her and renders her semi-nudity mundane, to the tiny detail of her applying lipstick in her room (as play or distraction, not strategic attraction for the opposite sex, as the gesture is often coded), as well as the *ikebana* (flower arranging) class which privileges the idea of women engaged in a communal activity in their own space. It is also evident in Charlotte and Bob’s accidental visit to a lapdancing club. Rather than objectifying the dancer, Bob sits uncomfortably on his hands; as she does a dramatic backbend, he almost instinctively (and paternally) reaches out to grab her, and after Charlotte ‘rescues’ him, awkwardly thanks her outstretched legs before leaving. The scene in which Bob rejects a prostitute is racially problematic, but sexually straightforward. In many films, engagement (or flirtation) with the sex industry is included as ‘proof’ of conventional virility or masculinity; here, disengagement from it is presented as sexual and moral confidence. Coppola’s work may be ‘post-feminist’ enough to include these tropes, but it is feminist enough to implicitly critique them.

²⁴⁷ For the previous decade, Shields had largely confined himself to remixing and producing for artists such as Placebo and Yo La Tengo, as well as touring with Primal Scream and contributing to work from Dinosaur Jr. and the Manic Street Preachers. He had also composed music for a Canadian dance troupe, but had not released any original work during this period.

²⁴⁸ These are extra-textual references, but ones which figure significantly in discursive representations of Coppola (and perhaps in a more prominent way than if she were a male director); her clothing label ‘Milk Fed’ was founded in cooperation with Kim Gordon of famed indie group Sonic Youth, and her husband and long-time musical collaborator is Thomas Mars, of internationally-known French indie band Phoenix.

²⁴⁹ While they remain outside the scope of this work, accusations of racism have been levelled against the film, culminating at the time of its release in the “Lost In Racism” campaign urging Screen Actors Guild and Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences members to vote against the film in its nominated categories (see Wright, 2004). Some elements are explicitly problematic, such as when Bob jokes that Charlotte’s “black toe” will end up on a restaurant menu, or the repeated jokes regarding the supposed Japanese difficulty in distinguishing ‘l’ sounds from ‘r’. Others are more implicitly so, as when Bob is sent a “Premium Fantasy” prostitute, whom he rebuffs, but whose attempted seduction and/or shakedown carries a deliberate incomprehensibility, approaching an ‘orientalist’ view of non-white women as problematically, uncontrollably hypersexual.

²⁵⁰ Charlotte and Bob both toy with the commercialised self-exploration offered by self-help; the audiobook which Charlotte silently mocks herself for listening to is perplexingly and presumably deliberately obscurantist: “Did you ever wonder what your purpose in life is? This book is about finding your soul’s purpose or destiny. Every soul has its path. But sometimes, that path is not clear. The inner map theory is an example of how each soul begins with an imprint, all compacted into a pattern, that has been selected by your soul before you’ve even gotten here.”

²⁵¹ Here it is useful to note that Abel (2010) links what he terms ‘postromance’ with globalisation: “a recently emerging ‘genre’ of international art house films that engage issues of love, sex, dating, and romance, usually set in contemporary urban environments....present[ing] audiences with an essentially pessimistic outlook on romantic relationships. The characters populating such postromance environments could be argued to enact the ‘success’ of the feminist intervention since the 1960s. They have grown up with the awareness that marriage is neither the necessary nor the ‘normal’ framework one needs in postadolescent life, and they share the post-1968 skepticism of the traditional “ideal” of lifelong, monogamous relationships....symptomatic of the age of neoliberal finance capitalism, with its imperative for citizens to be hypermobile workaholics... socioeconomic pressures manifest themselves on the private level, where the demands of fast-paced contemporary social life hinder one’s ability to maintain the different temporality required for developing and sustaining a romantic relationship.” (Abel, 2010, 77)

²⁵² Todd McGowan links visual, linguistic, and capitalist excess in his psychoanalytic analysis of the film, noting that the characters’ resistance of this, their focus on absence rather than excess, is what unites them; also that Charlotte resists attempts to position her as the stereotypical ‘consuming female’ of much classical cinema, with her minimalist makeup and clothing. As he describes it, the aesthetic “suggests an association of enjoyment with absence – an association that has become counterintuitive for subjects of global capitalism. Though the film foregrounds the excess of global capitalist culture, it depicts this excess in such a way that it no longer seems excessive. That is to say, Coppola’s aesthetic at once highlights excess and associates this excess with absence.” (McGowan, 2007, 56)

²⁵³ Their actions, and occasionally dialogue, such as when Vivian suggests, feet up on her desk in a classic ‘gumshoe’ pose, that Albert should “go home, let sleeping dogs lie”, engage cinephile references to the hard-boiled PIs of detective film, but as with all characters here, these references are engaged satirically.

²⁵⁴ Carol Vernallis links Gondry’s choice of Carrey as actor with both the heritage of silent film and with one of the newest media forms, the music video: “In a way it returns us to the silent era, particularly to a form of typage used by Eisenstein. Music video directors have to find shots that possess signs of human emotion powerful enough for the images to project over the music; but the performers, while usually polished and self-assured, are not actorly. Second, music videos do not present classical performances because they lack cause/effect, action/reaction relationships, except in the most fanciful ways.” (Vernallis, 2008, 286) While it is interesting to observe the stylistic link between Gondry’s considerable and impressive body of work as a music video director and his filmmaking, I believe her comparison does neither Gondry’s direction nor Carrey’s subtle and nuanced performance any favours; however, it is interesting in locating Joel as an ‘Everyman’ via the idea of Eisensteinian typage.

²⁵⁵ One of the reasons, I believe, that this film resonates so clearly with many viewers outside of the traditional Smart audience is that despite its formal unconventionality it adheres to the ‘emotional logic’ of much more conventional romantic comedies; in the resolution of Joel and Clementine’s clearly dysfunctional relationship we hear the echoes of that most formulaic of rom-com definitions of love – “You complete me” (*Jerry Maguire*, dir. Cameron Crowe, 1996).

²⁵⁶ *Stranger Than Fiction* (Marc Forster, 2006) provides an interesting counterpoint; while it contains elements reminiscent of *Eternal Sunshine*, including a protagonist who discovers that he is in fact a fictional character facing imminent ‘erasure’ through his author’s desire to kill him off, these elements are directed towards much more conformist ends. The formally conventional and indeed reassuring nature of the structure militates against complex readings; it is clearly influenced by the kind of philosophical and epistemological questions asked by the likes of Kaufman, but retains much more of the predictable overtones of mainstream comedy. I therefore count it more as a result of Smart influence operating within the mainstream than a Smart film per se.

²⁵⁷ This idea of ‘uncertainty’ as an organising principle of the film’s narrative construction extends to its visual and sound aesthetic, and is used to acute effect in illustrating the dream-like nature of Joel’s erasure experience, as well as the effects it has on his mind. Much of the visual interplay between the narrative structure and the visual elements is devoted to symbolically representing both the labyrinthine workings of the human mind, and the loss of self that goes with the loss of Joel’s memories. He is literally left ‘in the dark’ as lights wink out behind him, and the world of his mind becomes akin to a stage-set, full of darkened, oppressively small corridors, and entrances and doors which offer impossible transitions.

²⁵⁸ It must be noted that within the gender politics of conventional film, childlike behaviour is not seen as problematic when performed by a female; behaviour such as Clem’s – for example chanting “Slidy slidy, slidy slidy” at the Charles River – would be construed quite differently if performed by Joel.

²⁵⁹ The place of the ‘Other’ is curiously complex within the world of much Smart film, where rather than employ simple oppositions of ‘good guy’ versus ‘bad guy’, or drawing explicit (laboured, even perhaps clichéd in the context of interpretation by our notional media hyper-literate Smart audience) analogies between conflicting characters, contrasts and parallels are inscribed in more complex ways. *Fight Club* combines them in to sinister effect in the form of Tyler Durden; *Adaptation* features troubled twins Charlie and Donald Kaufman (enriched by our extra-textual knowledge that Nicolas Cage is playing both); *I ♥ Huckabees*, with its ‘African Guy’ and the concept of ‘Othering’ (Albert Markowski and Tommy Corn) as part of a process of philosophical and personal development.

²⁶⁰ One could argue that this becomes something of a commentary on the Mulveyan ‘male gaze’, with Clementine positioned as a cipher onto which men (both the fictional men, Joel and Patrick, and the potential male viewer) express their own desires; her wishes as a person are denied by Joel, who believes she can save him from himself, and his constructed/reconstructed memories of her perform the same action. The ‘real’ Clementine is dishevelled, roots showing, skin flaking, ‘falling apart’ whereas the recalled/imagined Clementine is clear-skinned and beautiful; this is in one sense a commentary on the way nostalgia colours memory, and indeed the way that love alters visions of the loved one. But Clementine’s problem is a problem of representation both within and for the film, one that dovetails with Kaufman’s original, more pessimistic, ending rather more clearly than with the finished product.

²⁶¹ The nature of the immediate, visceral (if one can use the term in relation to an activity so explicitly cerebral) access to his memories provided by the erasure renders the experience similar to the practice of Gestalt therapy: a form of psychotherapy emphasising the idea that the ‘client’ must alter their own *Weltanschauung* in order to function more appropriately within the world (Woldt and Toman 2005). Crucially it is a form of therapeutic process which focuses on lived experience, and on the present:

The aim of Gestalt therapy is the *awareness continuum*...where what is of greatest concern and interest to the organism, the relationship, the group or society becomes Gestalt, comes into the foreground where it can be fully experienced and coped with (acknowledged, worked through, sorted out, changed, disposed of, etc.) so that it can melt into the background (be forgotten or assimilated and integrated) and leave the foreground free for the next relevant gestalt.” (Perls, 1976, 221-222 [italics as per original])

Joel’s forcible reintroduction into his own memories forms the foundation of precisely this kind of process, whereby he makes therapeutic amendments to his own *Weltanschauung*.

²⁶² We can regard this as a refreshing turn away from the ethics of the conventional romantic comedy, in that it shows a progressive politics of gender which does not require that the female partner serve as moral and philosophical boundary-keeper to the more unrestrained male – ‘the one who can tame him’, so to speak.

²⁶³ The sequence illustrating Joel as a baby is particularly interesting. For all that it is clearly played for comic effect, the absurdity of adult Joel in a child’s patterned pyjamas heightened by the over-sized furniture placing him at a child’s level, fascinated by his own strong desire to be picked up by his mother, it also links several of the film’s threads. One of the primary factors here is the extent to which the audience is assumed to have a working knowledge of modern psychology. While the film would presumably function (in the sense of creating pleasure) without this, an acquaintance with Freudian psychoanalysis enriches the viewing experience, allowing a more elaborated understanding of how Joel manages his ‘strategy’ of (temporary) escape from Lacuna’s clutches.

²⁶⁴ Taking the chicken from his plate (an intimate but ‘familiar’ gesture) is one instance, others are her breaches of the normative socio-sexual order in questioning whether the person he lives with is male or female, and her assertion that (as they are in the house of Ruth and David Laskin) ‘I’d prefer to be Ruth but I’m flexible’. The suggestion that Clementine wishes them to temporarily assume the Laskins’ identities dovetails with this film’s preoccupation with constructions of personal identity.

²⁶⁵ The title of the film comes from Alexander Pope’s 1717 poem *Eloisa to Abelard*, a retelling of the tragic 12th century love story. Separated after their secret marriage, with her confined to a convent and him castrated, their famous letters are an exploration of human and divine love. Pope’s poem outlines Heloise’s wish that memories of Abelard be obliterated in order to end her suffering.

²⁶⁶ In some ways the film functions rather as a screwball comedy, taking Sikov’s conclusion that the word ‘screwball’ “successfully brought together a number of connotations in a slang and streetwise term: lunacy, speed, unpredictability, unconventionality, giddiness, drunkenness, flight and adversarial sport” (Sikov, 1989, 19) – for all that it locates these primarily within Joel’s mind, rather than in the world outside him. It also plays on the timeline within the romantic comedy framework, complicating Shumway’s assertion (2003) as described by McDonald Jeffers, that “romance and marriage have opposing goals, which explains both real-life endemic dissatisfaction with the married state and the need for romantic comedies to end before the couple embarks on married life.” (McDonald Jeffers, 2007, 13)

²⁶⁷ These also call to mind surreal detective series *Twin Peaks*, which cultivated the sense of teenagers as *knowingly* sexual and aggressive, rather than mindlessly or delinquently so.

²⁶⁸ This links *Brick* as much with other strands of Smart cinema which privilege noir elements (*Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Dark City*, *Memento*, and *Pi*) as it does with the teen film.

²⁶⁹ One could at a pinch draw on references to *Bugsy Malone* (Alan Parker, 1976), which tells a more or less classical gangster story – to occasionally queasy effect – with a cast of child actors and cream pie weaponry. See also an interview with director Rian Johnson entitled “Druggy Malone”, a somewhat glib title which however makes this link clear (Garnett, 2006).

²⁷⁰ Laura’s sung performance of a jazz version of a song from that school musical staple, *The Mikado*, makes strong references to the noir and parodic noir trope of the treacherous *chanteuse*, from *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946) to Emma in *Dark City*, Isabella Rossellini in *Blue Velvet*, and even Jessica Rabbit (*Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, Robert Zemeckis, 1988). Until her exposure as the manipulative hand behind much of the mystery, Laura functions as a combined ‘woman of mystery’ and ally, in the mode of Veronica Lake’s Joyce Harwood, of 1946 Raymond Chandler adaptation *The Blue Dahlia*.

²⁷¹ The other particular spatio-geographic marker employed is the school locker; further work could be usefully done on its incidence in the teen film, but here it functions as dead-drop (for paper notes, giving the film an appropriately retro feel) and as oddly private-public space, the nearest thing to significant ‘property’ a teenager may own, but vulnerable to legitimised predation by the authorities – or treacherous fellow students.

²⁷² This is the antithesis of the language of something like *Dawson’s Creek*, which gives its monologuing, implausibly super-articulate teenagers something of the quality of puppets.

²⁷³ The emphasis on The Pin's age - he is "supposed to be old, like twenty-six" – again emphasises the sense of separation of teenage from adult life, the intensity of its almost cult-like binds.

²⁷⁴ The 'world without adults' is so clearly delineated that breaching it for narrative reasons diffuses the generic complexity which the film has created. Brendan has in the past provided Trueman with information regarding a drug dealer in an effort to prevent Emily becoming hooked on drugs. This allows Brendan both to evade accusations of being a 'snitch' (permissible in neither teen nor 'noir' codes) and gain a certain amount of disciplinary flexibility. While in the classical form, the trickster or rebel often works to disrupt the hierarchical structures of school, the tone employed is usually playful. A key element in teen-adult 'nemesis' relationships within the classical format is the process by which the adult debases or humiliates themselves in the process of exacting petty revenge. As Trueman functions as an adult and professional at all times, this impression of parity seems generically forced – although it does parallel the detective-chief relationship of police drama – and Trueman is distanced from the narrative from then on.

Chapter Eight

²⁷⁵ Dussere describes it as a "postmodern neo-noir.....[featuring] the alienated mood, the stylized "realism," and the skepticism about the American mainstream that we recognize as noir" (Dussere, 2006, 18-23).

²⁷⁶ A convention has arisen whereby the diegetic character played by Brad Pitt is referred to as 'Tyler Durden' and that played by Edward Norton is referred to as 'Jack' after his occasional references to that name – I see no reason not to adopt this convention.

²⁷⁷ See Diken and Laustsen (2002) for a discussion of how the film represents an exploration of "micro-fascism" in the network society.

²⁷⁸ *Fight Club* holds to the tradition of the 'unreliable narrator'; more specifically, Jack/Tyler functions as what Voker Ferenz calls "the pseudo-diegetic character-narrator (that is, the character-narrator who 'takes over', and thus appears to be in the driving seat, of the narration...) whom we treat like 'real persons' and 'new acquaintances' and whom we can hold 'responsible' for being unreliable about the facts of the fictional world...a clearly identifiable fictional scapegoat with sufficient 'authority' over the narrative as a whole whom we can blame for textual contradictions and referential difficulties." (Ferenz, 2005, 135)

²⁷⁹ See Bernstein, 2002 for a psychoanalytically-grounded take on the pleasures of 'doubling', and the way in which they might be revealed or intensified by re-watching.

²⁸⁰ The film's take on the scopophilic pleasures offered by the presence of so much bared flesh is also somewhat mixed – not to mention the eroticism with which the camera treats the body, with lingering close-ups on musculature, blood and sweat (interestingly, Iocco, 2007, links this eroticism strongly to Gothic tendencies, and Ruddell (2007) also sees Gothic play in the 'splitting' of Jack and Tyler). The homosocial and homoerotic nature of the film has also been discussed, in particular by Brookey and Westerfelhaus (2002, 2004) who note not just the innuendo-laden dialogue between Jack and Tyler, nor their erotic objectification of the camera, but the framing of other fighters, "often caught posing in ways reminiscent of the men who populate the drawings of such homoerotic artists as Tom of Finland, as well as more explicit forms of gay pornography... the intense and knowing glances and occasional winks exchanged by members of Fight Club when they encounter one another in public places." (Brookey and Westerfelhaus, 2004, 314) This homoeroticism is explicitly countered by Jack and Marla's conventional heterosexual reunion at the end. While Jack and Tyler discuss male appearance in the context of 'metrosexual' valuations, saying "I felt sorry for guys packed into gyms, trying to look like how Calvin Klein or Tommy Hilfiger said they should...Is that what a man should look like?", any critique of pressure on men to abide by certain visual 'standards' is complicated by the continued fetishisation of Tyler's glossy musculature and prominent V-lines. Jack pulling a tooth out and dropping it down the drain may feature as a sign of renunciation of physical vanity, but does not undercut the predominant fetishisation of the body which recurs throughout. Interestingly, only at one moment does Tyler produce a sign of vanity, checking his reflection in a wing-mirror following a climactic fight with Jack; this serves as a reflection of the narcissism that underpins the Jack/Tyler crisis rather than a nod to the politics of the body.

²⁸¹ This links with Sisco King's fascinating framing of the film as illustrating the means through which hegemonic systems perpetuate themselves here through abjection. For her, the film is characterised by "a pervasive strategy of obfuscation, ambiguity, and symbolic playfulness that perpetuates white masculinity's privilege as an ideological formation and subject position..... Just as the men of *Fight Club*...experience pleasure and privilege from their ability to transgress and cross borders, hegemonic white masculinity benefits from its ability to remain amalgamated and diffuse. (Sisco King, 2009, 367) Her close reading emphasises the power relations which dominate masculinity contemporary culture: in particular I find her point that the very existence of *Fight Club* is dependent on the willingness to transgress – in order for there to be a *Fight Club*, people must break its first rule – convincingly argued.

²⁸² For Barker, this process is fundamental to the way in which the film's politics are fundamentally regressive, pointing towards a mythologisation of a supposedly more free or fruitful imagined or former state of being; to achieve sublimation to the demands of a fascist mindset "require[s] a *méconnaissance* or misconstruction of the self in terms of an ideal other, and for the narrator, manifests itself in a literal misrecognition of Tyler Durden." (Barker, 2008, 180) While I do not fully concur with her wider point, the links she makes between Jack's misconstruction of his own self and the aestheticisation of politics and violence are well made

²⁸³ Additionally, therapy culture here is framed as a 'feminine' activity, built on (assumed) feminine values of talk and physical intimacy – the group leader sees "courage" in the room, but it is defined by 'support' as crying and hugs – dominated by Marla, which therefore must be abandoned in pursuit of a more 'masculine' way. In the same way, Bob has grown "bitch tits" from steroid abuse, and abandons therapy culture for *Fight Club*; significantly, this abandonment of the supposedly 'controlled' feminine for the aggressive masculine model is the cause of his death.

²⁸⁴ Much of the film's language is strongly evocative of religious terminology of a patriarchal nature; the film is in that sense about a search for search for God as father, as community. Bob, with whom, at a support group, Jack first finds release from insomnia ("Every evening I died, and every evening I was resurrected.") is "huge the way you think of God as big." The support group where cancer sufferer Chloe breaks the taboo of sexual desire in the terminally ill is described as "tonight's communion." Tyler uses a long string of patriarchal-religious imagery when burning Jack to bring him closer to "premature enlightenment", telling him "Our fathers were our models for god. If our fathers bailed, what does that tell you about god? You have to consider the possibility that god does not like you, never wanted you, in all probability he hates you. We don't need him. We are god's unwanted children? So be it!...You're one step closer to being God." In her interesting analysis of the religious elements of the film, Lockwood links the psychopathology model of cult recruitment, ideological fundamentalism and consumer culture, while noting that it is "deeply impregnated with traditional Christian themes of asceticism and self-denial, which fundamentally oppose the ideology of Western modernity." (Lockwood, 2008, 331)¹

²⁸⁵ As Giroux and Szeman put it, "Tyler hates consumerism but he values a 'Just Do It' ideology appropriated from the marketing strategists of the Nike corporation and the ideology of the Reagan era" (Giroux and Szeman, 2001, 100). Similarly, Bedford regards the film as "a commercially driven, anti-progressive, Trojan horse" (Bedford, 2011, 49).

²⁸⁶ Gronstad (2003) argues that this conclusion is a recuperative one, in that the film "seems to intend a radical decentring of the identity politics of the male hero, perhaps to the extent of admitting that masculinity is not only a construction but in fact a vacant signifier. When even the last possibility for regaining a sense of durable manhood – bodily violence – ultimately falls short, it is tempting to read Jack's execution of his alter ego at the end of the film as the completion of a long process of symbolic divestiture." (Gronstad, 2003, 5-6) I tentatively agree with this, however the space the film allows for this to develop is so narrow – as the final sequences' drive to resolve narrative and generic concerns predominates – that these matters are somewhat swept aside.

²⁸⁷ While retrospective accounts by participants cannot always be regarded with a degree of seriousness, in the knowledge that hindsight and personal involvement will inevitably result in partiality, incompleteness and self-justification, I use Waxman's account here as it forms as thorough a chronicle of the film's industrial origins as I have found despite not being 'academic'. The tone she adopts, this being a somewhat hagiographic account, functions largely as mythmaking.

²⁸⁸ Indeed, part of the mythology – and I would argue, the success – of the film lies with the studio’s supposedly horrified initial reaction to the film’s screening, which as with *Happiness*, figures as a marker of prestige, of creative daring, in the film’s eventual cult success. In the Waxman narrative, and others which rely on an excessively auteur-based perspective on production processes (Linson, 2002; Biskind, 2005; Mottram, 2006) disputes like these are presented as almost entirely person-centred; as crusades or missions, with the plucky auteur director – occasionally replaced or augmented by a ‘maverick’ production executive who shares and supports the auteur’s singular creative vision (for *Fight Club*, Bill Mechanic or Art Linson) – struggling to combat the brutal force of metrics-driven studio executives who would neuter all innovation. It would be a mistake to regard this circuit of proscription and negotiation as anything out of the ordinary; script-, daily- or full cut-based bargaining processes, in which a studio may for example exchange a notional nipple in one scene for a theoretical violent death in another, are quite standard for Hollywood productions at all levels. In sum, the total time cut from the film amounted to just fifteen minutes: hardly the stuff of deadlock, or creative hostage-taking.

²⁸⁹ As an example, Miramax had paid a record \$10 million to acquire the distribution rights of the 1996 Billy Bob Thornton piece *Sling Blade* – a film with a \$1m production budget, and a wholly unknown star/director. The tendency for even the more conservative studios to align themselves with potentially troublesome material can be more easily understood in the light of box office figures for *Sling Blade*: \$34 million returns worldwide, and \$24 million of that in domestic sales.

²⁹⁰ Mechanic appears to have been a driving force in production, and a staunch defender of the film (see King, 2009, 146, 228) against Fox head Rupert Murdoch as much as anyone else (see Waxman, 135-137) – the importance of personal relationships to the politics of production should not be underestimated, in a variety of ways.

²⁹¹ While some of Fox Searchlight’s lower-budget small acquisitions had done large international business – *Boys Don’t Cry* (Kimberley Peirce, 1999), with its \$2 million budget and \$11.5 million return the most recent of them – its incursions into larger projects had been disastrous: Jack Nicholson vehicle *Blood and Wine* (Bob Rafelson, 1996) took just over \$1 million from an outlay of \$26 million; *The Ice Storm* (Ang Lee, 1997) was critically-acclaimed but not financially lucrative; more adventurous pieces like *Oscar and Lucinda* (Gillian Armstrong, 1997) and *Titus* (Julie Taymore, 1999) were mid-budget failures, and *Smilla’s Sense of Snow* (Bille August, 1997) had, disastrously, recouped just \$2.3 million of its \$35 million budget.

²⁹² Pitched to Brad Pitt’s CAA agency at \$7 million, his final salary was \$17.5 million, essentially benchmarking – and driving up – all other associated acting labour costs: *Fight Club* was no longer a ‘medium’ budget film. One aspect of the production process does, however, appear to have been undertaken with minimal studio supervision; the scriptwriting, which had essentially (by agreement with the studio) been taken out of the development process while Fincher and co-writer Jim Uhls were completing it. As Fox was not paying him for this, the writing process was essentially, according to Fincher, ‘independent’ (Waxman, 2005, 175). There no way to assess whether this period of independence, allegedly free from studio attention, had – or could have, given Fincher’s clear knowledge that he was producing the material for an essentially conservative media organisation – any effect on the final script; but according to Waxman’s account, certainly from script delivery onwards, studio attention was focused on attempting to mitigate ‘problematic’ areas.

²⁹³ The massive success of *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997) had provided the studio with a certain amount of financial security, as had the successful re-release of the first three *Star Wars* films.

²⁹⁴ Pitt’s stock was evidently regarded as sufficiently strong to justify the increase in budget his presence in the film would require, despite concerns about Pitt’s appeal to male viewers. No such consideration was given to the casting of Helena Bonham Carter, whom the studio was allegedly keen to avoid in favour of a ‘name’ actress or a younger actress, on the grounds that she “pushed the production still further in the direction of the dreaded Art Film.” (Waxman, 2005, 182)

²⁹⁵ A post-coital “I want to have your abortion” from Marla Singer was amended to “I haven’t been fucked like that in grade school”. (Waxman, 2005, 269)

²⁹⁶ See Waxman, 2005, 259-271 for a full account.

²⁹⁷ “The other option was to go the intellectual route, and market *Fight Club* as an art film... ‘We could have platformed it, tried to get reviews. It was for a thinking audience. It was social commentary,’ said one Fox marketing executive.....Fincher believed that his movie needed to be explained and placed in context by the more intelligent movie critics. Fox never set that up. They just sold it...as a movie about underground boxing that would appeal to testosterone-heavy guys – which to Fincher wasn’t what the movie was about at all.” (Waxman, 265-267)

²⁹⁸ While some critics embraced the film, a host of influential ones decried it. Roger Ebert described it as “cheerfully fascist...macho porn” (cite Waxman, 293); Kenneth Turan as “a witless mishmash of whiny, infantile philosophising and bone-crunching violence”; Rex Reed “a load of rancid depressing swill from start to finish”; and Alexander Walker “not only anti-capitalist, but anti-society and, indeed, anti-God” (all cited from Pulver, 1999). In light of these denunciations, I feel it useful to point to Slade’s note that the film “stages a generational conflict” (Slade, 2011, 230); it may be said that such is also in operation in the film’s condemnation by elder figures within the critical establishment. It is also worth noting that time has recuperated the film’s ‘image’ to such an extent that Bedford, writing more than a decade after the film’s release, condemns what he describes as the way in which the film “has become uniformly valorized (by the film-makers and various critics) as a credible, keystone artistic and philosophical statement about cultural and gender malaise in contemporary western societies.” (Bedford, 2011, 52). While I feel his overall argument lacks a sophisticated understanding of the complexity of the film’s operations, there is perhaps something in his assessment of it as marked by 1990s ‘grunge’ aesthetics politics, which have themselves become the target of a (commodified) nostalgia over the past few years.

²⁹⁹ Bing (2001) notes these figures and also the effect of the film’s success on the subsequent career of the source novel’s author, Chuck Palahniuk.

³⁰⁰ Something with which Jancovich et al would be very familiar, noting that “if cult fans usually make claims to oppositionality, they are largely middle class and male, and their oppositionality works to reaffirm rather than challenge bourgeois taste and masculine dispositions.” (Jancovich et al, 2003, 2)

³⁰¹ While she does not refer directly to *Fight Club*, and is discussing French as well as American cinema, I feel Franco’s assessment here relates strongly to several of the films I discuss, most particularly *Fight Club*, *Happiness*, and *American Beauty*: “These predominantly homosocial narratives exhibit melodramatic traits, most obviously by placing emphasis on the family as the site of wider social crisis but also in terms of the *mise-en-scène* of the hyper-damaged male who becomes a pleasurable spectacle and a smokescreen for the realignment of patriarchal power structures.” (Franco, 2008, 30)

³⁰² All paratextual materials are available as extras on the original two-disc version of the 1999 DVD release; the original (parallel) one-disc version contained only an extra commentary track by Fincher.

³⁰³ In their compelling 2002 article on *Fight Club*’s DVD release, Brookey and Westerfelhaus argue convincingly that the technological capacities of the DVD to accommodate extra-textual material can direct viewers to preferred interpretations and simultaneously undermine unfavourable or unwanted interpretations, by calling on the shadow of auteurism, and that viewers are more likely to respond to this as they have become financially and personally ‘invested’ through their early adoption of DVD technology. As an example, they cite the way in which in one of the DVD’s parataxts – a pamphlet entitled “How to Start a Fight” – negative reviews are interspersed with positive quotes from those involved with the film project, undermining the credibility of the negative ones. For them *Fight Club*’s extra text “is employed to discourage the viewer from interpreting the homosocial practices presented as signifying homosexual experience...the extra text is used to deny the presence of homoeroticism, to dismiss homoerotic elements, and to divert attention away from these elements.” (Brookey and Westerfelhaus, 2002, 29)

³⁰⁴ The full text of the parody warning reads: “If you are reading this then this warning is for you. Every word you read of this useless fine print is another second off your life. Don’t you have better things to do? Is your life so empty that you honestly can’t think of a better way to spend these moments? Or are you so impressed with authority that you give respect and credence to all who claim it? Do you read everything that you’re supposed to read? Do you think everything you’re supposed to think? Buy what you’re told you should want? Get out of your apartment. Meet a member of the opposite sex. Stop the excessive shopping and masturbation.

Quit your job. Start a fight. Prove you're alive. If you don't claim your humanity you will become a statistic. You have been warned.....Tyler”

³⁰⁵ The Dust Brothers had gained significant credibility within the underground hip hop and nascent electronica field through working with the Beastie Boys (*Paul's Boutique*, 1989) whose link with other Smart filmmakers like Spike Jonze are well-documented, and Beck (*Odelay*, 1996). In this context their 1997 production of teen boyband Hanson's *MMMBop* sounds hilariously unlikely but, as does their work with Vince Neil from Motley Crue, but also fits smoothly into the 'cultivated irony' perspective of the 1990s.

³⁰⁶ While much of it is amusing, taking as it does the form of a faked 'lifestyle catalogue' with Jack and Tyler in stereotypical poses, selling eyewear "inspired by Pol Pot", or silk shirts "hand crafted in an Indonesian sweatshop by Frida, a single mother of seven whose monthly salary is equivalent to six American dollars", its references to transgressive sexuality, liberal sentimentality, concern-voyeurism, the exploitative nature of capitalism, and the shallowness of consumerism are intensified to the point of reader exhaustion, and add little to the overall campaign.

³⁰⁷ Waxman notes that although the studio felt its 'best' option was to market it as a kind of black comedy specifically focused on men between eighteen and thirty-five (and more or less entirely ruling out female viewers), they encountered a serious problem in targeting the film, in that their pre-launch market research suggested its greatest appeal was to teenagers, but "in the post-Columbine furore over violence in entertainment, studios were under serious scrutiny not to market their R-rated movies to teenagers under seventeen." (Waxman, 2005, 265)

³⁰⁸ An additional irony, perhaps, is that Brad Pitt starred in both; in *Thelma and Louise* as a contemporary reimagining of the cowboy, this time focused on female experience – his thieving more than compensated for by his devotion to the female orgasm – and in *Fight Club* seemingly reclaiming his own aggressive hard-bodied masculinity from a star persona which had, repeatedly, cast him in the light of the former.

³⁰⁹ Joy's response to his gift "It almost makes me want to learn how to smoke" sets the tone for the film's dialogue; at every point characters evade reality or hard emotional truths, retreating instead to the safety of social niceties.

³¹⁰ This calls to mind the Doris Day and Rock Hudson romantic comedy *Pillow Talk* (Michael Gordon, 1959)

³¹¹ Fat, pale, ineffectual, self-loathing, preferring masturbation to human interaction, in some ways Allen is strongly reminiscent of a Kaufman character, in particular Charlie Kaufman of *Adaptation*.

³¹² Allen's fantasies are aggressive and filled with self-loathing: "I want to undress her, I want to tie her up and pump her pump pump pump till she screams bloody murder. And then I want to flip her ass over and pump her even more and so hard my dick shoots right through her and so that my come squirts out of her mouth... Not that I could ever actually do that. Oh, if only she knew how I felt, how deep down I really cared for her, respected her, she would love me back. Maybe. But she doesn't even know I exist." The emphasis he places on 'care' and 'respect' is ersatz; they have not spoken more than pleasantries, and he appears unable to relate to women in any non-pornographic context. In this way, Allen's speech both emphasises his own (futile, wasted) management of his sexuality, and creates an unease around the conventional romantic comedy trope of 'love at first sight'. What Allen describes as 'love' is depersonalised, misogynistic stalking; within the context of the film this is seen as mitigated by his essentially pathetic nature.

³¹³ There is a separate question here as to whether Kristina's attentions are coded as 'ridiculous' because of her size – the framing of this scene, where Allen is pinned under her and must throw her off in order to vomit, and the accompanying music, indicate that she is to be seen as comic or pitiable, which would be less sophisticated than the film's general management of gender issues would indicate. However, my suggestion, given the comparatively straightforward treatment of Kristina's rape, is that this is less a joke about size than a visual reference to that event; a tacit condemnation of victim-blaming, an indication that her physical size could be no defence against the psychologically-paralysing ambush she suffers.

³¹⁴ Hawkins, with whom I agree, sees this moment less as a fat joke than a reference to the more avant-garde roots of this film, "a homage to the kind of shock humour and bad taste that characterises the work of John

Waters... as well as downtown cineastes like [Nick] Zedd and [Richard] Kern. It is a deliberately punk-transgressive moment in a film which otherwise presents itself as classy satire.” (Hawkins, 2005, 103); she also sees this referencing in the final dog-semen moment of the film.

³¹⁵ King’s deconstruction of the scene in which Bill sees Johnny for the first time, notes the “extent to which it relies on cinematic devices of such banal conventionality: the use of music, especially romantic music, to indicate emotional states, and editing based around eye-line match shots to reveal the object of desire and to heighten (progressively closer shots of both protagonists are used) the implied degree of yearning.” (King, 2005, 197)

³¹⁶ There is also a profound irony here in the fact that Bill constitutes a more ‘accepting’ father figure than Johnny’s real father, who fears he may be gay and wishes to buy a prostitute to ‘cure’ him. Holmlund points out the comparative rarity of a film outside of the explicitly experimental referring to pre-teen gay sexuality, saying “that children could be queer is viewed as really risky business, especially by ‘indiewood’.” (Holmlund, 2005b, 179) However, this is problematic in its own way: the way in which the gay identity assumed on behalf of Johnny risks being seen as minimising Bill’s crime is troublesome. As Holmlund says, “Bill’s late night ‘poaching’ when Johnny sleeps over is thus partially ‘excused’: Johnny is already gay.” (ibid., 184)

³¹⁷ James Schamus recounts that “One Hollywood talent agency found the script so offensive that it all but openly boycotted the casting process steering its entire client list away from the film.” (Schamus, 1999, 34)

³¹⁸ Not all critics embraced the film; Brooks cites several stinging reviews:

For G. Allen Johnson of the San Francisco Examiner, *Happiness* was ‘graphic, disgusting and overwrought... It’s a dirty movie played for uncomfortable laughs, and if we don’t get it, we’re just not hip.’ CNN’s Paul Tataro remarked: ‘If there’s any poetic justice, some abused child out there will grow up to make a movie during which a goofy-looking independent film-maker gets bent over an editing console and receives a “satirical” violation.’ Despite commending the film in his *Village Voice* review, J. Hoberman still referred to what he felt was ‘Solondz’s cinema of cruelty’ and continued: ‘Awash as it is in bodily fluids, *Happiness* conspicuously lacks the milk of human kindness.’” (Brooks, 2001, 22)

Charles Taylor’s critique is interesting not necessarily for its description of the film as “exercises in humiliation” (Taylor, 1999, 10), or his entirely reasonable concern for the representation of class in it, but for his assertion that “as indie distributors come more and more under the control of the major studios and film-makers feel the need to prove they haven’t sold out... incorporating shock techniques is the easiest way to prove you haven’t been co-opted.” (ibid.) While this fear has not necessarily been borne out, his note that “the studio takeover of this now very lucrative ‘niche market’ is really just the best recent example of the corporate strategy of divide and conquer.” (ibid.) was perspicacious.

³¹⁹ Biskind alleges that this was because Universal CEO Ron Meyer was personally offended by its content (Biskind, 2005, 334), although I have not seen the claim repeated in more scholarly sources. Schamus gives a more rounded account, relating it directly to Seagram worries that controversy about the film might result in negative publicity and perhaps a consumer boycott, at a time when Wall Street concerns about share price and the cost of Seagram’s entry to the entertainment industry were running high. He also directly implicates “the extraordinary concentration and conglomeratization that has occurred in the media industries, beginning in the Reagan/Bush era and accelerating substantially during the Clinton years... their dominant market positions and ability to ‘synergize’ also leave these corporate behemoths particularly vulnerable to political pressure” (Schamus, 1999, 35).

³²⁰ Vachon confirms that Solondz would not have acceded to any cuts in the film, which is a claim easy to make retrospectively, but given the character of his other work, seems credible (Vachon, 2006, 103).

³²¹ With an estimated production budget of \$3 million, *Happiness* would gross \$2.8 million domestically and a further \$3m internationally (Vachon, 2006, 92).

³²² As Schamus explains, Trimark (the film’s video distributor), released it unrated: “Since, however, Blockbuster controls nearly a third of the rental market, and in most mid- and small-size markets has vanquished its independent competition, this meant we were effectively banned throughout a great deal of the United States.” (Schamus, 2001, 258)

Chapter Nine

³²³ This is strongly in line with what King, argues, when he indicates that a distinct element in Focus Features' practice and process was "the articulation of what sets out to be a distinctive brand image for the division" (King, 2009, 235).

³²⁴ *Boogie Nights*' setting notwithstanding, the film functions much as period drama or biopic, and privileges 'reassuring' heteronormative resolutions.

³²⁵ For example, many accounts of the genesis of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* omit the fact that the central conceit on which the film hangs was developed by Michel Gondry, who then brought this idea to Kaufman, making statements such as "this story... could only have been written by Kaufman, the reigning craftsman of idiosyncratic tales of human subjectivity." (Kennedy, 2004) In contrast, see James, 2004, a piece which strongly emphasises an auteurist framing of Gondry, rather than Kaufman: "this is distinctly a Michel Gondry film, and not simply because he collaborated on the story. The emotional warmth and tenderness – qualities not usually found in a brash Carrey blockbuster or a cerebral Kaufman screenplay – are typical of Mr. Gondry's work, drawn heavily from his own dreams and memories." (James, 2004, 18) Here, the object of the auteurist framing may differ, but the framing remains. An interesting compromise position comes from Manohla Dargis, who offers "the director Michel Gondry does such lovely work here that he makes you forget Charlie Kaufman wrote the script" (Dargis, 2004, 16)

³²⁶ "A high-concept film is one which places a great emphasis on style and 'stylishness', revolving around a simple, easily summarized narrative based on physically typed characters, which in turn affords striking icons, images and snappy plot descriptions as marketing 'hooks'... is heavily reliant upon stars, and gives great prominence to its soundtrack (usually a mixture of original scoring and pop songs), which is marketed separately as one or more soundtrack albums" (Neale and Smith, 1998, 12)

³²⁷ King attributes Sony Pictures Classics' ongoing survival to the experience of the Sony Pictures Classics heads Michael Barker and Tom Bernard, who had come from Orion, and argues that their continued autonomy was maintained "on the basis of a track record for stability, modest spending and consistent profitability" (King, 2009, 259).

³²⁸ Clearly this has changed rapidly in the period following the peak of Smart cinema, and any research focusing on that time would have to be extremely conscious of the changes the internet has wrought, on the one hand providing easier, faster access, and on the other creating a variety of complexities – including that of piracy – which would be expected to deeply affect this kind of quasi-independent cinema.

³²⁹ The importance of distribution to the balance of power in Hollywood was recognised early, as can be seen from Tino Balio's citation of a 1944 piece on the subject: "Observing that the structure of the motion picture industry was 'a large inverted pyramid, top-heavy with real estate and theatres, resting on a narrow base of the intangibles which constitute films,' [Mae] Huettig concluded that the crux of the motion-picture business is not production but exhibition." (Balio, 1995, 5) Yet the subject remains somewhat under-explored. Arguing for a reconsideration of it, Douglas Gomery recognises that "film distribution, sadly, is the least analysed part of the film industry – there are no fascinating movies to consider, only dry, dull figures, investment decisions, and analysis of international political and cultural power." (Gomery, 2005, 6)

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Pi (Darren Aronofsky, 1998)
Dark City (Alex Proyas, 1998)
Rushmore (Wes Anderson, 1998)
Happiness (Todd Solondz, 1998)
Being John Malkovich (Spike Jonze, 1999)
Election (Alexander Payne, 1999)
American Beauty (Sam Mendes, 1999)
The Matrix (Andy and Lana Wachowski, 1999)
Magnolia (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999)
Fight Club (David Fincher, 1999)
Memento (Christopher Nolan, 2000)
Donnie Darko (Richard Kelly, 2001)
Ghost World (Terry Zwigoff, 2001)
The Royal Tenenbaums (Wes Anderson, 2001)
Adaptation (Spike Jonze, 2002)
Lost in Translation (Sofia Coppola, 2003)
I ♥ Huckabees (David O. Russell, 2004)
Sideways (Alexander Payne, 2004)
The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou (Wes Anderson, 2004)
Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (Michel Gondry, 2004)
Brick (Rian Johnson, 2005)