

DECLARATIONS OF INDEPENDENCE:
FILM AND THE AMERICAN MYTHOLOGY

by

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, the author investigates the American Independent Film, specifically its recent flourish from 1980 to the present. The argument is made that the narratives told about the Independent film of this era – by the popular press, by academia, as well as by the films’ makers – are often more meaningful than the content of the films themselves. The author suggests that what makes this historical phase of Independent American filmmaking different from previous movements is an increased public awareness of these narratives as familiar and formulaic. The promotion of these films is increasingly apparent *as a mythology* – a set of narratives America tells itself about itself. As a result, emphasis is placed on the cultural awareness of this mythology as a set of constructed narratives told to the public by a culture industry that profits from them. To begin, a series of case studies are analyzed. First, representations of the Sundance film festival are examined, with emphasis placed on the figure of its founder, Robert Redford. Next, three directors thought to embody the American Independent film at various points over the last twenty-five years are studied: Jim Jarmusch, Quentin Tarantino and Steven Soderbergh. Following these case studies, the methodology of American Studies is applied to the discourse of Independent film. The field’s two simultaneous emphases – on the interpretation of national self-mythologizing and the meta-critical awareness of its own impact as an academic field for the generation of such knowledge – are used to consider the extent to which media promotion of Independent cinema has become a form of cultural authority that usurps traditional academic knowledge.

Finally, the author considers new media technologies – digital cinema, video games – as the most recent manifestation of these narratives. Video games are considered as a location for preserving American myths of the frontier within a virtual space, and digital filmmaking is analyzed as a means through which Independent and Hollywood filmmaking tropes are fluidly combined. The conclusion is thus drawn that such technologies offer a meaningful moment of synthesis that represents an end point for this movement of independence.

INTRODUCTION

“Large Dependent Film Tops Weekend Box Office,” ran the headline in satirical weekly newspaper The Onion’s ‘News in Brief’ section on October 2, 2002.

The entire story read as follows:

HOLLYWOOD – In what is being hailed as a triumph for dependent cinema, Sony Pictures’ *A Perfect Alibi*, a \$90 million Mel Gibson-Cameron Diaz thriller, topped the weekend box office with an impressive \$39 million take. “This just shows what can be accomplished when you’ve got a major studio’s backing and distribution,” executive producer Don Murray said Monday. “Contrary to what some in the movie business would have you believe, there *is* a place for big, non-character-driven pictures.” Murray said he hopes the film’s success serves as an inspiration to established, bankable actors and directors.¹

The joke is a simple juxtaposition, in which the language and conventions of press coverage for successful independent movies are applied to the supposedly antithetical discourse of generic Hollywood movies. In order for the joke to succeed, however, the writers at The Onion are assuming that their readers have seen so many articles touting the openings of small, independent, character-driven films that they will be able to recognize the conventions when parodied in a new context. The story is not inherently special as a piece of comedy writing, but it does speak to a popular cultural awareness of the independent film’s status in recent years. On some level, the joke speaks to a certain sense of exhaustion: hasn’t this story been done to death already? Aren’t we starting to get a bit sick of hearing the same formula being repeated in newspapers and on television?

¹ <http://www.theonion.com/content/node/31175>. Issue 38-36, October 2, 2002.

When I told friends and colleagues that I was writing a dissertation on the American Independent film, specifically one that explored the recent era of Miramax and the Sundance film festival, I was often asked, “So what is *your* definition of an ‘independent film’?” I have never had one; instead, I am interested in the recent burst of popular writing that *does* claim to answer this question. Why is there such fascination with the concept of American films that are somehow *different*? For many, this difference is financial: we love the story of a lone filmmaker scraping together a film’s budget on his own, beating the studios at their own game by making large profits on cheap entertainments. For others, the shape of the film industry is itself paramount (if you will forgive the pun): while the Hollywood studio system threatens to collapse under its own weight, those who work outside of it are unencumbered by focus groups, test screening audiences, the conservative tendencies of share-holders, or the need to appeal to the largest possible audience. There are also many whose stomachs churn at this obsession with money and business, to the point of suggesting that such obsessions are themselves the root cause of more qualitative erosion to be seen throughout the last decades of Hollywood production; in this case, independent cinema is to be celebrated for its nurturing of artistic bravery and aesthetic creativity.

Rather than passionately choosing sides, what interested me is instead the recognition of such claims as themselves formulaic narratives. As many have noted, the ‘independent film’ has been in existence for over a century: indeed, when Thomas Edison and the other members of the Motion Picture Patents Company

refused to let such men as Carl Laemmle join their trust through a combination of greed, paranoia, and anti-semitism, the first network of independent filmmakers was born. They fled the MPPC's often violent stranglehold on the East Coast and headed for Southern California. Laemmle founded Universal Pictures when he arrived; Warner Bros. was itself another such independent company. Once these Hollywood studios put the MPPC out of business, they formed what the United States government would later call a 'de facto monopoly'; upon breaking this monopoly after WWII, the studio system found itself accommodating a new wave of independent films, both made and funded by producers, directors and actors eager to experiment now that they were released from constricting, multi-year contracts in which they had little say over *which* films they made, let alone how.

We are currently at the tail-end of another set of narratives about independent American cinema, a moment identifiable as an ending both because the narratives are now subject for parody², as well as the fact that the aforementioned definitions of the independent film no longer reflect reality. Today, many Hollywood studios make films through their 'independent' arms; art-house cinemas offer features awash in what are now seen as dull, 'indie' clichés; and the quality of the mainstream movie has been greatly enhanced, often by poaching from the field of such alternative

² Soon after the Onion article, 2005 saw the release of *My Big Fat Independent Movie*, a Zucker-Brothers-style of send-up, mocking such films as *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Swingers* (1996) and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002).

cinemas.³ Is there anything that makes this recent, post-Sundance narrative of independence different from those that preceded it?

I would say so; throughout this dissertation I will argue that the significance of the recent narratives around independent filmmaking lies, somewhat paradoxically, in the recognition of those narratives as themselves familiar and formulaic. Or: this recent version of mythology surrounding the independent American film is special precisely because The Onion can now confidently make jokes about it. We are increasingly aware of this mythology *as* a mythology, a set of stories America tells itself about itself; significantly, the ‘we’ to which I am referring here is not limited to those reading an academic text, but instead a larger American public savvy to the surprising success of such films as *El Mariachi* (1992), *Clerks* (1994), *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). This savvy is itself worth recognizing: keep in mind that the aforementioned Onion article requires not only a reader’s awareness of independent filmmaking successes but, as with all of its jokes, a larger awareness of news media conventions as well.

What are these narratives, what do they mean, and finally, what is the impact of our increasing awareness of them as constructed narratives being told to us by a culture industry that profits from them? If the reader detects a note of conspiratorial paranoia creeping into my tone, be aware that said tone is intentional, and that such

³ I am writing these words, for example, at a college library within earshot of two undergraduates watching the noisy summer blockbuster *Armageddon* (1998), the cast of which includes Ben Affleck (*Chasing Amy*, 1997), Owen Wilson (*Bottle Rocket*, 1996), Billy Bob Thornton (*Sling Blade*, 1996), and Steve Buscemi (*Fargo*, 1996).

paranoia is not mine alone. A current special edition of The New Yorker, self-labelled “The Media Issue,” includes not only an article about media baron Rupert Murdoch’s potential influence upon the 2008 presidential race, but an exploration of the foothold that 9/11 conspiracy theories have attained throughout the mainstream press.⁴ Rather than deny its existence, I instead prefer the route of self-disclosure: I feel that the current moment is one of what might be called conspiracy fatigue, in which we are somewhat resigned to operations of cultural power as containing bias, spin, self-interest. By way of compensation, I hope that my work here reflects an admirable trend seen throughout the discipline of American Studies, in which the ideological goals of that discipline at any given moment are made visible, and read alongside the cultural texts analyzed by its members.

Though I stress the specifics of the contemporary moment as key to understanding the recent celebration of the American independent film, they are nevertheless inseparable from the fact of this celebration as one with prior historical precedent. Indeed, the initial idea that began this project was a curiosity about the relationship between this present, intense adulation over the independent film and the larger American self-definition represented by its historic Declaration of Independence. Was this anything more than a coincidence, a pun? The Sundance film festival, for example, is accompanied both by the celebration of cinema as well as the iconography of the American West. The independent directors who help to define this movement, such as Jim Jarmusch, Quentin Tarantino and Steven

⁴ “Murdoch’s Game: A Mogul’s Unpredictable Politics,” and “Paranoid Style: Conspiracy-Theory Journalism Since 9/11,” respectively. October 16, 2006.

Soderbergh, have become celebrities through narratives that depict them as rebellious, self-made men. I begin with chapters devoted to the mythologies of the festival itself, and then to these three directors as crucial case studies.

Next, I consider in more detail the theoretical implications of the recent independent discourse as one that lays bare the operations of cultural power. Again, I am interested in doing so with as much transparency as possible: this evocation of current American Studies tenets is important not merely for its own sake, but as a reminder of academic production as itself occupying an uneasy, contested relationship with the cultural authority presented by Hollywood studios, mainstream critics, and independent film companies. Chapter Five thus considers both the use of American Studies as a paradigm with which to read, to master the discourse of independent film as well as its status as a self-interested form of cultural authority, attempting, perhaps, to reclaim academic power in what are currently referred to as the Culture Wars. Finally, I consider what this set of narratives now threatens to morph into; namely, an interest in the role of new technologies as the latest definition one can use to celebrate challenging American film art as progressively 'other' to its more mainstream counterpart. Much of the recent exploration of video games throughout the academy emphasizes their ability to reconfigure conceptions of narrative itself: how does this discourse of independence maintain its historical value while also receiving this upgrade?

CHAPTER ONE
**THE DESIRE TO DECLARE: SUNDANCE, ROBERT REDFORD, AND
INDEPENDENCE DISCOURSES**

“Other people have analysis. I have Utah ... I often feel like I’ll just opt out of this Rat Race and buy another hunk of Utah.”

-- Robert Redford, in the 1970s

“Maybe it’s time to say, ‘Are we making a mistake using the word ‘independent’ quite so much?’ Should we not just say ‘film is film’?”

-- Robert Redford, in the 1990s

I have never been to the Sundance film festival, and it is likely that I never will go; it’s only slightly less likely that the average reader of these words has never attended the festival either. Yet it is an event that nevertheless maintains a high degree of popular fascination as well as a multiplicity of resultant cultural meanings. Why is this? Does the festival simply hold the same cult-of-celebrity appeal as do, say, the Academy Awards, or can its meanings be read more significantly, more specifically than this? Clearly, the meanings of the Sundance film festival are not as closely linked to the Hollywood industry as are those of the Oscars; the comparison, however, is meant to stress the inaccessibility, the heavily mediated nature of the event. I suggest that in the festival one can locate a useful and revealing case study through which a larger American cultural mythology can be discerned and interpreted, that of the desire for ‘independence.’ For the most part, the resonance of this word has not been lost on those who would seek to champion what has come to be known as, arguably, a movement of independent film in recent American cinema. Not long ago, for example, the Independent Film Channel asked viewers to ‘declare their independence’ by watching a marathon of recent low-budget, non-studio

productions over the July 4th weekend.⁵ Similarly, in her introduction to the latest edition of Videohound's Independent Film Guide, editor Monica Sullivan refers to Louis B. Mayer as one of the “founding fathers,” joking that such expressions evoke both Hollywood history as well as that of the United States.⁶

But what does this really mean – what are such examples actually telling us? Are the centuries-old political writings of the United States in any way relevant to the discourse around present-day film, or is this little more than a semantic coincidence, a pun? In this chapter I attempt a preliminary investigation of such matters, significantly not through textual analysis of recent ‘indie’ films themselves⁷, but instead through a consideration of the way such films are placed within a specific cultural context by popular representations of the Sundance film festival, and the larger concept of “Sundance” that accompanies and modifies it. This in itself proves to be a surprisingly rich and varied discourse; enough has been said about the festival over the course of the last fifteen years⁸ that it is worth considering in a number of different ways, according to a variety of critical perspectives.

At the outset, I explore its festival status: Bakhtin’s notions of the carnivalesque, as well as his writings on popular festival forms, have inspired a great deal of thought on the significance of such ritualized public gatherings. Can the

⁵ From the IFC website: “Declare your independence with an IFC tv, uncut jaunty chapeau! And by jaunty chapeau we mean baseball cap. *Me and You and Everyone We Know* are doing it. Wear it *Sideways to Camp* and you'll look like a *World Traveler*.” <http://www.ifctv.com/ifc/what?CAT1=6686&AID=14449&CLR=black&BCLR=000000> Sep. 18, 2006.

⁶ Sullivan, xvii.

⁷ More of this will be seen throughout the auteur chapters to come.

⁸ The festival is typically thought to achieve mainstream familiarity in 1989 upon the success of *sex, lies and videotape*.

Sundance film festival accurately be depicted as one of these, and if so, to what end? What is the applicability of such an approach to this event, given that Bakhtin views festive gatherings as avenues by which the masses can express themselves in opposition to dominant culture, which the predominantly wealthy, bourgeois Sundance audience is often thought to unanimously typify? Second, I explore the nature of our mediated access to Sundance: is the event itself ultimately less useful and significant than the ways in which has been discussed? A great deal has been recently published about independent film in general and the Sundance film festival in particular. How does such writing itself convey cultural meaning? It is my belief that specifically within this discourse one can identify a substantial dependence on images and conventions of familiar American mythologies. In this section I rely primarily on Leo Marx's The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America to suggest that, even at the level of the popular press, the Sundance film festival can be explored as a complex and contested cultural symbol, a site of multiple and conflicting meanings.

Third, I consider in detail the role of nostalgia in our current understanding of the festival. Naturally, such consideration is an extension of the festival's engagement with the mythology of independence; however, it is sufficiently problematic to be worth specifically addressing in some detail. What does the festival generate nostalgia for, and by extension, how does our own nostalgia help to construct an understanding of the festival's meaning? It is ironic that the festival was originally called the United States film festival before becoming the Sundance film

festival in 1984, when it was absorbed into Robert Redford's eponymous institute. Ultimately, one finds that the event is nostalgic not for any actual American history but instead for a fertile period of creative American filmmaking in the 1960s and 70s. In this section I view the Sundance phenomenon through the lens of postmodern nostalgia as expressed in the writings of Fredric Jameson, Marita Sturken and Jacques Derrida.

As Redford's renaming of the event forever links it to his eponymous star-making role in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), it is prudent to explore the extent to which the festival is, fourthly, a star discourse. In the same way that we have no real access to the festival, so too are we deprived of any direct engagement with its 'founder,' yet a striking majority of newspaper and magazine articles on Sundance literally frame their reporting with comments on Redford himself. What does Robert Redford symbolize, then, and how has this symbol been manipulated in order to structure the public's perception of the event?

Many journalists portray each year's production of the festival as the latest chapter in an ongoing Redford-narrative; given that so much of this discourse concerns Redford's ability to control and exploit his own star persona, or to engage with his own commodity status, I will briefly consider the actor from the perspective of a branch of Cultural Studies that has devoted itself to an exhaustive analysis of Madonna. If 'Madonna studies' are about the singer's ability to expose young fans to the constructed nature of (female) gender roles, can it be said that Redford's iconic relationship with the Sundance festival reduces a discourse that purports to celebrate

difference and innovation to one that is about familiar, conservative notions of white male masculinity? Or, does Redford's long association with liberal politics instead reinforce our understanding of Sundance as an institution distrustful of authority, unwilling to accept the corrupting influence of the Hollywood industry?

Finally, I attempt to demonstrate the extent to which an objective reality can be shown to be at stake in the discourse around Sundance and its relationship with Park City, Utah, via Samuel R. Delaney's work on the social implications of transforming public space in Times Square Red, Times Square Blue.

Sundance as Ciné-Carnival

"But perhaps all these images are nothing but a dead and crippling tradition?"
-- Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*.

A great many representations of the Sundance film festival depict it as an enormous party. An extreme example has appeared on E!, the television entertainment network, in which the Sundance festival was covered as part of its *Wild On...* series, a recurring program that travels to exotic locations and drains them of any unique local characteristics they might have by focusing instead on American tourists drinking and fornicating in them. More down to earth is John Anderson's recent account of the 1999 festival, Sundancing. The book is composed almost entirely of interview fragments, excerpted from conversations with actors, directors and executives, as well as Park City locals, volunteers, shopkeepers, etc. In part, one can cynically attribute this to the publishing industry's desire to put the book in print

as quickly as possible; similarly, the majority of books written about Sundance and the 'indie' film movement seem hastily written, conceived to capitalize upon the surprising successes of such films as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999).

Nevertheless, the effect of Anderson's book is to portray the festival not simply as an event for the wealthy Hollywood elite, but as one in which that elite is forced to interact with, literally, a different class of people. Despite this sense of interaction, however, it is difficult to reconcile present narratives of Sundance with Mikhail Bakhtin's work on popular festive forms and the carnivalesque. For Bakhtin, such tropes are meaningful counter-histories, popular narratives in which the people are momentarily empowered to represent themselves. Bakhtin's work has inspired a rich vein of thought, notably in the writings of Natalie Zemon Davis and Robert Darnton, which investigate the existence of implicit satiric critique in the 'misbehavior' often found in popular festivities. A notable criticism of this sort of work is that it is too often heavily reliant on a simple binary of high and low culture, and that furthermore, it is not sufficiently critical of its own implicit high cultural status by the very fact of its academic investigative nature.

Does Sundance represent an opportunity to conceive of festive forms more fluidly, or should the event be dismissed as a 'bourgeois carnival' that merely replicates dominant culture? There is a very real sense in which the festival's value lies instead in its ability to provide a public forum through which such questions can be asked at all; throughout this dissertation I will offer several examples that suggest that this contemporary discourse of Independent Film is one that brings academic

work, particularly recent self-investigative tendencies within American Studies, into public view. Many have suggested that 'indie' films are significant for allegorizing their own making; I would extend this to suggest that they also more productively allegorize the academic endeavors which contribute to processes of cultural meaning.

The aforementioned authors typically stress themes of play and ambiguity in considering such popular festivities; what seems most significant about Sundance, then, is that its use of ambiguity allows it to achieve a unique status that effectively can be described as the inverse of the Bakhtinian argument. If popular festive forms are those in which the masses appropriate, exaggerate and parody the conventions of bourgeois living in order to (at least temporarily) disempower those conventions, then Sundance can be seen as an example of those parodies re-appropriated back into the service of dominant cultures. For Bakhtin, one of the most essential images of such popular-festive forms is the act of uncrowning; as he observes, a substantial amount of carnivalesque activity can be identified as either literal enactment (temporarily stripping state officials of their power) or symbolic performance (lowering bells from atop the church steeple) of such role reversals. At the Sundance film festival, however, those in power put temporary crowns on members of the ostensible masses by supporting their films, while holding on to true power themselves.

The suggestion of Sundance as an inversion of Bakhtin's carnivalesque, however, ultimately reaffirms the concept's validity here, albeit paradoxically; more integral to this discourse than uncrowning is a pervasive sense of ambiguity and

ambivalence. All crowning, furthermore, is always an act of simultaneous uncrowning, and vice versa; such is the nature of power, as well as the ambivalence Bakhtin locates within forms of carnivalesque expression. Sundance, moreover, offers us both latent and unconscious images of crowning and uncrowning. While obvious examples of crowning can be found in the various acts of bestowing awards and titles upon filmmakers, journalists covering the event tend to represent the event via greater interpretive leaps. A New York Times reporter, for example, notes that visiting Robert Redford (easily, the festival's symbolic king) in the actual Sundance institute, outside Park City's festival proper, has the character of an ascent when it is in fact a descent: "Sundance itself, where Mr. Redford was host to a lunch of filmmakers on Saturday, seems like Shangri-La ... Never mind that Sundance is south of Park City and lower in altitude; going there conveys the sense of trekking up the mountains to find some cinematic shaman."⁹ Another Bakhtinian paradox is thus invoked: as with the pre-modern carnivalesque, it is the popular symbolism of such events that has the most social meaning in reality, especially since it is only through mediation that we are presently able to encounter them -- be it the mediation of Rabelais, or of the New York Times.

The crowned filmmakers themselves are also notable mediators of Sundance's carnivalesque significance. Consider, for example the words of Kevin Smith, whose sudden success with *Clerks* (1994) led to a lengthy interview throughout John Pierson's chronicle of recent independent film, Spike, Mike,

⁹ Caryn James, quoted in Pierson, 292.

Slackers and Dykes: “I’m a student of American independent cinema, and I’m not the best student in the world, but I was good enough to do what I eventually did. I don’t feel that I have to go back and view European or other foreign films because I feel like [Jim Jarmusch et al] have already done it for me, and I’m getting filtered through them. That ethic works for me.”¹⁰ This quote is important in a number of ways: not only does it evoke one of Bakhtin’s concepts, it also, more importantly, presents an implicit defense against those who might argue that notions of pre-modern carnivalesque folk culture are often too easily applied to what they feel is a fundamentally incompatible postmodern mass culture. First, on the face of it, Smith’s comments remind us that his crowning comes at a cost: the rise of his popularity as an independent filmmaker is tied to the declining relevance of those directors who embrace a contemplative, non-narrative (read: ‘foreign’) influence in their work. By extension, one is then further reminded of the constant equivalent crowning and uncrowning that permeates all histories of cinematic independence. Scorsese, for example, was influenced by Cassavettes (among others, of course); those who blindly imitate Scorsese have lost true historical knowledge of Cassavettes. Similarly, those who now desperately evoke Tarantino’s work have rarely heard of Scorsese’s *Mean Streets* (1973); again, the truth of an older filmmaker’s work is ‘lost.’

But what meaning is there to be found if we follow this argument, with its seemingly endless string of crownings and uncrownings, to its logical end? Kevin

¹⁰ Quoted in Pierson, 32.

Smith's words directly refer to the present-day marginalization of a director (Jarmusch) who was himself crowned during the 1980s; I then followed this by invoking a '70s auteur whose crowning in turn led to a marginalization of the 1960s 'king' of American independent film, John Cassavettes. Just how far back into history can this process extend? I would suggest that such operations are ultimately a conceptual means to identifying the peculiar (and, yes, paradoxical) significance of the carnivalesque to American mythologies. I do not claim, of course, that I am the first to apply Bakhtin's work to specific instances of popular American festivals (George Lipsitz has already done so extensively in his writing on the meanings of Mardi Gras); instead, I am suggesting that there is an important clue to be found in Kevin Smith's willing act of 'forgetting' European cinemas at the expense of his beloved American 'indies.'

There is an ambiguity here that is worthy, finally, of Alexis de Tocqueville, in its incessant return to images of a New World turning its back on, even declaring itself independent from, a corrupt Old World. These acts of crowning and uncrowning, for Bakhtin, ultimately have little to do with simple exchanges of power and a great deal to do with our embrace of historical progress. Throughout his analysis of Rabelais, Bakhtin repeatedly invokes "time, which is the true hero of every feast, uncrowning the old and crowning the new."¹¹ Consider his interpretation of a notably ambiguous uncrowning image: "By cutting off and discarding the old dying body, the umbilical cord of the new youthful world is simultaneously broken

¹¹ Bakhtin, 219.

... Every blow dealt to the old helps the new to be born.”¹² For all the pre-modern, European significance of such passages, to other ears they may sound ‘inherently’ American, with their implications of constant youth¹³ and suggestion that the carnivalesque is itself inherently democratic. By extension, America thus can be portrayed as an on-going festive response to European decadence. The act of staging such a festivity, as Bakhtin describes it, has a familiar, particularly declarative character: “The carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace or on the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized *in their own way*, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity.”¹⁴

The peculiarly American paradox, of course, is that of the nation’s desire to represent its own hegemonic coercive force as the festivity itself, through a constant assertion of its own youth, and (now alarmingly global) independence. Herein lies the simultaneous revulsion and fascination the United States is able to inspire for so many throughout the rest of the world, teenagers and intellectuals alike: here is the party that has not yet ended, in which the people refuse to relinquish control to those who expected only a symbolic loss of the crown. The resulting social experiment forces us to consider the potential, paradoxical tyranny of democracy as anticipated

¹² Bakhtin, 206.

¹³ This eternal sense of youth found only its most recent expression in the media’s response to the events of 9/11. If we ‘lost our innocence’ when the terrorists attacked us in 2001, one might reasonably wonder how we were able to retain it during the events of Watergate, the Vietnam war, the Civil War, or after dropping bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, etc.

¹⁴ Bakhtin, 255 (his emphasis).

by de Tocqueville: when the carnival becomes the standard operating mode of the power structure, how are the people to mobilize any resistance to it, symbolic or not? How can we resolve this paradox of the constant carnival? We must look to the work of those who respond to Bakhtin in order to arrive at a potential response to this query.

A modern variation on the meaning of popular festivities, however those festivities may be made manifest, is explored in Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's article "Bourgeois Hysteria and the Carnavalesque." Stallybrass and White suggest that, though dominant culture has largely succeeded in erasing such forms of expression by the twentieth century, such erasure has only occurred at the level of the explicitly visible landscape. Through inspecting transcripts of Freudian analysis, the authors conclude that the intense bourgeois fear of, and even disgust with, the images of the carnivalesque force its numbers to repress such images, both socially and psychically, so profoundly that they are doomed to reappear within the bourgeois unconscious. Subjects of high culture, then, attempt "to mediate their own terrors by enacting private, made-up carnivals. In the absence of social forms they attempt to produce their own by pastiche and parody in an effort to embody semiotically their own distress."¹⁵ Moreover, it is important to note that the "modernization of Europe led [to this repression of the carnivalesque] ... it was simply one of the many casualties in the movement towards an urban, industrial society."¹⁶ Stallybrass and White would likely identify Sundance, then, as a purely "sentimental spectacle"

¹⁵ Stallybrass, 384.

¹⁶ Stallybrass, 386.

through which the upper-middle class engages with their base natures in ways that are only “momentary, fleeting and partial”¹⁷; the paradoxical nature of the American character, however, reveals that Sundance is not an expression of bourgeois nostalgia for pre-modern *jouissance*, but in fact the opposite. The forewarned tyranny of the masses has effectively reversed the terms, crowning one as the other is uncrowned. James B. Twitchell has suggested that the dominant, mass expression of the culture, with its mindless, abrasive TV programs and derivative, bloated feature films is now a ‘Carnival Culture’, in his book of the same name. Now, the assumption of aesthetic quality encased within the celebrations of the Sundance film festival leads to ‘the masses’ (represented by those who define them, the purveyors of Hollywood mass culture) enjoying the annual experience for its fleeting, utopic simulation of what it might be like to have bourgeois tastes in art.

One must not forget, finally, that this event is not so much a mere carnival as it is a *ciné-carnival*: the specificities of any film festival are such that the festivities are on some level about their own mediation, or about the conflict between the various forms of expression on and off the theater screens. As Bakhtin depicts it, no such conflict should be necessary: true carnivalesque festivity is meant to fully integrate ritualized stage-play with the unruly hum of street-life: “this utopia is enacted without footlights; it is presented within life itself... [there is] no separation of participants and spectators. Everybody participates ... the absence of clearly established footlights is characteristic of all popular-festive forms. The utopian truth

¹⁷ Stallybrass, 388.

is enacted in life itself.”¹⁸ Sundance, conversely, is a festival in which the bourgeois attendees celebrate their own engagement with, and support for, popular expression as embodied by the independent films they watch (and attempt to purchase).

If Bakhtin’s popular festive forms were about publics assembling and expressing themselves in opposition to the codes of dominant culture, then in Sundance we can see present-day dominant culture now performing a crypto-nostalgic and counter-parodic version of those previous public gatherings, in which one can recognize both a longing for pre-modern forms of expression (as represented by the festivity itself as well as the films shown, collectively defined by their resistance to industry) and a compulsive desire to repeatedly return to a site of such festivity in order to defeat it, to repress it once more (by acquiring the films for attempted integration into dominant systems of exhibition, distribution and marketing). By this I mean that the festival is not necessarily successful in attempting to sublimate popular expression, either by acquiring its films and absorbing the codes of independent filmmaking into the Hollywood mainstream, or by masquerading as a popular festive form while in actuality serving the interests of established hegemony; this is only part of the discourse. Instead, it is a cultural space in which such contestation is made visible and public, in which the class-war subtext inherent to popular festive forms is now made manifest and explicit. Even if, at the end of the day, the operations of the festival are effectively the same as those of the Hollywood industry, they serve a unique function in that they make such operations

¹⁸ Bakhtin, 265.

visible. This is not merely a postmodern symptom in which, for example, we are now more interested in business than textual content, or are in love with self-reflexive media in-jokes. More importantly, it is a means by which the public is able to recognize its own specific acts of film attendance as active engagement in joining the ranks of the taste-makers. The trade-off, however, is that the footlights, indicating the boundaries of this drama's proscenium, are now more visible than Bakhtin would want; this Sundance-utopia is indeed visible, but it is no longer directly enacted within the lives of the people, and their participation is heavily contingent upon the whim of those who have yet to be uncrowned.

This theoretical passage of this chapter has made little use of the specificities of the event, of its actual details. In the next section I will investigate the representation of the festival in the popular press, exploring the meanings of the ways in which it is depicted and historicized. What kind of a symbol is Sundance? What kind of a narrative is it? In the same way that the event's festive status demonstrates an implicit, if complex, nostalgia for pre-modern living, so too do current representations of the festival engage with a mythology that is as old and as contested as the United States itself. Now, however, the contestation is dual: it is at once a debate over the meanings of American mythology as well as one over the proper forum for that debate. By inherently aligning itself with conceptions of taste, and by announcing its own cultural authority, Sundance locates what was once purely academic work in the hands of the masses; much of the discourse's significance thus lies in academic ambivalence around such an occurrence.

Sundance and the Pastoral

It is important to consider that the phrase “the Sundance film festival” bears the trace not only of its original incarnation, the United States film festival, but of the Sundance institute as well. That is, it is a concept that is equally communicative of both ‘film-festival-ness’ and ‘Sundance-ness.’ I call attention to this so that one can recognize why the press is able to photographically represent Sundance not simply as a snow-bound, freezing January festival, but as a verdant, tranquil summer utopia as well. Indeed, since the annual festival is merely a temporary manifestation of the institute’s ongoing work year-round, a striking number of mainstream articles about Sundance choose to depict it as an ode to nature in full bloom. A story in American Film devoted to one of the institute’s first workshop experiments in the early 1980s represents it not by identifying any of its buildings, or even its workers, but instead with an extreme long shot of unidentifiable figures dwarfed by the trees lining the field in which they stand, a path behind them leading up into the mountains while a brook babbles in the extreme foreground. Peter Biskind’s story for Premiere magazine, “Promised Land,” is accompanied by a large photo of one of the institute’s cabins, next to a small wooden bridge one must cross in order to reach it; the bridge sits over a mountain stream beside which can be seen a hand-carved Native American figure. When people are shown, they are invariably outside, in casual dress, grouped either around a picnic table or merely sitting cross-legged in a circle on the grass.

The text accompanying such photographs, unsurprisingly, is quite similar. On the treatment of struggling young filmmakers attending a summer workshop, a reporter for Time notes,

the staff recruits the best talent, pumps fresh mountain air into their brains and hopes they are never tempted ... to make *The Return of Howard the Duck* ... the morning sound and smell of creek water under a wooden footbridge, the afternoon light on lush summer grass, the green-walled canyons climbing the evening sky – anyone who can't draw creative inspiration from this place should probably be shooting weddings and bar mitzvahs.¹⁹

What a closer inspection of such texts reveals is that they are not simply about the romanticization of nature, or even of the simple likening of the creative spirit to nature. They are about an America, and an American culture, that has lost its way. This is already apparent in the above excerpt from Time magazine (in which artists need to reinvigorate themselves in the countryside lest they be tempted by a life devoted to hollow sequel-making); however, the larger implications of Sundance are not present only in those stories devoted to its artistic commitments. Strikingly, one is also able to consider those texts that attempt to promote what can collectively be called “Sundance-ness” as a way of life.

Far from simply being a mere film festival or filmmaking institute, Sundance is also a ski resort, a clothing catalogue, a small community. Here is a passage from the “Sundance History” page on the Sundance catalogue web-site:

In the canyon now called Sundance, Native Americans once honored the spirit of the earth. The land has changed little since then. From

¹⁹ Lopez, 75.

Ute Indian hunting ground, to a Scottish family's sheep pasture, Sundance has become an arts and recreational community on 6,000 acres of protected and cherished wilderness. Robert Redford conceived of Sundance in 1969 as an experiment in environmental stewardship and artistic expression. A place where the ideas would change, but the land would not.²⁰

This passage is advertising copy, pure and simple. Though the text makes passing mention of the artistic endeavors Sundance has to offer, for the most part its goal is to depict the location as one of untouched land, ideally to be contrasted in the reader's mind with the implied landscape in which he or she is likely to sit: spoiled, polluted, noisy, over-developed. This is the type of pastoralism that Leo Marx would call simple; it is a more complex version of pastoralism that he primarily investigates in The Machine in the Garden. Marx would likely dismiss the catalogue's copy as proving nothing more than the success of a "strategy, validated by marketing research, [that assumes] Americans are most likely to buy the cigarettes, beer, and automobiles they can associate with a rustic setting."²¹ Though the passage from the catalogue could certainly be said to engage with an American cultural mythology, it does so to such a simplistic, one-sided degree that it is devoid of meaning. There is nothing to analyze here; Marx's seminal study, however, finds what he calls the most significant issue of American culture dramatized within those more complex moments (be they literary, commercial, social, or political) in which images of the pastoral and the industrial contradict and conflict with one another. For Marx, these contradictions are not necessarily to be resolved; instead they are to be historically

²⁰ www.sundancecatalogue.com

²¹ Marx, 6.

situated and interpreted as crucial sites of meaning in and of themselves. To consider Sundance as a meaningfully American symbol, then, it is imperative not merely to read it as a pastoral utopia, but instead as what Foucault calls an “heterotopia” in which the pastoral and the industrial can be shown to operate upon one another.

The vast majority of writing about the Sundance phenomenon takes this conflict as its central theme. Consider the extent to which the following passage from a New York Times interview is about the harmonious integration of nature and technology, celebrity and obscurity:

the trip to Redford’s mountainside home is like driving to the Bat Cave. We pass through a series of roadblocking security screens that move aside when Redford pushes a button on a remote-control unit. He points out a meadow where elk gather each evening ... we come to a perfectly green expanse of lawn. Redford’s solar-heated home is a marvel of eco-architecture; a modern dwelling built of native stone, it’s so thoroughly fused with the land around it that it takes me a moment or two to see it.²²

It is a central thesis of mine that such mythologizing transcends the content of any individual independent film shown at the Sundance festival; by linking the promotion of such modes of filmmaking to this larger discourse of lifestyle choice, the entire film movement becomes at some level essentially about this internal American conflict. A great deal of writers struggle to define a precise distinction between the ‘indie’ film and that which is made by Hollywood; what seems more interesting to me is the extent to which the resultant debate itself becomes a meaningful popular American discourse. Redford’s home is an absurdly optimistic

²² Kim, 85.

example; a significant number of recent depictions of Sundance, however, emplot the narrative of the festival in ways that Hayden White would call decidedly tragic. Lory Smith's Party in a Box: The Story of the Sundance Film Festival is told from the perspective of a programmer for the original "United States" incarnation of the event; the book details the cost of the festival's acquisition by Redford's Sundance institute, reinforcing popular notions of the present Sundance in which pretentious Hollywood vultures descend upon a town too small to accommodate them while they pick apart the flesh of innocent, struggling young filmmakers. Smith coins a neologism to describe the act of replacing an original, dedicated US festival staffer with a fresh face from the Sundance institute (such as Redford's brother-in-law Sterling VonWagenen): to suffer such a fate is to be "Sundanced." A typically irreverent episode of *South Park* recently went so far as to depict Redford himself as a form of cultural parasite (that would likely have made Adorno and Horkheimer proud); the megalomaniacal star is shown to be plotting the transformation of all small American towns into new Los Angeleses.²³ For the creators of *South Park*, Sundance has become its antithesis: Hollywood. The episode cannily satirizes the label of independence as merely an advertising category the industry can co-opt (via Marx's simple pastoralism) to dupe the general public into continuing to enjoy its ever-familiar product.

²³ The story is in many ways more reminiscent of an LA Weekly article devoted to Bruce Willis' failed business ventures in Hailey, Idaho that left many locals heavily in debt, "Hailey's Comet: How Bruce Willis Romanced and then Jilted a Small Idaho Town." The narrative offers a failed microcosm of Reaganite trickle-down economics (excitement over a wealthy star's fleeting investment, a transformation of Hailey's stagnant economy); as I suggest, the satire of *South Park* is often reductive, even reactionary, in its politics.

Though the episode is certainly satisfying, climaxing in an explosion of the sewer system, brought on by the sudden population boom in South Park, that results in the Sundance folk fleeing the town while covered in shit, its counter-extremity suggests its own kind of simple pastoralism. It seems to be a knee-jerk reaction to attitudes present in the aforementioned “Sundance Catalogue” quote, in which a love of nature is directly linked to commodified jackets and sweaters. The episode tells us little more than to cherish the pastoral town in opposition to encroaching but ill-defined urban industry. In many ways, however, the satire of the episode is even more satisfying for its surprising embrace of the carnivalesque, effectively (and memorably) critiquing this decadent ciné-carnival through a renewed energization of pre-modern festive forms. We have all heard, surely, descriptions of Sundance that liken the event to an enormous banquet, feast or even a ‘smorgasbord’; the selections are meant as an alternative to the ‘steady diet’ of escapism offered by Hollywood. *South Park*’s Trey Parker and Matt Stone echo the words of Bakhtin during this moment, in their willing depiction of the symbiotic, even restorative relationship between consumption and defecation. Here we have yet another example of the ambiguities and ambivalences that are so prevalent throughout the author’s conception of carnivalesque social commentary. Specifically, Bakhtin refers to a passage in Rabelais’ work that compares servings of animal intestines to the human counterparts that digest them: “the limits between the devouring and the devoured body are erased ... animal and human organs are interwoven into one dissoluble

grotesque whole.”²⁴ Though it is easy to dismiss the episode’s explosive climax as a simple display of the recent renaissance of gross-out comedy initiated by the Farrelly Brothers’ films, to do so would be to ignore the vital tradition of fecal matter as a meaningful symbol. Again, Bakhtin puts it best: “it is necessary to turn away from the limited and reduced aesthetic stereotypes of modern times.... In grotesque realism ... excrement was conceived as an essential element in the life of the body and of the earth in the struggle against death. It was part of man’s vivid awareness of his materiality, of his bodily nature, closely related to the life of the earth.”²⁵

A further result of the episode is that Sundance itself becomes a cultural forum around which these debates can accumulate, allowing the public to judge the success of what the institute’s members tend to describe as an experiment in hybridity. As one board member commented in 1981, “Sundance’s excitement is in the cross-fertilization [between Hollywood and independents] ... For Sundance to work, knowledge can’t just pass one way.”²⁶ A more recent interview with programmer Geoff Gilmore explicitly links such hybridity to the festival’s distinctly American character: “There has to be a realm, not entirely outside commercial determination but not directly commodified ... an in-between space ... I don’t think it’s a simplistic ideological vision, partly because I think ideology in the US is so confused ... independent film is not a reducible term. It’s diversity, by definition.”²⁷

If the current Sundance discourse is essentially a debate about the meaning of

²⁴ Bakhtin, 223.

²⁵ Bakhtin, 224.

²⁶ Perry, 49.

²⁷ Aufderheide, 44-45.

American ideology, then by definition it must engage with a certain amount of nostalgia, interrogating the country's self-definition by contrasting what it currently means against that which it has always meant. But is this actually a nostalgia for the American past, a nostalgia for previous modes of American filmmaking, or is it instead a kind of postmodern nostalgia for nostalgia itself, drained of any meaning beyond the loss of meaning so many theorists find endemic to our current cultural climate?

The Nostalgias of Sundance

“One would have to be a moral imbecile to be in any way nostalgic for this situation.”

-- Samuel R. Delaney, Times Square Red, Times Square Blue

In his comprehensive survey, Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film, Emmanuel Levy writes, “If there was a stereotypical indie in the 1980s, it could be described as a ‘sensitive’ coming-of-age story about a Midwestern farm girl ... in the 1990s, the images are almost entirely urban and multi-racial, suffused with violence and dark humor.”²⁸ Again, it can be seen that Sundance and filmic independence serve as a site of meaningful cultural debate: while Levy celebrates the diversity to be found within the current trend of ‘indie’ filmmaking, Lory Smith’s history is one that is now nostalgic for the original version of the

²⁸ Levy, 41. The gendered binary to which Levy here refers will later be explored through the lens of new technologies. Henry Jenkins’ “Complete Freedom of Movement: Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces” refers, for example, to a similar binary in the designs of games aimed specifically at boys and girls. If recent independent cinema engages with video game technologies to erect a ‘virtual frontier’ for viewers to explore, it is worth recalling that the gendering of this frontier predates its slippage from real to virtual realms.

festival, a kind of now-and-forever-bespoiled ‘virgin land’. Smith’s position represents a substantial side of the debate that suggests the current trend of postmodern crime films (Tarantino’s fusion of Kubrick’s *The Killing*, 1956, with Hong Kong cinema in *Reservoir Dogs*, 1992, is a definitive example) reveals the festival to be little more than a forum for young directors to display hip, “calling-card” movies in order to gain access into Hollywood, as opposed to an outlet for truly different modes of filmmaking. It is intriguing to consider that, despite the complex pastoralism often represented by Sundance, the nostalgia generated here is not so much for a time when America was better as it is for a time when American movies were better. The festival’s name change, from “United States” to “Sundance,” suggests a Jamesonian kind of nostalgia not for the reality of the country but for its glossy cinematic representations.

Consider Jameson’s description of *Body Heat* (1981) in “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”: “the small town setting has a crucial strategic function: it allows the film to do without most of the signals and references we might associate with the contemporary world, with consumer society.”²⁹ For Jameson, such a trend suggests an inability to face either the present or the actuality of the past; what is striking about the “Sundance” label, and its use of small town iconography, is its nostalgia for a time when the American nostalgia film was able to meaningfully address its present context. It is important to consider that the name Sundance links the phenomenon specifically to *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) and by

²⁹ Jameson, 117.

extension to experimentation within the Hollywood system during the 1960s and 1970s. It is easy to dismiss the label as merely indicating that moment at which Redford achieved enough power to begin the gradual construction of his ‘empire.’³⁰ To do so, however, is to miss the extent to which the film represents a period when the Hollywood western was able to mobilize past American iconography in order to engage viewers with complex commentary on such contemporary issues as the Vietnam War.

If the reader can only recall George Roy Hill’s film for its curious use of “Raindrops Keep Fallin’ On My Head,” then perhaps a brief refresher is in order (and the song is a perfect place to start). One of the film’s most memorable sequences is the lyrical musical interlude in which Paul Newman and Katherine Ross’ characters cavort joyously on a bicycle while being lovingly photographed amidst their natural environment. If anything, the sequence is a perfect cinematic embodiment of Marx’s title: a machine in the garden, indeed (in one shot they even indulge in the temptation to snatch apples from a tree while gliding by it). What is perhaps less memorable about this sequence is its fleeting, elegiac function in the larger structure of the film. The bicycle itself has earlier been introduced by a barker who announces to a crowd, “this little machine will change your lives ... the horse is *dead!*” Later, when the heroes are forced to retreat to Bolivia, Newman’s character

³⁰ If the frontier has ultimately been rendered virtual, then so too are the empires that are built from it; as we shall see, Ronald Reagan’s invocation of the *Star Wars* trilogy’s “evil empire” to denounce the Soviet Union suggests a decisive shift from the real to the virtual throughout the discourse.

heaves off the machine into a small pond, shouting after it in disgust, “the future’s all yours, you lousy bicycle!”

Considered in isolation, one is tempted to dismiss *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* as simply an odd, idiosyncratic film (which it certainly is); however, its social functions become easier to recognize upon noting that a great deal of popular film criticism in 1969 was devoted to comparing the film with that year’s similarly elegiac western, *The Wild Bunch*. Both films are set not in the 1860s, but at the turn of the century; both depict the displacement of traditional western outlaw-heroes by modern technology, as represented by an automobile and a Gatling gun in Peckinpah’s film; and both films end with their main characters ripped to shreds by a hail of bullets from overwhelmingly large opposing forces. This last detail has often been noted as a reference to *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), in which the absurd degree of violence is typically interpreted as a denouncement of the equivalent carnage (shown to Americans via television coverage) of the Vietnam War.

The result is that this Sundance-nostalgia becomes harder to dismiss as a simple postmodern erasure of historical significance; instead, the use of “Sundance” evokes Marita Sturken’s work on the multiplicity of meanings derived from the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C. For Sturken, the wall embodies “not a singular statement but [is instead] a site of mediation, a site of conflicting voices and opposing agendas ... [Representing] a struggle between narratives, it has spawned ... very different kinds of remembrance.”³¹ Tellingly, Sturken also notes that media

³¹ Sturken, 83-84.

coverage of the wall's reception moves between dealing directly with the Vietnam War and its own collective sense of purpose in representing that war; this is not merely a remembrance of conflict but of the media's significance in engaging the American public with interpretations of that conflict. Similarly, the Sundance discourse is one that not only engages with the myth of American independence but also is nostalgic for media representations of this mythology, specifically the 1960s-70s "New Hollywood" declaring itself, on some level, aesthetically independent from an increasingly ineffectual studio system. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *The Wild Bunch* symbolize at once a collective desire to engage with American historical mythology and, at the same time, disillusionment with prior U.S. cinema's monolithic engagement with that mythology. As a result the discourse effectively conflates the desire for a greater sophistication in film with a desire for a greater complexity to American self-interrogation; similarly, this dissertation will necessarily move from the specifics of the independent film discourse to the self-interrogating academic discipline of American Studies itself.

What exactly, then, is the significance of the independence myth? If this truly is a complex nostalgia, it must be gazing back towards something more meaningful than a vague, distant past – what is it that keeps this myth alive in the present? A great deal of philosophical enquiry has been devoted to attempting to answer this question. By temporarily laying aside the matter of historical specificity, Jacques Derrida approaches the heart of the matter in a brief address regarding the implications of signing any such document, aptly entitled "Declarations of

Independence.” Though the speech would seem to be a simple matter, perhaps even predictable in its own way, Derrida’s remarks begin with an expression of tension and insecurity. On the occasion of America’s bicentennial celebrations, the philosopher finds himself giving a public lecture at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville; his host has suggested that the unique combination of speaker and event could result in only one possible topic – a Deconstructive reading of the Declaration of Independence. Almost certainly pressured unwillingly in such a direction, Derrida’s ultimate first words should not come as a surprise: “It is better that you know right away; I am not going to keep my promise. I beg your pardon, but it will be impossible for me to speak to you this afternoon, even in indirect style, about what I was engaged to deal with.”³² Derrida quickly proves to be less interested in a conventional textual analysis of the document than he is in proposing an answer to the question, “Who signs, and with what so-called proper name, the declarative act which founds an institution?”³³

Derrida is ultimately referring here to the paradox of political imitation that is also at the center of Ronald Schmidt’s recent study, This is the City: Making Model Citizens in Los Angeles. Invoking a similar question – “[H]ow does one imitate the radical excellence of a founding?” – Schmidt recalls “the paradoxical demand that the good citizen simultaneously innovate and imitate has been a central fixture of the politics of the United States since the eighteenth century.”³⁴ Such a paradox is easily

³² Derrida, 7.

³³ Derrida, 8

³⁴ Schmidt, xvi-xvii.

extended to the aesthetic realm of independent film that engages with such mythologies – how can such films ever coalesce into a meaningful, sustained discourse when they are defined through their very innovation, through decisive change? Schmidt’s book is also useful, however, for stressing the inevitability of a move from the real to the virtual as a means to resolve such paradoxes:

[H]ow does one imitate radical innovation? By crafting superior personae; those who are best at pretending to be completely genuine are thus able to maintain political authority by being able to bar others from their legitimate place in the political realm. In short, from Cooper’s fictional Natty Bumppo to the film-star cowboy president of the 1980s, the master artificers of innovative spontaneity dominated the authorized public world of the American Republic.³⁵

As a result it is easy to suggest that the alternatives to Hollywood proposed by Sundance and the cinema it represents are themselves largely virtual; I will later suggest that a contrast between the film-star cowboy president of the United States and the film-star cowboy president of the film festival that champions authenticity is itself an illusory choice between persuasive, mediated personae. The discourse of Independent Film threatens to render virtual the processes of academic work in much the same way that Schmidt’s popular personae themselves inhibit public access to the political process.³⁶

³⁵ Schmidt, xviii.

³⁶ Many contemporary American Studies scholars stress the need for self-awareness in their academic work, a result of substantial inquiry as to the impacts of the 1950s and the 1970s as historical contexts for the discipline’s earlier analysis. Accordingly, it is worth noting that this dissertation was written during a political moment in which intense polarity of opinion threatens to drown out the voice of measured academic analysis; the most recent of many examples is the publication of David Horowitz’s *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*, in which a figure such as Fredric Jameson is attacked simply for suggesting the concept of a political unconscious that might enable one to read past the surface artifice of current political discourse.

Though I will return to Derrida's remarks momentarily, an analysis more representative of what was likely expected from him can be found in Carl L. Becker's book, The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas. Becker explores various drafts of the document, interpreting specific elements of its wording while attempting to historically account for various decisions that were made in settling on the version that is now considered 'official.' Amongst his more notable conclusions, however, is that the text was heavily edited so as to downplay its own inherent hypocrisies and paradoxes, such as the assertion that 'we are all created equal' having come from a group of rich, white men, many of whom fully intended to continue employing slaves for as long as they wanted. As Becker puts it,

The most notable instance [of revision] was the deletion of Jefferson's famous 'philippic' against the slave trade. Jefferson himself thought this long paragraph one of the best parts of the Declaration; and certainly nothing could have been more relevant in an argument based on the natural rights of man than some reference to slavery -- that 'cruel war against human nature itself.' But Congress struck it out.³⁷

It is not difficult to imagine such conclusions weighing heavily upon Derrida's decision to focus instead upon the inherent performative paradox inscribed in the document's signature, rather than the moral paradox within its ideology.

Here, too, however, Derrida has been anticipated by Becker's analysis. "If the Declaration has not been forgotten," Becker suggests, "... no doubt one essential reason is that it was an event, [as well as] the chief symbol of an event of surpassing historical importance, as well as a literary document which set forth in classic form a

³⁷ Becker, xiii.

particular philosophy of politics.”³⁸ Here we can see the parallels between the meanings embodied by the document and those Marita Sturken locates in examining the Vietnam memorial; once again, another multiplicity of meanings is produced, rather than a singular statement. In a sense, for both men the proper code with which to read the Declaration is Bazinian; the document is not so much significant for what it says as text, but for the extent to which it ‘embalms’ a crucial historical moment, rendering it forever present and contemporary. The Declaration thus becomes an attempt at a unique reconciliation of an imitative political paradox that dates back to the Roman Empire.

Becker, for example, seems almost moved by the extent to which his own painstaking reconstruction brings Jefferson back to life, finding the man’s presence haunting the words, filling them with life much as a good public speaker does to entertain his audience. Consider the following tribute, presented in the form of an apology:

Like many men who write with felicity, Jefferson was no orator... It might seem that a man who can write effectively should be able to speak effectively. It sometimes happens. But one whose ear is sensitive to the subtler, elusive harmonies of expression, one who in imagination hears the pitch and cadence and rhythm of the thing he wishes to say before he says it, often makes a sad business of public speaking because, painfully aware of the imperfect felicity of what has been uttered, he forgets what he ought to say next. He instinctively wishes to cross out what he has just said, and say it over again in a different way – and this is what he often does, to the confusion of his audience. In writing he can cross out and rewrite at leisure, as often as he likes, until the sound and the sense are perfectly suited – until the thing *composes*.³⁹

³⁸ Becker, 225.

³⁹ Becker, 195 (his emphasis).

The seeming over-length of this passage is crucial: what for one reader would be a seemingly minor point, relatively easy to express succinctly, becomes for Becker a near confession (one wonders if he is speaking in defense of his own struggles to speak in public) that again evokes Sturken's conclusions. Like the Vietnam Memorial Wall, the Declaration also invites us to 'visit' and revisit it, to reflect upon our own selves, our own definitions of the nation, and finally to actively re-engage ourselves as good citizens, rather than passive followers.

For Derrida, then, what fascinates is the signature, as well as the according act which produced it. "But just whose signature exactly? Who is the actual signer of such acts?" Derrida asks.⁴⁰ If we are inclined to answer 'Thomas Jefferson', we must accept that the words merely denote the man; what they connote, however, is a trickier matter altogether. Just as 'Jefferson' ultimately signifies 'the representatives', so too do they ultimately stand in for 'the people.' But how can the act of drafting and signing the Declaration of Independence have any legitimate meaning, when the very reason for its existence is that 'the people' have already granted themselves the rights it outlines by demanding that the document be drafted? "One cannot decide," answers Derrida, "whether independence is stated or produced by this utterance ... This obscurity, this undecidability between, let's say, a performative structure and a constative structure, is *required* in order to produce the

⁴⁰ Derrida, 8

sought-after effect.”⁴¹ It is possible, initially, to interpret Derrida’s tone as vaguely pessimistic, as if to suggest that the words are irrelevant; or one might conclude the act of declaration is akin to a Nietzschean will-to-power, in which one can only be independent by having the brute force necessary to declare and keep said independence. In this formulation, the true ‘declaration’ would be the Revolutionary War, an interpretation reinforced by Derrida’s repeated use of the word ‘coup’ to describe the Declaration.⁴²

Derrida’s ultimate reading of the signature’s significance, however, is aligned with a decidedly more benign conception of morality. In order to truly retain independence, “an institution ... has to render itself independent of the empirical individuals who have taken part in its production ... it turns out, precisely by reason of the structure of instituting language, that the founding act of an institution – the act as *archive* as well as *performance* – has to maintain within itself the signature.”⁴³ Here we can identify an eternal tension between a sense of permanence evoked by the concept of independence as well as a constant engagement with the present, as embodied by this contrast between archive and performance. The ‘coup of writing’ undertaken by Jefferson et al thus can be seen as not so much a will-to-power, in which ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are terms defined solely by those with the power to maintain the definitions, but instead a humble will-to-transcendence, forever merging a specific moment of the historical past with a constant *presence*.

⁴¹ Derrida, 9 (his emphasis).

⁴² “The *self* surges up here ... in a single coup of force, which is also a coup of writing, as the right to writing.” Derrida, 10 (his emphasis).

⁴³ Derrida, 8 (his emphasis).

Derrida's tentative conclusion is that the act represents our collective desire for meaning; our belief that such a declaration will take effect in the long run is also our belief in a "last instance,"⁴⁴ in which the ultimate implied signer of any such document is a moral and just God. This myth of independence, and our continued cultural engagement with the term, is thus one of our most primal philosophical enquiries: is this a universe that means, and do I have free will within it? With Sundance we simultaneously face an institution as well as one of Schmidt's public personae in the figure of Robert Redford; indeed, as a discourse Sundance is all too successful at rendering its acclaimed directors into similar personae themselves (Kevin Smith, Quentin Tarantino, etc). Derrida's most significant conception of American independence, then, is that which renders the American institution independent of American founding fathers – if America is to succeed as the great social experiment it claims to be, it must be an experiment whose results can be duplicated by others in order to validate it. If not, American democracy becomes simultaneously symbolic and one more system of control.

An intriguing implication of Derrida's, however, is that it is not so much the institution founded that bears cultural meaning but rather the act of declaration itself. Ultimately, it is this act that we are nostalgic for, and thus it seems especially significant that the Sundance discourse is one in which we see represented not a stable institution but an ongoing process, a series of repeated acts of declaration: the Sundance Resort is independent of our modern world, which relies on automobiles

⁴⁴ Derrida, 12.

for transportation; the Sundance Institute workshops are independent of traditional Hollywood-apprenticeship film schools; the Sundance Festival is devoted to films that are independent of the Hollywood mainstream; the Sundance Channel is independent of commercialized cable television; and the Sundance Catalogue is independent of modern shopping malls. An institution merely governs, represents a set of rules; a founding declaration, however, suggests a present-day ability for citizens to live up to their founding fathers' ideals. However, as Mary Fuller notes in her dialogue with Henry Jenkins, "Nintendo and New World Travel Writing," such a suggestion is itself typically illusory: "Cultures endlessly repeat the narratives of their founding as a way of justifying their occupation of space ... [discourses such as video games] allow us to enact through play an older narrative that can no longer be enacted in reality."⁴⁵

The history of cinema is full of forms of independent filmmaking as well as narratives of oppositional filmmaking strategies re-appropriated into the Hollywood system once more so that new independences can reappear in a cyclical fashion. It is possible that Sundance has captured the public imagination so vividly simply because it plays out this cycle on such a grand scale. Or, perhaps, this Sundance discourse will succeed in revealing this cycle to be over-naturalized, that this binary between independent and Hollywood films is a false one that must be deconstructed before it can be resolved, before true progress can be made. Perhaps it is simply not

⁴⁵ Jenkins and Fuller, 69.

in the nation's character to do so: as Leo Marx notes, "American writers seldom, if ever, have designed satisfactory resolutions for their pastoral fables."⁴⁶

Redford-as-Whore?

I mentioned in my introduction that Sundance is worth recognizing as a star-auteur discourse, at least in part. Consider the following headlines: "Redford: Content king, even in high-tech world"; "Redford hates the buzz, loves the pics"; "The Two Hollywoods; Robert Redford has this problem"; "Eight wannabe directors spend a month with Redford and other pros to sharpen their craft." It seems self-evident that this discourse is one that engages with the star's persona, but why does it do so, and what meaning does this engagement convey? On one level the Redford discourse is another manifestation of simple pastoralism: many of the stories that cover the festival end by reporting on the status of Redford's latest production. The result is to link the festival, and "Sundance" by extension, with the sentimental films Redford typically directs; such titles as *A River Runs Through It* (1992), *The Horse Whisperer* (1998) and *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000) come to mind. This recent filmography links Redford with a pastoral impulse; at the same time, however, a film such as *Quiz Show* (1994) can depict a more cynical Redford, distrustful of the media.

Somewhat more complex and intriguing, on the other hand, is a trend within the Sundance discourse to portray Robert Redford as a figure who is required to

⁴⁶ Marx, 364.

‘play’ himself, or to manipulate his star persona, in order to achieve his goals. Schmidt refers to the distinction between the passive ‘imitation’ of our forefathers, which allows citizens to behave with good obedience, and a more active ‘emulation’ of them, which includes an attempt to exceed them, to continue their radical acts. Redford thus simultaneously becomes the artificial persona that cannot be emulated, used in the control of a pliant populace, as well as himself an actual citizen attempting this very act of impossible self-emulation. This aspect of the discourse necessarily interrogates the extent to which our collective memory of Redford’s persona, particularly in the 1970s, contributes to our interpretation of Sundance. Peter Biskind’s aforementioned article “Promised Land,” for example, cannot help but depict the mismanagement amongst the various branches of Sundance as a conspiracy reminiscent of *All the President’s Men* (1976), or Redford’s elusive role throughout the proceedings as evocative of the Senatorial nominee, untrustful of associates’ use of his image, from *The Candidate* (1972).

It would be unfair and, more importantly, inaccurate to accuse Biskind of being singularly predisposed to blurring the line between Redford’s on- and off-screen activities; one might assume for example, that the ongoing war in Iraq, itself difficult at times to separate from a post 9/11 ‘War on Terrorism’, would lead to a greater sobriety on the part of journalists, even when merely dealing with Hollywood. Yet, as Redford’s name began to appear in major American newspapers throughout the fall of 2002, it became readily apparent that the distinction between Redford-the-political-participant and Redford-the-political-symbol, or icon to be

invoked by others (including Redford himself) was hopelessly, inescapably vague. A recent example began with an editorial Redford wrote for the Los Angeles Times, entitled, “The Highest Patriotism Lies in Weaning U.S. From Fossil Fuels.” In it, Redford simultaneously attacks the policies of the Bush government as well as a news media establishment that reports on such policy to the exclusion of more relevant concerns:

The Bush White House talks tough on military matters in the Middle East while remaining virtually silent about the long-term problem posed by U.S. dependence on fossil fuels. Failing to rein in our dependence on imported oil gives leverage to undemocratic and unstable regimes ... American rooftops can be the Persian Gulf of solar energy ... If we want energy security, then we have to reduce our appetite for fossil fuels. There’s no other way. Other issues may crowd the headlines, but this is our fundamental challenge.⁴⁷

In this brief article, Redford combines explicit critique of Bush’s pro-war stance (given authority by referring to his own “involvement with solar power issues [since] the mid-1970s and ... [support] of the San Francisco-based Vote Solar organization”⁴⁸) with an implicit sense that Redford is especially well-suited to exposing the sensationalist bias of most mainstream media, himself having such a long-standing, uneasy relationship with it.

More pronounced, however, was a New York Times interview with Redford that followed this editorial about a week later, in which the line of questioning shifts from a reiteration of the editorial’s argument, to Redford’s own status as aging

⁴⁷ Redford. <http://www.commondreams.org/views02/1202-03.htm> Originally Published on Monday, December 2, 2002 by the Los Angeles Times.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

celebrity figure and concurrent solidification as icon of the American West. Intriguingly, this brief article is entitled “The Outsider.” Nowhere within the text does this assessment receive elaboration; the suggestion would seem to be that Redford’s ‘independent’ nature is by now so established that one’s own assumptions as to the meaning of this independence are most likely correct, whatever they may happen to be. The very brevity of the piece should make its sudden transitions of subject matter all the more glaring; however, the sense of Redford as a shorthand signifier serves to conversely naturalize the article’s blurred boundaries as commonly accepted aspects of the discourse, while making Sundance a symbol through which many discourses are reductively condensed into one. In the same way, for example, that Redford at once represents Hollywood and an independent cinema that purports to oppose it, just as he is simultaneously a near-mythic emblem of the established American West, and a counter-cultural political figure, so too is it equally natural for a New York Times piece criticizing Presidential politics to appear in the ‘Movies’ section. In the interview, Redford cites ‘apathy’ as a primary reason for the lack of dissent in the current national climate, sizable but short-lived anti-war protests notwithstanding; tellingly, he identifies this apathy as dual, straddling both political and cinematic spheres.

Such fluctuation is at times implicit – when Redford complains that “the Bush administration is making it virtually impossible for the smaller groups to have a say,”⁴⁹ he could be paraphrasing his own reasons for the importance of the Sundance

⁴⁹ Griscom, www.latimes.com.

film festival – as well as surprisingly explicit. The lack of motivation for political dissent is also the inability to read textual products, to *interpret*, at the level of both the news media and more unambiguously entertainment-based variations. When an ‘apathetic’ citizen skims, as Redford puts it, “right past all news about the ozone hole and the wetlands being drained and junked by developers and the Glacier National Park in Montana that could have no glaciers by mid-century,”⁵⁰ their decision to do so is not only political but aesthetic as well. Again there is a sense of nostalgic loss: Redford is no longer a popular actor who is able to convey, as the Sundance kid, that modern America is failing to learn from the simple ‘purity’ of its own past. He is also, now, an element of that past, struggling to make his own history present for a younger demographic. Asked, “Is it hard for you to communicate to the MTV generation?”, Redford replies, “Entertainment is a double-edged sword, quite frankly, and it’s kind of weird to be saying this because it’s my day job. But I’m a little critical of how completely oppressive it’s getting. Newspapers now have box office scores on the front page. The front page should be left for major issues that really affect us. And top ten this, top ten that -- it’s always changing. It’s about as shallow and transitory as you can get.”⁵¹

Though one might argue that Biskind’s invocation of Redford’s signature film roles in his article on the Sundance institute is more a function of Premiere magazine’s style than a Baudrillard-worthy confusion of signifier and signified, it is nevertheless uncanny that in this current example one cannot help but recognize the

⁵⁰ Griscom, www.latimes.com.

⁵¹ Griscom, www.latimes.com.

actor effectively replaying his role from *The Electric Horseman* (1979) in real life. Though the film was one of the top ten box office hits of the year, it is likely not as well remembered as some of Redford's more critical successes, and thus is worth briefly recounting here. Redford plays Sonny Steele, a rodeo champion whose career is shown to both rise and fall during an opening credits montage. In a series of newspaper headlines, Steele is revealed to have signed, while still popular, a contract to promote products for the ominous 'Ampco Corporation.' The name might evoke an oil company; a particularly likely interpretation, given the fuel shortage crisis of the late '70s and early '80s. The film, however, is deliberately vague about its specifics, preferring to depict Ampco instead as a megaconglomerate with diversified holdings "in industry, in energy, in development, in research, entertainment, in nutrition, recreation and in science," as one of its television commercials proudly announces. Steele is hired specifically to appear as a spokesman for 'Ranch Breakfast' cereal. When one of the montage's headlines reads, "Ampco adds Cowboy to its stable of Corporate Symbols," the significance is doubly loaded: not only does it evoke the sense of Western independence reined in by corporate control, it also announces that the film will be, on some level, about signification itself -- the reduction of real people to semiotic commodities.

A running joke throughout The Electric Horseman is that Steele is an embarrassingly awkward media performer, prone to freezing up when in front of cameras; he is almost immediately disillusioned, moreover, about both Ampco, and himself for having signed with them. An early scene in which Steele promotes Ranch

Breakfast in a grocery makes this painfully clear, as he struggles to recite the product's generic copy: "For all you hard-workin', hard-playin' little folks, whose bodies are growing every day, you remember Ranch Breakfast, uh, is the cereal that builds champions. It's exploding with the kind of energy that's, that's got more stuff in it, uh, than toast and bacon, eggs ... and toast and bacon, and uh, uh, meat loaf and olives ... nuts ... It's just got more good stuff in it" [dissolve to next scene]. To be sure, the joke depends in part upon our awareness of Redford's own 'natural' charm; however, the moment pokes more fun at the empty monotony of consumer culture than it does the cult of celebrity.

If the real Steele is unable to perform as well as Ampco would like, no problem: he is promptly reduced to a costume that can be worn by others, becoming a hollowed-out signified who watches from the sidelines as a flashy signifier (literally: the rodeo outfit lights up to evoke the film's eponymous figure) is dutifully trotted out to amuse pliant rodeo audiences. When Steele complains, "That's not me," he is told, "They don't know the difference," furthering the film's suggestion that authenticity is now irrelevant to media consumers. It is a sentiment that is easy to take for granted today, especially by an academic audience willing to accept that 'The Gulf War Did Not Take Place'; however, it is both surprising and, in retrospect, revealing that such sentiments should be uttered so explicitly in a Hollywood film of 1979. Certainly, Hollywood has engaged in a long tradition of self-reflexive media mockery: Frank Tashlin is just one of many directors, for example, who found success with Madison Ave. advertising satires during the 1950s and '60s; countless

figures of TV comedy have looked directly into the camera to suddenly disrupt the narrative to undercut their own sponsors; and, in terms of concurrent context, the industry had a notable success three years earlier, with the acclaimed dark satire *Network* (1976). Though some of *The Electric Horseman's* points had thus already been made, perhaps even more successfully in the hands of others, it is nevertheless notable for locating its satire within a framework that would become increasingly relevant during the two decades in which this most recent celebration of independent film has occurred.

From one perspective, the film is important merely for having been conveniently released during the bridge between two decades, allowing it to appear as a final statement from the Hollywood that produced challenging product throughout the 1970s, before giving way to the producer-driven blockbusters that would define '80s cinema (and which continue to overwhelm the industry today). Moreover, the film seems to signal a decisive rupture in Redford's career, between the defiant, often directly political roles of American cinema's 'Second Golden Age,' and the more intermittent, charisma-driven work he took in the 1980s, such as *The Natural* (1984), *Out of Africa* (1985), and *Legal Eagles* (1986). As Stephen Prince has noted, "instead of performing with some regularity, Redford turned his attention to the causes of Western environmental conservation and the creation and promotion of his Sundance Film Institute."⁵² To be sure, *The Electric Horseman* is a Hollywood Media satire that is particularly concerned with conservationist issues: Sonny

⁵² Prince, 182.

Steele's response to the oppressive power of Ampco is to steal the company's latest mascot, a thoroughbred horse named Rising Star, so that he can return it to the pastoral harmony of Utah. Steele abducts the horse during a Las Vegas show Ampco is staging as a public relations stunt, to celebrate its merger with the similarly ominous corporate entity, 'Omnibank.'⁵³ Having arranged a TV interview, initiated by a tenacious reporter, Hallie (Jane Fonda, herself one of Hollywood's most politically loaded celebrity figures), Steele complains about Ampco's earlier treatment of the animal: "They got him all tanked up on tranquilizers and 'bute – they're sticking him full of needles! Look at this tendon! It's all filled up. He's shot full of steroids, and it's just for looks. Makes the horse sterile. So even if they – God, this is so damn funny! Even if they wanted to breed him, even if they wanted to pass on some of those fine qualities, they couldn't."

The film's engagement with both conservation issues and the fading relevance of Western American iconography also extended, in a rather ironic fashion, to its promotion. *The Electric Horseman* was advertised on the Sunset Strip in Los Angeles via the 'world's first solar-powered internally lighted billboard.' Oddly enough, the film's full title was not displayed on the ad, merely a close-up of the stars embracing under the single word 'Electric.' According to the industry trade papers, "When asked why, Robert Friedman, senior VP Columbia Pictures said, 'We felt the word "Horseman" might turn off many people, particularly in the East and

⁵³ For a consideration of Steven Soderbergh's metaphoric depiction of Las Vegas as a corporate entertainment industry that does not provide room for the stylistic flourishes only an individual artist can create, in his remake of *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), see the chapter on the director in this volume.

other big cities. “Electric” best describes what generates on the screen between Fonda and Redford, so, that will be the thrust of the ad campaign from now on.”⁵⁴ It is interesting that this strategy ultimately backfired; the trades would later report that audiences erroneously assumed the film was about an energy crisis, similar to Fonda’s then-recent appearance in *The China Syndrome* (1979). This partially accounted for *The Electric Horseman*’s performance as a gradual, word-of-mouth hit rather than an immediate box office smash. On the one hand, one could celebrate the public’s rejection of this Hollywood marketing ploy, which sought to downplay traditions of the West in favor of simulated ‘modern’ sophistication. On the other hand, reaction to the campaign seems more likely to suggest that the masses were wary of the stars’ personae signifying ideologically charged, complex storytelling, such as *All the President’s Men* (1976) or *Klute* (1971); once word spread that the film was a fairly light Romantic Comedy, it became an embraceable hit for the early months of 1980.

Critics also sensed that *The Electric Horseman* was implicitly about the controversy and relevance being drained from the stars’ images. Newsweek’s review of the film, moreover, itself seemed to unconsciously evoke Schmidt’s issues of political imitation and emulation:

Since these stars are celebrated mavericks, supposedly resistant to movie-biz stereotyping, it’s interesting that they seem to see themselves as behavioral models, *icons of righteousness pointing the way toward proper conduct in a corrupting world*. Righteousness blends with their grace and beauty ... if you’ll only agree with them

⁵⁴ Field, (clipping file – no page number given).

on whatever it is – the Vietnam War, nuclear energy, the environment – you too can have the golden flair and ethical sexiness of Fonda and Redford.⁵⁵

Andrew Sarris went so far as to suggest that *The Electric Horseman* is a kind of formal farewell, by Redford, to his own career's previous significance, foreshadowing his shifting priorities of the coming years. Sarris, ultimately, reanimates a lost Redford within this film in much the same way that Carl Becker has with Thomas Jefferson in the lines of The Declaration of Independence: “Redford and Fonda are actually involved in a weird sort of Bazinian epiphany by traversing the wide open spaces of Utah itself. Fonda, both on-screen and off, must move on, of course, but Redford will stay in this idyllic wilderness of his liberal imagination.”⁵⁶

The film's relevance to the coming decades is not simply one of environmentalist awareness, however; more importantly, it also prefigures the confusion of real and reel life that would soon be embodied by Ronald Reagan's presidency. *The Electric Horseman* is ultimately about the desire for – and declining potency of – [celebrity spokespersons of] the political left. Hallie is only able to capture Sonny's passionate rant about Rising Star by not telling him that the cameras are on; when ready to perform, all Steele is able to say about the creature is that “he's one of the best. He's one of the greatest animals in the ... history of ... animals.” As the country finds itself within an increasingly conservative political

⁵⁵ Kroll (clipping file, no page number given; my emphasis).

⁵⁶ Sarris (clipping file – no page number given). It had been widely reported that the film would shoot many of its exteriors in Arizona, until Redford signed on with the stipulation that location work be moved closer to his home and interests.

climate once more, best embodied by George W. Bush's seeming desire to replay the defining moments of his Father's presidency⁵⁷, many have publicly wondered why there is no viable popular figure who accomplishes for the Democrats what Rush Limbaugh, for example, is able to achieve for Republicans. *The Electric Horseman's* depiction of Redford as a dashing liberal hero who nevertheless fails consistently in his attempts to spread a message through mainstream media both suggests that there is no longer any place for such ideas in a conglomerated entertainment apparatus while simultaneously establishing the actor as Ronald Reagan's most significant opponent, symbolic or otherwise, in American political discourse of the 1980s.

Though Reagan would not be sworn in as President until 1981, his years spent as Governor of California and his previous attempts to receive the Republican presidential nomination (in 1968 and 1976) had already given him substantial visibility as a notable actor-turned-politician. It is telling that a pulpy⁵⁸ biography, Robert Redford: The Superstar Nobody Knows, already made a casual, yet revealing comparison between the two figures, well before *The Electric Horseman* was released. The book opens with Redford lobbying for pro-environment legislation at the premiere party for one of his own movies; the author, David Hanna, feels compelled to apologize somewhat for the actor's desire to do so. "There remains considerable spillover from the McCarthy era. Producers still take a dim view of

⁵⁷ Many have suggested that Bush Jr. replayed not merely a military action against Saddam Hussein, but a confusion of war and Hollywood as well. This sentiment is best demonstrated by the parody movie poster, widely circulated via the internet, that turns George Lucas' *Star Wars: Episode II* into George Bush's *Gulf War: Episode II* (Coming Soon!).

⁵⁸ Indeed, the short book is so dubious that its credits page does not even list its own date of publication! As *The Great Waldo Pepper* (1975) is the most recent film to which it makes reference, one must infer the book appeared shortly afterwards.

activist actors,” Hanna argues.⁵⁹ The McCarthy reference suggests a perceived equating of leftist politics and Communism that will become more explicit as Hanna goes on to deliberately contrast Redford’s politics with those of the notorious ‘Red-baiter.’ Note the implied binary of authenticity and simulation separating Redford and Reagan, respectively, in Hanna’s assessment:

The articulate actor still has a hard row to hoe unless he is ... a smooth product of public relations and big business like Ronald Reagan ... Reagan is protected by old friends who picked his attitudes and wrote his position papers on all their cherished repressions – welfare, health insurance, government housing, free education, etc. ... [instead, at the premiere, the] impression of Redford ... was of a man governed by sincere motives and deep dedication to a cause. No one felt tempted to label him a phony – and that counts as an accomplishment.⁶⁰

It is not much of a stretch, then, to see an ‘80s-era Redford as himself an overly domesticated horse, rescued from the empty showmanship of Vegas/Hollywood/the Political Right and deposited in the comforting pasture of Utah/Sundance/the Left; beyond any surface sentiment about the depletion of natural resources, *The Electric Horseman* depicts a leftist retreat in the face of Republican political dominance within the media’s arena.

Michael Rogin’s seminal essay on the relationship of American politics and the Hollywood industry is almost immediately encapsulated in its own title: “Ronald Reagan, The Movie.” Though Rogin does not mention Redford directly in this article, written in 1981, his discussion of ‘independence’ as a crucial mythology for

⁵⁹ Hanna, 16.

⁶⁰ Hanna, 17-19

Reagan, alongside a scathing critique of the former actor's heavily mediated presidency, demands consideration here; at the same time, Rogin reminds us of the discourse's fluid movement between the political and filmic spheres throughout the decade. One does not have to cast one's mind back very far, for example, to recall how consistently Ronald Reagan was able to align his recovery of the country with the reinvigoration of the Hollywood blockbuster: the Strategic Defense Initiative was nicknamed *Star Wars*, the film that still symbolizes, for many, a decisive rupture between American cinema of the '60s and '70s and that of the last twenty-five years; he used the words "Go ahead – make my day!" to show his resistance to proposed tax increases, invoking Clint Eastwood's then-recent 'Dirty Harry' hit, *Sudden Impact* (1983); and, after the 1985 release of thirty-nine hostages in Lebanon, Reagan joked that the same year's *Rambo: First Blood Part II* would provide a useful template for dealing with such scenarios in the future.⁶¹

Consider the simultaneous trajectories of this period: as Reagan rises to power, using such references to effectively 'cinematize' politics, Redford is conversely retreating from his pedestal, making fewer films in order to emphasize his Sundance work, which, ideally, offers a means to (re-)politicize American cinema, if not at the level of explicit content, then at least at the level of popular discourse.⁶² While Reagan is applauded as a consistently and especially charming politician, a result of both his aforementioned quips and his former status as a Hollywood 'movie

⁶¹ Rogin, 7.

⁶² Later, we'll see similar inverse narratives at work throughout both of George Lucas's *Star Wars* trilogies.

star' (though many have debated that label), Redford is instead considered to be increasingly media-shy and an awkward public speaker, best embodied by Sonny Steele's repeated stumbling when the cameras are on him. Furthermore, each man is not only identified with a signature role but is also able to directly exploit that identification for his own ends: Redford's institute and festival are indebted to *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, just as *Knute Rockne, All American* (1940) provided Reagan with the role of football halfback George Gipp. As Rogin notes, "Win those races for the Gipper!" was how Reagan urged crowds to vote the straight Republican ticket during the fall campaign.⁶³

Both figures also notably invoke nostalgia for a previous 'golden age' of Hollywood filmmaking. While Redford wishes the industry was still able to generate the challenging movies through which he achieved stardom in the 1960s and '70s, Reagan's autobiography similarly indulges in what Rogin calls "an elegy for a vanished Hollywood."⁶⁴ It is most likely not surprising, however, that Reagan's tastes are decidedly different from Redford's; the former president instead longs for a return to, predictably, the more formulaic films of a vertically integrated studio system, not yet besieged by anti-trust suits and Communist infiltration. Rogin calls "Reagan's enlightenment about Communism in postwar Hollywood ... the founding moment of the politics in which we now live"⁶⁵; the moment, however, is equally

⁶³ Rogin, 15.

⁶⁴ Rogin, 38.

⁶⁵ Rogin, 29.

significant for its prediction of the uneasy relationship between Hollywood and independent filmmaking that flourished in the 1980s and still survives to this day.

As Rogin goes on to note, paraphrasing Reagan's autobiography, "the Communists failed to capture Hollywood ... but they initiated a series of costly studio strikes that caused the decline of Hollywood as the entertainment capital of the world."⁶⁶ The bottom line of such an assessment is to locate the roots of what is now so comfortably, so colloquially known as 'indie' filmmaking within an 'evil' conspiracy that threatened American safety and its cultural identity in the 1950s; an especially ironic assessment in light of criticism directed at Reagan's postmodern 'forgetting' of reality in favor of reel life, since so much of said conspiracy was a phantasmic illusion, generated by right-wing hysteria, that never really existed. A similar narrative that will be explored in chapters to come is that of the debates between 1950s methodologies and those of the 1970s-80s throughout American Studies scholarship; given the polarized nature of the political moment as I write this, it is worth examining these as, effectively, a debate within the academy over a familiar binary of '50s conservatism versus '70s liberalism.

Consider the developments of the Hollywood industry, and American film content, in the immediate post-war period: as the monopoly crumbled, independent producers were free to develop and expand their material to an unprecedented extent, primarily led by the rejuvenation of United Artists by Arthur B. Krim and Robert S. Benjamin in 1951. Over the course of the decade, Krim and Benjamin signed scores

⁶⁶ Rogin, 37.

of independent producers to make films with newfound creative autonomy. Stars such as Burt Lancaster and Kirk Douglas were now able to make such cynical, downbeat films as *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957) and *Detective Story* (1951), respectively; directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, Billy Wilder and Blake Edwards produced their own material through United Artists; and, elsewhere in the industry, now lauded 'indie' pioneers such as Sam Fuller and Nicholas Ray were beginning to develop their best work. Such experimentation continues into the 1960s, as Redford began to appear in movies; flourishes during the era of Civil Rights, Vietnam and Watergate; and finally comes to symbolize the sort of content that many American independent filmmakers now say they wish to evoke. As Reagan would have it, such innovation is the 'fault' of a post-war Communist presence in Hollywood; the garden to which he suggests his American Adam must return is populated by John Rambo, 'Dirty' Harry Callahan and Luke Skywalker.

Questions I have not seen directly asked of Redford in any interviews about Sundance include: "Why have you not appeared in any of the films to have been developed by the institute, or to have premiered at the festival? For all the praise you lavish on such material, why haven't these films offered you one role that you've wanted to play?" Or, "Why hasn't there been an independent film to which you've lent your star power as an actor simply because it would not have been made otherwise?" The answer would most likely reflect other statements Redford has made about his limited visibility at the festival itself: that to commit himself in such ways would be to 'overwhelm' works that should not be corrupted by the influence

of celebrity status. The effect of such a position is also, of course, to solidify the public's perception of Redford as 'reclusive'; however, such a stance also serves as an ironic, implicit critique of Reagan's abusing his own celebrity status to similarly overwhelm real political issues by casting them in simple-minded, cinematic terms. To ensure that Sundance films remain meaningfully independent, Redford must ensure that they are not merely independent of Hollywood, but independent of himself as well⁶⁷. The result is a definition of independence that excludes the mythologies generated by such mass cultural texts as those in which he has appeared; this is another notable comparison point between Redford and Reagan, whose use of independence, as depicted in Rogin's writing, is startlingly different.

Rogin notes Reagan's desire to return the country "to a time before Americans were 'robbed of their independence'",⁶⁸ while suggesting that the President literally embodies the inability to do so in a time of late consumer capitalism. Reagan's 'independence' refers to a nation that once sustained itself through the production of goods and services; instead, his America continues to sustain itself through the proliferation of media images that offer only a model for how to consume, an instruction manual that tells consumers how and what to buy – with Reagan himself a prominent construction of such media. Reagan attempts to lead by example, removing himself from the world of make-believe. By embracing

⁶⁷ Though the first draft of this chapter was written before Redford took starring roles in such 'indie' films as *The Clearing* (2004) and *An Unfinished Life* (2005), one could argue that the wait was in itself revealing – by now, Sundance, and the independent feature film it seeks to celebrate, have become so inseparable from the Hollywood system, that the two films' releasing companies are directly owned by 20th Century Fox and Disney, respectively.

⁶⁸ Rogin, 9.

the frontier mythology of the Hollywood western, however, equating Communist ‘Reds’ with the Indian ‘Redskins’ he had previously hunted down on screen, Reagan reveals that this independence remains a fantasy generated by precisely the same culture industry out of which he could never fully escape.⁶⁹ By the time of his presidency, espousing independence while himself an ‘agent’ fully under corporate control, Reagan had “realized the dream of the American male, to be taken care of in the name of independence, to be supported while playing the man in charge.”⁷⁰

If Reagan’s cinematized politics present an illusory independence, stable only in the extent to which it is a consistently generated Hollywood fantasy, then Redford, by way of contrast, offers an independence from that fantasy, from the ubiquitous simulation of an American nation and American values offered by an increasingly sensational film industry. As Redford tells it, the independence offered by Sundance is meant to resist conglomeration, to reject the simple-minded messages of a Hollywood monolith dually: both through this resistance, suggesting that the meaning of this independence lies within its very inability to be defined, as well as its financial limitations, which ensure such films will not descend to Hollywood (largely right-wing) propaganda, simply because they cannot afford the special effects that would allow them to do so. Like the ecological elements Redford hopes to preserve through his acquisition of Utah land, so too does film become one more vital renewable resource that must be appreciated anew, before we become

⁶⁹ Rogin, 30.

⁷⁰ Rogin, 34.

addictively dependent on the disposable synthetic substitutes generated by industrial apparati.

Redford's remarks in interviews about Sundance consistently make these points: "I get a little bit nervous labeling independent film too strictly, because film is film. But the usual traits of independent film are that it tends to be lower budget, without stars, and it tends to be auteur-driven: a lot of writer-directors. The trademark of an independent film was a certain rough-edged look that mainstream films didn't have because [independents] didn't have the money to do all the refinements."⁷¹ Redford's reference to authorship is, of course, not to be ignored here: from our current perspective, one could argue that one of Sundance's few substantial achievements is the (re-)discovery of the *politique des auteurs*, as embodied by such young white men as Quentin Tarantino, Jim Jarmusch, and to a lesser extent, Steven Soderbergh. Tarantino in particular is repeatedly championed for having returned the lost art of written dialogue to cinema.

Moreover, it is not to be forgotten that this independence is its own mythology, depicting the potential for self-determination of the artist at a time when corporate control of the film industry repeatedly sought to stifle such expression. As Redford continues:

I just had a belief in independent film's future. I could see that my own industry was beginning to narrow down to being highly centralized and very expensive. You could see the handwriting on the wall: there were going to be fewer and fewer chances for diversity and for *real* writing and *real* screenplays. The films that I've made in

⁷¹ Tray, www.wga.org/WrittenBy/1996/0196/redford.htm.

my career that I had any control over were really independent films made within the studio system.⁷²

Here once again is Redford as Sonny Steele, now rescuing both celebrity status (Sundance is a place where the auteur has independent control over his work) as well as representation itself (Hollywood films are collectively assembled by script doctors, while Sundance produces ‘real’ screenplays, developed not by committee but instead a pseudo-kibbutz of retreating fellow artists). Both are rescued by Redford from a network of modern conglomerates that reduce all they acquire to corporate symbols, devoid of tangible value or presence. But a crucial question remains: if the reach of America’s culture industry is infinitely broad, all-encompassing, is it possible for Redford, himself such a widely embraced product of that industry, to truly escape it? If so, how?

P. David Marshall directly addresses such concerns in his study Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture. For Marshall, virtually all celebrities generated by the machinery of the mass media are inherently constructs of modernity; they are all effectively ‘American’ phenomena, due to their literal embodiment of the ideological paradoxes, identified by Derrida and Schmidt, that simultaneously celebrate mass democracy and individual independence; and they are all ultimately political agents, working to shape and control public opinion. Much of Marshall’s book would seem to suggest that neither Redford nor any individual celebrity is able to resist such operations of power; for all the ways in which the public associates Robert Redford with ‘independence’, the association is ultimately

⁷² Tray (my emphasis), www.wga.org/WrittenBy/1996/0196/redford.htm.

moot, for this independence is merely the same illusory fantasy repeatedly sold to us by all of our favorite stars. According to Marshall, “the film star has [always] operated as a symbol of the independent individual in modern society. This crucial symbolic value has demonstrated and reinforced the ideology of potential that is housed in all members of capitalist culture to supersede the constraints of institutions for the true expression of personal freedom.”⁷³

For all the effort, then, that has just been expended into binarizing the relationship of Robert Redford and Ronald Reagan into one that, respectively, opposes independence of expression with media hegemony, in Marshall’s formulation, both figures exist within the same politicized celebrity discourse. Once again, the postmodern theorizing of Jean Baudrillard seems appropriate: just as the excessive simulacra displayed by Walt Disney World et al constitute a mere smokescreen that tricks us into thinking the rest of the world still exists in (or contains any) reality, so too does Reagan’s consistent contempt for the real dupe us into accepting Redford’s embrace of independence via ‘real’ writing and ‘real’ movies as a possible alternative. This despite the fact that the political acts he inspires add up to little more than a different kind of movie attendance.

In Marshall’s hands, celebrities exist to acknowledge and control our own desires for independence to an extent that recalls Foucauldian depictions of prison and the treatment of madness as institutions that enable us to internalize the operations of our own oppression:

⁷³ Marshall, 82.

the celebrity, like [Foucault's work on] sexuality, allows for the configuration, positioning, and proliferation of certain discourses about the individual and individuality in contemporary culture. The celebrity offers a discursive focus for the discussion of realms that are considered outside the bounds of public debate in the most public fashion ... a way in which the sphere of the irrational, emotional, personal and affective is contained and negotiated in contemporary culture.⁷⁴

Marshall is not quite a pessimist – he notes that “what cannot be overlooked is that celebrities are *attempts* to control the masses,”⁷⁵ but he is particularly astute in noting that the celebration of stars as stars allows for their hold over audiences to transcend the temporary, specific meanings offered by any of their individual film texts.⁷⁶ Tom Cruise, for example, might make a film that criticizes excessive materialism, such as *Risky Business* (1983), or even one that suggests his own star persona was itself complicit in the celebration of such materialism during the 1980s (*Jerry Maguire*, 1996, and *Magnolia*, 1999, come to mind); however, because Tom Cruise is still himself a product we buy when we go to the movies, because we know how much he gets paid per picture, and because his divorce is presented to us not as a private crisis but as an opportunity to exchange attractive co-stars within his public textuality, ‘Tom Cruise’ will continue to signify the American dream of wealth and power that we wish to believe ourselves, all of ourselves, capable of attaining.

Marshall is not directly interested in Robert Redford, invoking him only to suggest that, “in the tradition of Newman and Redford, Cruise embodies American-

⁷⁴ Marshall, 72.

⁷⁵ Marshall, 243 (his emphasis).

⁷⁶ Marshall, 242-3.

ness as opposed to some other or ethnicity.”⁷⁷ One can easily conceive of Marshall, however, suggesting that Redford’s association with Sundance represents nothing more than a hyper-independence – an extreme form of the self-determination that all such celebrities possess when they use their wealth and power in ways that the masses erroneously believe are potentially available to them. Indeed, Redford’s interests in ecological conservation thus become easily comparable to the charity efforts of many celebrities, such as Paul Newman’s line of food products or Roger Moore’s support of UNICEF after leaving the James Bond series. Such efforts, in Marshall’s view, are more likely to enhance our appreciation of the star – and by extension our support of the star system – than they are to effect real political change; as he puts it, “the agency of the celebrity is more often reduced to a privatized, psychological representation of activity and transformation – it rarely moves into a clear social movement.”⁷⁸ I would argue that the ‘exceptional’ nature of Robert Redford as an American film celebrity is that he has been able to achieve exactly that: he has manipulated his celebrity agency not merely to create meaning on the level of a single film text or the larger discourse of his own star persona as a locus of public discourse. Instead, with Sundance, we are shown an attempt to manipulate media itself (rather than its textual units), to build, if you will, a counter-hegemony. To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, if the medium truly is the message, then the meaning of independent film is to be found outside the boundaries of its

⁷⁷ Marshall, 48.

⁷⁸ Marshall, 244.

own textuality, and instead within the operating systems of its own production, distribution and exhibition networks, as well as its discursive cultural status.

In reviewing Marshall's book for American Literary History, Michael Newbury also invokes Jean Baudrillard's writings: "it would be possible to understand any given celebrity as one of Baudrillard's simulacra, as existing in an inescapable system that facilitates the pleasures of consumption, but we would still want to understand how and to what ends consumers and audiences negotiated the commercially produced 'realities' around them."⁷⁹ Newbury also notes, quite rightly, that without paying such attention to the actual consumer use of celebrity icons, the analysis of stars as pure simulacra "operates as a kind of endgame." Newbury expands upon Marshall's conditional optimism (celebrities as mere attempts to control mass consumership) by suggesting a renewed relevance for Stuart Hall's Cultural Studies work. Here again, the discourse seems to argue for the value of New Americanist trends in American Studies, about which more later: here is a phenomenon without inherent textuality, only able to achieve meaning through an interactive network of films, stars, fans, and the systems of cultural authority that bind them.

Though the hyper-artifice of all celebrities always already connotes a dearth of reality that obscures the mere denotation of left/right political binaries offered by Redford and Reagan, their plastic accessibility ensures that mega-stars are also crucial elements in the utterances of disempowered audiences. Indeed, the

⁷⁹ Newbury, 278.

aforementioned episode of *South Park* literalizes such negotiations through its formal emphasis on (bri)collage: here Robert Redford is reduced to an easily manipulated construction-paper-doll that the show's 'underground' creators can themselves manipulate in order to expose the potential transparency of celebrity altruism. The paradox, however, returns precariously close to the 'endgame' Newbury warns against: the most visible, progressive, satirical, disempowering and creative appropriations of Redford's image are themselves depicted via yet another media text, rather than through public activism. Despite *South Park*'s embrace of controversy, notable attacks on media censorship, and low-budget appearance on a little-watched basic cable network, the show is nevertheless subject to the realities of the marketplace, selling multiple soundtrack albums, DVD sets, and plush toys of its 'cuddly' characters. Ironically, by leaving Hollywood for a substantial period of the 1980s, Redford himself became, paraphrasing Newbury's prescription, the most significant subordinate audience to make over this cultural object ('Robert Redford') to suit his own reality.

In establishing Sundance, Redford-the-real-agent not only participated in developing an infrastructure for this new group of movies, he also engaged in a historically significant media performance of textual self-poaching. If the enterprising *Star Trek* fan, for example, is to be celebrated for re-appropriating video footage of the show to generate his or her own slash fiction, exposing sexual subtexts not recognized by controlling producers, then Redford's manipulation of his own symbolic value should be read as equally, if not more emancipatory. By shunning the

industry that would have required a consistent output of charming lead performances, at the decisive turning point of having played the shy, stammering Sonny Steele, Redford began to create a media narrative that cast himself as an American Adam of sorts, removed from the Edenic pleasures of Hollywood stardom and thrust into the thorny brambles of punishing toil: self-financing. The irony is one that Marshall would surely appreciate. Redford, the Hollywood celebrity we most closely associate with the beloved American mythology of independence, effectively has to reject the consumer-independence granted to him as such a celebrity in order to embody it for his nation. For Marshall, “the celebrity is the independent individual par excellence; he or she represents the meaning of freedom and accessibility in a culture ... [He] accentuates the possibility and potential for individuals to shape themselves unfettered by the constraints of a hierarchical society.”⁸⁰ In this formulation, of course, the independence is illusory, of the simulated sort that inspires Marshall’s readers to invoke Baudrillard: it is not so much necessary for a celebrity to actually have independence as it is for said celebrity to represent or signify ‘independence’ for media audiences. Marshall crucially reminds us that celebrities are beloved (both by their fans, and by the media conglomerates that ‘represent’ them, in every sense of the word) for embodying ‘possibility’ and ‘potential.’

Celebrities are rarely expected to act upon such possibility; typically they (mis)-behave in familiar, predictable, even generic ways. If they acted otherwise,

⁸⁰ Marshall, 246.

capitalizing on the potential their wealth brings them in ways other than lavish acquisition and consumption, studios would not know how to sell them, and audiences would not know if they liked them anymore. Redford, conversely, constructs narratives of himself as newly humbled and dependent while investing in endeavors that promise true independence from such culture industry formulae. Sundance, ideally, disrupts and counters not only Hollywood's filmic narratives, but its extra-textual promotion mythologies as well. A revealing anecdote, for example, depicts Redford as forced to use his star charisma in order to raise funds for his festival:

Once, in the early 80s, he visited Martin Davis, then head of Twentieth Century Fox, to hit him up for a gift. Davis was watching football and seemed more interested in the game than in Redford. "He said, 'Hey, look, I'm going to give you the money, because you cared enough to come see me,'" recalls Redford, smiling. "He was very generous. Then he says, 'There's a few ladies out in the pool. Why don't you go jump in?' What's really bad is I did. But we needed all the help we could get in those days."⁸¹

There is an undeniable entertainment value to this story; however, it is also significant as a depiction of Redford coming uncomfortably close to literally whoring himself (while a mafioso-esque studio head watches!) in order to get what he wants. I use the word 'whore' deliberately to evoke a celebrity figure who has been associated with the term somewhat more often, namely, Madonna. As Robert Miklitsch notes in From Hegel to Madonna, the "issue of prostitution ... has historically functioned as one of the most powerful and pervasive metaphors of the ...

⁸¹ Biskind, 92.

relation between capitalism and sexuality ... [it is] a classic instance of the commodity-body.”⁸²

The branch of academic inquiry currently known as ‘Madonna Studies’ investigates the post-structural intersection of stardom, semiotics, economic capital, and (representations of) the body. Due to her many high-profile self reinventions, Madonna transcends the fascination of a mere movie star, leading to her earning a disciplinary status all her own. Even more so than Redford, she is a figure who struggles to emulate, in Schmidt’s sense, her own image as an innovator, a founder of radical trends. Often, such writings focus on the status of cultural agency, both of Madonna herself, as well as that of her teenage, typically female fans. In much the same way that I have argued about Redford and Sundance, Madonna Studies sees the star as not representing a fixed meaning but rather an ongoing cultural process around which issues of performativity tend to accumulate; in the case of Madonna, such performativity is typically linked to gender. In Miklitsch’s words, the “Madonna commodity-body-sign is not simply ... a commodity fetish but a figure, ... a *symptom*. Indeed, it is in this overdetermined sense that one can speak of Madonna as an *hypericon*, a dialectical image that is not merely a ‘particular sign for something’ (say, reification), but a figure that symbolizes the process of figuration itself.”⁸³

Why shouldn’t our increasing cultural awareness of Madonna as an ongoing performance-of-the-self enable us, by extension, to read other celebrities in this

⁸² Miklitsch, 132.

⁸³ Miklitsch, 126.

manner? I ask this question because the current discourse around independent film is alarmingly white and masculinist; a particularly cruel irony, given the term's ostensible associations with difference, and resistance to dominant hegemonic norms. The vast majority of recent books on the subject (such as Cinema of Outsiders, and Stranger Than Paradise) devote substantial enquiry, if not entire chapters, to the films of Tarantino, Soderbergh and Jarmusch, while engaging in a kind of academic tokenism by including a scanty summary of female and non-white directors (the latter work patronizingly lumps both into a brief chapter entitled "New Kids on the Block"). Perhaps a future avenue to explore when considering the Sundance discourse is one that is comparable to Richard Dyer's work on whiteness, which explores the media's construction of an ethnicity too long accepted as a naturalized norm in opposition to those ethnicities portrayed by film and television in highly circumscribed ways. Similarly, Madonna studies may prove to be a useful paradigm to apply to the Sundance discourse in order to expose it as one around which the performative nature of masculinity, and its role in capitalist exchange, is shown to be at stake in Redford's ongoing self-performance.⁸⁴

The Fate of Park City

"Reason does not rule this world, and it will not necessarily rule here."

-- Jane Jacobs, The Death and Life of Great American Cities

⁸⁴ Though in some ways it might be argued that the issues of gender performativity raised by this discourse might be most profitably considered from the perspective of Judith Butler's recent work, I stress Madonna Studies because of its ability to combine such an approach with issues of celebrity, commodification, etc.

Finally, it seems important to recall that, for all the preceding abstraction about celebrities, cultural debate, and independence, Park City, Utah remains a very real, very small place. As such, it represents a unique potential for investigation into the deployment of non-urban (rural?) space, following from present work that analyzes the transformations and uses of urban space, typically in major centers such as New York and Los Angeles. Though a comprehensive investigation of this sort would require both time and practical methodologies (of urban planning and land use) that exceed my current framework, it remains fruitful to consider how other work in urban studies can be applied to Park City as a unique discursive realm. It seems particularly significant, for example, that in his passionate defense of New York City's red light district, Times Square Red, Times Square Blue, Samuel R. Delaney often invokes a potential binary between big cities and small towns in order to make his points. For Delaney, this binary is not so much one comparing actual spaces as it is one that proposes alternate modes of perceiving space; at the heart of this matter can be found, in Delaney's argument, an essentially discursive debate. As Delaney suggests, when developers exaggerate the potential for violent street crime in order to justify their overhaul of Times Square, what they employ is neither their own perspective nor that of a typical New Yorker. Instead, what allows them to succeed in such manipulation is "the small-town fear of urban violence. Since the tourist to the big city is seen as someone *from* a small town, the promotion of tourism

is a matter of promoting the image of the world – and of the city – that the small town holds.”⁸⁵

Indeed, much academic writing on the meanings of cities locates within them a compelling intersection of the real and the fictive; “imageability,” for example, is Kevin Lynch’s term for a physical site’s potential to create an image beyond its mere physicality within the mind of its observer.⁸⁶ Both Lynch and Delaney are influenced, in varying degrees, by Jane Jacobs’ seminal work, The Death and Life of Great American Cities, which argues, amongst other things, for increased awareness of the destructive power inherent within American pastoral nostalgia. One can recognize Jacobs’ impact on Delaney when reading her passages on the misplaced blurring of urban and rural boundaries: “I hope no reader will try to transfer my observations into guides as to what goes on in towns, or little cities, or in suburbs which still are suburban. Towns, suburbs and even little cities are totally different organisms from great cities ... To try to understand towns in terms of big cities will only compound confusion.”⁸⁷ The cultural stereotype, for example, of cell-phone addicted agents crushing such a modest environment, as seen on *South Park*, can be seen as proof that this is precisely what has already happened to Park City. Though Jacobs is only interested in The Major American Metropolis, as Delaney is primarily concerned with New York, the inverse of each writer’s argument is rarely far from its surface: just as the city will cease to function smoothly when a small town model

⁸⁵ Delaney, 153 (his emphasis).

⁸⁶ Lynch, 9.

⁸⁷ Jacobs, 16.

is applied to it, so too are small towns ill-equipped to support the diversity big cities offer, especially when such diversity is forced upon them. As with Leo Marx, Jacobs considers a prevalence of one-dimensional, ‘simple’ pastoralism to be a primary culprit in such transgression:

Owing to the mediation of cities, it became popularly possible to regard ‘nature’ as benign, ennobling and pure, and by extension to regard ‘natural man’ ... as so too. Opposed to all this *fictionalized* purity, nobility and beneficence, cities, *not being fictions*, could be considered as seats of malignancy and – obviously – the enemies of nature... There are dangers in sentimentalizing nature... It is no accident that we Americans, probably the world’s champion sentimentalizers about nature, are at one and the same time probably the world’s most voracious and disrespectful destroyers of wild and rural countryside.⁸⁸

I have deliberately emphasized Jacobs’ use of fiction as a dominant mode for our engagement with each type of space. As with Redford’s aforementioned claim for those who don’t read newspapers closely enough, such urban reading is also meaningfully aesthetic: at some level, the abuse and decay of both American towns and cities can be seen to have been caused by an over-reliance on the cliché, or the outmoded stereotype. The substantial, powerful impact of Delaney’s work, moreover, cannot be separated from his remarkable candor as a storyteller: much⁸⁹ of his defense of Times Square consists of his ability to narrativize the place to a degree that is surely antithetical to the stories ‘we’ (non-New Yorkers? heterosexuals? conservatives?) have typically heard about the area and its various

⁸⁸ Jacobs 444-5 (my emphasis).

⁸⁹ More than fifty percent, effectively: Times Square Red, Times Square Blue is structured as two essays, roughly equal in length. The first (Red), is a detailed memoir, recounting Delaney’s relationship to (and relationships in) the area, while the second (Blue) formulates a more traditional academic argument.

pornographic movie theaters. It is likely, furthermore, that ‘our’ stories are often fictions themselves, generated by Hollywood crime films of the conservative 1980s (of which the quintessential example will always be William Friedkin’s notorious film, *Cruising*, 1980).

Delaney, for one, has never come across a deranged, psychopathic serial killer in his years of visiting the neighborhood, seeking forms of contact that are not necessarily sexual. He has, however, used this milieu to meet: “a twenty-six-year-old lapsed Jesuit priest – for whom I shortly secured a job at a paperback publishing house,”; “a man who became my lover for eight years”; as well as, over the preceding quarter century, “playwrights, carpenters, opera singers, telephone repair men, stockbrokers, guys on welfare, guys with trust funds, guys on crutches, on walkers, in wheelchairs, teachers, warehouse workers, male nurses, fancy chefs, guys who worked at Dunkin Donuts, guys who gave out flyers on street corners, guys who drove garbage trucks, and guys who washed windows on the Empire State Building.”⁹⁰ In Delaney’s formulation, such instances of random but surprisingly productive contact are to be contrasted with more rigid, circumscribed modes of networking. As with his use of cities and small towns, if ‘contact’/‘networking’ presents itself as a potential binary heuristic, it should be read as one that arrives pre-deconstructed. Both types of social interaction are essential to Delaney; however, the developers’ ‘cleansing’ of Times Square threatens to erase the multi-class mingling

⁹⁰ Delaney, 124, 16, 15 (respectively).

of contact, leaving only the class stratification that is inherently inscribed within instances of networking.

This distinction between ‘contact’ and ‘networking’ is particularly suggestive when applied to Park City during the Sundance Festival’s run. If “networking tends to be professional and motive-driven ... and can look – especially from the outside – quite glamorous,”⁹¹ while “contact is the conversation that starts in the line at the grocery counter,”⁹² (or perhaps the line to get into a screening of the latest Hal Hartley film?), then Sundance becomes significant as a location at which the former is consistently portrayed within the generic codes of the latter. Recall the words with which I began this chapter: though few have actually been to Sundance, many have a consistent sense of it, because stories are consistently told about it in newspapers, magazines and on television. Consequently, Park City has become a largely virtual space, which we are now able to navigate through imageability alone, removed from any tangible source. Try to think of the most generic Sundance Festival narrative possible: for example, one producer overhears a rival’s men’s room cell-phone call with Miramax executives, subsequently using that information to make a successful bid of his own for a film the other had wanted. As a result, a struggling young filmmaker suddenly receives a great deal of financial power, both to promote the film in question, as well as to develop future productions with much larger budgets.⁹³

⁹¹ Delaney, 129.

⁹² Delaney, 123.

⁹³ One of many notable examples of this narrative trope centered around a prolonged bidding war for a modest coming-of-age drama, *The Spitfire Grill* (1996). The escalating, self-perpetuating

Such a tale hinges on the qualities of contact as described by Delaney – coincidence, chance meetings, unlikely settings, inter-class movement, youthful social climbing – but is, effectively, a tale of networking in its most cutthroat form. Many have suggested, furthermore, that it is no longer the perceived quality of the films in competition that instigates the events which lead to such story-telling, but the reverse: the accumulation of such stories around a given film in itself now generates the ‘buzz’ which allows us to perceive it as ‘good.’ Once again, the decline of actual social space and that of cinematic aesthetic quality are linked not merely in terms of relative correlation, but those of outright causation instead. Sundance, originally removed from the core of Los Angeles networking to promote the potential for truly democratic contact (between established ‘urban’ talent and developing regional filmmakers), has been manipulated by industrial developers who are able to maintain only the sentimentalized appearance of the latter in order to profit the most fully from their (re-)introduction of the former.

One of Delaney's conclusions is that such an erasure of contact is not merely an unfortunate byproduct of ‘progress’ but, ultimately, a substantial encroachment upon democracy itself: “Interclass contact conducted in a mode of good will is the locus of democracy as visible social drama, a drama that must be supported and sustained by political, educational, medical, job, and cultural equality of opportunity if democracy is to mean to most people any more than an annual or quatra-annual

networking activity translated into substantial pre-release buzz that quickly dissipated when critics and audiences saw the film for what it was: a familiar, albeit earnest character study, unlikely to be remembered.

visit to a voting booth.”⁹⁴ At times, Delaney's words echo the Depression-era rhetoric of FDR, suggesting the importance of attempting new projects in order to potentially shock the nation out of its stagnation: “we'd best try cutting up the world in different ways socially and reorganizing it so that we may benefit from the resultant social relationships.”⁹⁵ My invocation of Roosevelt here is far from arbitrary or coincidental: a great deal of his popularity resulted just as much from his active ability to try new things as it did from his reflective ability to recognize when such measures were unsuccessful and to adjust or discard them with pragmatic confidence. Furthermore, as chronicled in Michael Denning's The Cultural Front, the era of New Deal politics continues to represent, for many, a crucial moment in the evolution of oppositional, meaningfully left-wing American art.

Others have already arrived at the seemingly inescapable conclusion that the Sundance film festival no longer has the same social function it had during the 1980s or even the early 1990s; it has, however, inspired a number of smaller contiguous festivals which seem more likely to foster Delaney's vision of contact. As with New York and Sundance's Park City, they too are typically encountered via narratives: here, however, the stories are usually ones of networking already thwarted. Unable to arouse a producer's interest, or perhaps even to have their work accepted at Sundance altogether, the people behind Slamdance, No Dance, et al instead operate outside the established superstructure (necessarily, having been rejected by it), via clandestine, self-promoted film screenings in hotel rooms and coffee houses.

⁹⁴ Delaney, 198.

⁹⁵ Delaney, 193.

Delaney suggests the only way to ensure the existence of healthy democratic contact is through a 'constant renovation' of the concept of discourse itself;⁹⁶ much as Derrida suggested that independence is a quality meant to be kept alive through a repeated declaration, rather than a one-time historical event. Similarly, Schmidt concludes by calling for a “continued attempt to understand, challenge and even enact the unstable, dangerous, promising and problematic tradition of political imitation.”⁹⁷ In these examples of alternate festival foundation we can see such work currently in progress, led not only by artists whose evolution explores style and theme but by social forces that engage with industry and economics as well. If Sundance has finally 'gone Hollywood', one's optimism may nevertheless be braced by the appearance of such constant Park City renovation.

⁹⁶ Delaney, 121.

⁹⁷ Schmidt, 114.

CHAPTER TWO
FUNCTIONS OF THE INDEPENDENT AUTEUR
(THESIS: JIM JARMUSCH)

A particularly ironic by-product of the American independent film's increased visibility and acclaim over the past two decades is the largely familiar, even traditional manner in which said output is generally discussed. As a movement, these independent films are celebrated as ostensibly novel, consistently challenging and rewriting the static rules, conventions, settings, casting choices and, inevitably, meanings of their Hollywood counterparts. Specifically, however, the discourse around 'indie' films is disproportionately auteurist, to a somewhat alarming extent. For all the ways in which *Pulp Fiction* (1994), for example, is both an aesthetically and historically significant cultural text, discussion of the film is almost inseparable from our on-going cult-of-personality debate regarding its director, Quentin Tarantino.

What is at stake in this occurrence? Why has such a (now) conventional heuristic paradigm been used to confine, rather than unlock, these allegedly 'pure' cinematic expressions of freedom, of novelty, of independent spirit? What historical events have led to this development? Finally, what elements of cultural power are being served by this substitution of celebrity adulation for genuine cultural/aesthetic discourse? These are the questions that drive this next set of chapters, in which I will explore the ongoing relationship of the auteur theory to recent American independent cinema. In doing so, I propose also to consider the careers of three specific celebrated filmmakers -- Jim Jarmusch, Quentin Tarantino, and Stephen Soderbergh

– both to reveal their consistencies with the traditional form of the auteur theory as well as to suggest the ways in which one can discern the concept’s evolution as a partial result of the contemporary ‘indie’ film phenomenon.

A set of tropes that cannot be ignored in attempting to address this issue are, of course, the transitions within both filmmaking and American culture during the late 1970s and early 1980s; indeed, this is a moment often invoked by figures within the current ‘indie’ movement and one to which I will repeatedly return throughout this dissertation. A shorthand interpretation of this historical and cultural shift might easily conclude that the field of independent filmmaking either grew to be, or was deliberately founded as, a means to protect ‘the auteur’ as a form of endangered species, suddenly threatened by the selfish greed and short-sightedness of ever-conglomerating corporate structures.

This perspective has been popularized by writers such as Steven Bach, Jon Lewis and Peter Biskind, in works such as Final Cut: Art, Money, and Ego in the Making of *Heaven’s Gate*, the Film That Sank United Artists, *Whom God Wishes to Destroy: Francis Coppola and the New Hollywood*, and *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-And-Rock’N’Roll Generation Saved Hollywood*, respectively. Collectively, each book engages with the ‘second Golden Age’ view of Hollywood, in which the industry’s attempts to adapt to, and/or engage with, the burgeoning countercultural/youth audience are resolved by the appearance of ‘movie brat’ directors. Often youthful themselves, these figures, such as Francis Coppola, Michael Cimino or William Friedkin, made films that were celebrated both for their

ability to address topical (read: countercultural) concerns as well as their ability to turn a substantial profit while doing so. Here already can be seen the aforementioned irony that permeates our current discussion of filmic ‘independence’; historiographically, the writing on such movie brats is heavily romanticized. Consider the full titles of each text mentioned above: while Lewis’ conveys a mythic, Icarus-quality to Coppola’s career, both Bach and Biskind hyperbolically suggest their tales are ones of Hollywood studios either ‘saved’ or (nearly) destroyed. Though their films may have been challenging and new, the celebration of these movie brats as a discourse was – and continues to be – an oversimplified, if not regressive, set of “Great Man” histories.

By the appearance of the 1980s, and the rise of an acclaimed American independent film movement, the movie brat discourse had begun to display a decidedly tragic emplotment. In the last years of the 70s, a number of these particularly visible auteurs made films [e.g. *Heaven’s Gate* (1980), *Apocalypse Now* (1979)] that required legendarily extended schedules as well as accordingly exorbitant budgets. At the same time, other young directors found meteoric, seemingly overnight success with blockbuster films [e.g. *Jaws*, *Star Wars*] that made a great deal of money, and, more importantly, did so very quickly. One can attribute this success partially to the fact that said films were given heretofore unheard-of saturation releases, which allow movies to open on so many screens that the resultant attention to opening weekend scores has by now come to resemble something of an arms race, or pseudo-stock market, particularly during the summer months.

However, another potent reason for the success of these blockbusters is their decidedly populist, apersonal nature. Though George Lucas, for example, directed the first *Star Wars* installment, he achieved equivalent success with the series' next two episodes even though he only produced them; fans of the trilogy either did not miss his 'authorial signature' or (if they in fact cared at all) now perceived that signature in ways that have little to do with our understanding of a director as responsible for a film's expressive formal elements.

As with Lucas, so too with Steven Spielberg: though he achieved astounding success as a director in the 1980s, Spielberg was equally successful as a producer. As with Lucas, Spielberg's 'signature' seemed less like that of a personal artist and more like that of a corporate brand; this concept of 'branding' is perhaps best embodied by the use of an iconic image from *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) – a child bicycling through the night sky, silhouetted against the moon – as the corporate logo for Spielberg's own production company, Amblin. Here, an authorial flourish from what many would call Spielberg's best work as a director is literally reduced to a symbol for the postmodern Hollywood mode of business. Many have suggested that several of Amblin's productions, such as *Poltergeist* (1982) and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1989) feel as if they were directed by Spielberg even though they were not.⁹⁸

In a sense, the romanticization of auteurs at the expense of their work contributed to a surprising effect as the '70s ended: successful young directors

⁹⁸ Indeed, many have suggested that *Poltergeist* was largely directed by official producer Spielberg, taking over from hired director Tobe Hooper.

continued to be championed as the quality of their work was absorbed into the very industry against which they had once been thought to rebel. More importantly, these figures were celebrated more as producers – that is, agents in a primarily economic process – than as directors who could be said to embody a unique artistic vision. By the time George Lucas was heard to declare himself a fully ‘independent’ filmmaker, on the basis of the regional nature (Northern, as opposed to Southern California) of his production company, Lucasfilm, as well as his ability to generate funding ‘outside’ the Hollywood studio system (by making large scale escapist entertainments), the irony of this new type of auteur was hard to avoid. Unlike that of their predecessors, this rebellion against the powers that be took the form of internalizing studio influence and in turn reproducing their structures of cultural power within new studios of their own, such as Lucasfilm or Dreamworks.⁹⁹ For these auteurs, the only way to claim independence was to destroy it¹⁰⁰, at least in terms of the movement’s cultural meaning in the 80s and 90s.

In the years following their early successes, both Spielberg and Lucas would go on to be thought of as auteurs, whose thematic interests and formal signatures were visibly manifested throughout their work; however, their relationship to their own content became inescapably linked to a growing understanding of the Hollywood industry as a factory for postmodern culture. The presence of authorship

⁹⁹ Peter Biskind’s latest book, *Down and Dirty Pictures*, charts a similar trajectory for Harvey Weinstein’s Miramax pictures. The company once defined by small, challenging ‘indie’ films now seems set on beating the studios at their own game, producing expensive, multi-Oscar-nominated spectacles such as *Chicago* (2002), *Cold Mountain* (2003) and *Gangs of New York* (2002).

¹⁰⁰ The phrase itself is, of course, deliberately loaded with evocations of Vietnam; one more irony of this period, given that the movie brat auteurs were consistently seen as reacting to the War’s violent absurdities.

within their work could now be seen as more symptomatic than determined by creative agency: popular knowledge of both Lucas and Spielberg depicts them as, importantly, members of the ‘TV generation’, doomed to an understanding of the world filtered through the media texts they received in their youth, and only expressible through the homages and citations that have come to define postmodernism as a cultural mode. Notably, these producer-directors are vaguely infantilized by their own reputations as 1980s auteurs. Each, permanently marked by the horror films, TV Westerns, and adventure serials they viewed as children, undertakes a career path that seems designed primarily to resurrect and even redeem such texts for new youthful viewers. Instead of displaying a vigorous maturity that challenges the Hollywood system, by means of their talent, tenacity and a desperate conviction to expose inequities within the status quo, the most visibly celebrated auteurs of the Hollywood 1980s typically earned their names for an ability to service the system that, in a sense, gave them their lives – in the form of both adult productivity and, more importantly, their own beloved childhood memories. Even the most generous of auteur analyses regarding these directors considers them in terms not of relevant social critique, but of their fantastic, mythic, even universal ‘fairy tale’ appeal.

Though Thomas Elsaesser stresses that “its analysis is open to different kinds of exploration,” his article ‘American Auteur Cinema’ provides a notable example of this new perspective on authorship. For Elsaesser, the films made by these

postmodern auteurs were often literally infantilized themselves, and in this infantilization

more was at stake than the prolonged adolescence of one or two directors ... The films that were to come to dominate the 1980s and 1990s, such as the many fairy tale or adventure stories even outside the Disney orbit *featuring young boys*, show a marked tendency to endow them with a deeper knowledge than the adults. They are also entrusted with cosmic missions and communicate with non-human powers, as if they were being groomed for ‘inheriting’ the universe, albeit that of fantasy and self-enclosed worlds.¹⁰¹

For Elsaesser, the extent to which any of these Hollywood spectacles can be said to engage with social reality of any kind is that of a faint, but nevertheless identifiable ‘redemptive’ allegory: a key example is that of the boyish rebel Luke Skywalker replaying the American Revolution by leading an attack on Imperial Forces (tellingly cast by Lucas as uniformly British actors) aboard the Death Star in *Star Wars*. If these films engage in any kind of dialogue with a real America, they do so by turning back the clock to ‘A long time ago (in a galaxy far far away)’, that is, to America’s own childhood innocence. In Elsaesser’s formulation, then, the shift from 1970s to 1980s Hollywood cinema is a transposition of revealing allegorical modes: the ‘80s cinema not only sought to assuage cultural tensions by depicting idealized youth restoring order to the ‘American’ universe, it also did this, significantly, by supplanting the previous allegories of ‘70s cinema, in which frustrated adult heroes rail flailingly against corrupt forces beyond their control. As he puts it, “many of

¹⁰¹ Elsaesser, 64 (my emphasis). The quote also reinforces the gendered nature of these fantasies; more will be said on this in the chapter on Independence and new technologies, engaging with Henry Jenkins’ “Complete Freedom of Movement: Videogames as Gendered Play Spaces.”

[these celebrated '70s films] now seem surprisingly legible as allegories of the very 'modernization' processes and 'flexible' psychopathologies of which the movie community appears to have been both agent and victim."¹⁰²

If a crucial criticism of this infantilized postmodern American cinema is that of its retrograde nostalgia's ability to preclude engagement with contemporary social discourse, as occurred so readily during the 'New Hollywood,' then a fundamental question that must be asked of recent American independent film is whether its equivalent nostalgia for that New Hollywood is itself an allegorical mode that obscures, rather than illuminates the realities of our present moment. One triumph of late '60s - early '70s Hollywood was that the immediate social concerns of the '60s and '70s were its great subject; to what extent should the 'indie' movement be celebrated if its own great subject remains "the '60s and the '70s" (and at that, more often the films of the era rather than its social realities)?

What is ultimately at stake in this question, I believe, is an engagement with American historiographies: to inquire as to the value of this recent "'indie'" phenomenon is often predicated on one's own assumptions and beliefs regarding the progress, or lack thereof, within American history. As David W. Noble has demonstrated in Death of a Nation: American Culture and the End of Exceptionalism, many scholars of American history find themselves confronted with conflicting models of that history. Noble succinctly outlines this situation as formulated by the historian Charles Beard: "There is first, the philosophy that history

¹⁰² Elsaesser, 68.

has no meaning, but no one can possibly write history who holds to this view of history as chaos. Second, [Beard] asserted, one can believe that history is marked by cycles and man is doomed to the endless repetition of the past. And finally, he declared, one can believe in history as progress.”¹⁰³ In proposing this project to my advisers, a question was put to me that echoes Beard’s second option above: why choose this recent period of independent film?

From this question, many others followed: Why not explore the independent productions of Ida Lupino, Walter Wanger et al in the 1940s? Why not consider the rebel cinema of 1950s mavericks Samuel Fuller and Nicholas Ray (both of whom have heavily influenced Jim Jarmusch)? What about the numerous directors who made independent films for Roger Corman in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Monte Hellman, Jonathan Demme, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, and James Cameron? Surely, any of these are equally or even more significant examples of independent American filmmaking worth studying than the era you suggest. In short, has there not always been a tension in American film culture between the perceived innocence of dependent studio filmmaking and the assumed maturity of their independent counterparts? And has American history not itself been an endless cycle of innocence lost in the face of national traumas (the Civil War, the Depression, World War II, Vietnam, the War on Terror), only to be regained just in time to be lost again during the next? Or are these opposing tensions ever identifiable as a dialectic from which one can identify genuine progress and resolution?

¹⁰³ Noble, 32.

Noble's work is quick to remind us that such answers are up to the historian's own choices, rather than the self-evident truths of history itself; revealingly, in his essay 'Auteur Desire,' Dana Polan has suggested that something similar is at work in auteurist film analysis itself. The very fact of its object of study – a director's body of work over several years – means that auteurism is itself inherently the act of writing history on some level. As Polan puts it, "the auteurist wants to create meaning by an imposition of will."¹⁰⁴ He further notes that "it might not be too extreme to suggest that in the auteur theory, the real auteurs turn out to be the auteurists rather than the directors they study."¹⁰⁵ If we are thus left with the impression that it is the academy that determines the meaning of American history, or the meaning of an auteur's oeuvre, then I will propose that it becomes necessary to simultaneously consider the current subject alongside the modes that have been used to interpret that subject, in order for progress to be made from a cyclical to a dialectical view, and for the meaning of this discourse to be revealed.

In this vein, Polan concludes, "The point, then, wouldn't be to no longer do auteurism, but to imagine ways to do it differently. Perhaps auteurism needs more ... self-reflexivity. ... We could, for example, imagine auteurism as itself a historical activity – arising in particular social and cultural situations as a way of responding to them."¹⁰⁶ From this, one is also reminded that, in the best traditions of contemporary American Studies, as well as Polan's formulation for future auteurism, this text

¹⁰⁴ Polan, 10.

¹⁰⁵ Polan, 13.

¹⁰⁶ Polan, 15.

before you should similarly be a self-aware dissertation. Indeed, this is inevitable, given that the discourse of independent film is one that forces us to confront the role of the academy in assigning value and meaning to cultural texts. The legacy of the '70s Second Golden Age should furthermore be seen as itself inseparable from the college film classes many of its movie brat directors attended; not only were they exposed to classic and international movies, but evolving theoretical approaches for their analysis as well. The aforementioned shift from a cyclical to a dialectical view of history mirrors a shift from the myth-image-symbol school of post-war American Studies (in which classic works were made to reflect a Cold War context) towards a New Americanist approach (which, by embracing Cultural Studies, became aware of its own pressure to read texts historically and attempted to simultaneously analyze this trend alongside the texts in question).

Occurring concurrently with this shift in mainstream Hollywood filmmaking, then, was an equivalent development in academic modes for interpreting dominant mass culture. If the text lacked sufficient content for textual analysis, several alternative models became increasingly prevalent: Cultural Studies theorists would instead explore how specific, localized audiences were able to use such texts; Psychoanalytic thinkers, aligned with Feminist theory, would now emphasize the unconscious desires that drive cinematic narratives, as well as their viewers; and an increasingly post-structural academy would pervasively argue for a multiplicity of reading strategies, rather than a contest among monolithic, determining interpretive modes. Throughout this era, the multiplex viewer's loss became the film professor's

gain, for as mainstream films themselves depreciated in visibly recognizable aesthetic values, it became increasingly evident that the primary means to account for the medium's continued fascination and power was to acknowledge the existence of invisible operations that could only be known through the perspectives of theory.

To put it another way, the old guard of academia once saw itself as, above all, an absolute authority of taste values. In the 1980s, cinema studies, still a relatively young and devalued academic field, confronted the fact that 'good' movies were especially rare, and that 'quality' was a limiting approach to reading them; new theoretical paradigms, with their lack of interest in simple aesthetics, effectively rendered this matter moot. Why stress this interpretive background alongside the history of the texts themselves? I do so in order to emphasize the curious present day disconnect between the rise of the independent film, with its symbolic connotations of the 'highbrow' aesthetic values (the 'art film'), and the current interests of academic media studies. A substantial amount has been written about the last two decades of American independent film; there has been, however, surprisingly little scholarship on the subject.

Is this simply a function of the academy's increasing disinterest in its own power as an aesthetic cultural barometer? If independent film is defined largely by its perceived increase in an ill-defined 'quality' over the typical studio film, then it should come as no surprise that it is a category almost fully marginalized within academic film discourse. Contemporary media studies are, despite the protests of many old-guard academics, more productively interested in canon formation as a

subject worthy of deconstructive interrogation than as a project worthy of its ongoing efforts.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, one recognizes a return to roots within the analysis of this movement, that is, at worst, wearily redundant (most evident in books such as Cinema of Outsiders and Stranger than Paradise) and, at best, intriguingly progressive. This latter tendency within current studies of the ‘indie’ film phenomenon re-energizes the debate by illuminating it through a self-aware prism of contemporary authorship.

An intriguing alternate theoretical paradigm worth applying to the independent cinema of this period would be one that explores the concurrent rise of post-structural theory alongside the films’ own collective move from modernism to postmodernism. Elsaesser notes that this beloved ‘second Golden Age’ period is notable as the only one that could briefly sustain the conspiracy thriller, with its now almost comforting us-them depiction of the workings of political oppression. His aforementioned article identifies a certain vanity within the simplicity of this model: “vain, perhaps, because power, if we follow Foucault and Deleuze, does not manifest itself in the form of top-down hierarchies or conspiracies, capable of being pictured as concentrically organized around an inner core ... Instead, power, is dispersed, transversal, interstitial.”¹⁰⁸

One could make the case, then, that this vanity is itself a key reason for the ongoing romanticization of 70s American filmmaking; it portrayed the last time in

¹⁰⁷ Though relevant to issues of auteurism, these debates will be explored at length in the chapter on American Studies itself.

¹⁰⁸ Elsaesser, 66.

which the sources of power were visible, and the protagonists had a sense of how to resist that power (their inevitable on-screen failures, ideally, spurring viewers to take off-screen action). The critics themselves also had been flattered by this vanity in that they knew they were supporting the correct (i.e. important, politically progressive) films, be they conspiracy thrillers or otherwise. Today, academic critics are themselves either implicated or directly engaged in what might be called a post-conspiracy moment, forced to confront their own status as interested bearers of power.

There is a similar self-investigation made manifest through the predominantly ironic tone of so much contemporary postmodern cinema, as typically voiced through the words of a disaffected youth seen at the center of so many ‘indie’ films (particularly, as we will see, in the work of Jarmusch). Said tone reflects this post-structural shift in the theorization of power simply because we now no longer know on whom the joke is being played. Is this free-floating irony a hipster’s rejection of cultural power by the mere refusal to play the game? Or is it instead ultimately a joke on the (failures of the) protagonists of the previous decade’s conspiracy thrillers, proposing passive acceptance over committed engagement?¹⁰⁹ Similarly, the films of the 60s and 70s engage with the cultural history of the 60s and 70s because that was their immediate social context: is ‘indie’ cinema’s postmodern fetishization of the same cultural history meant to inspire viewers into the same anger as had previously been identified? Or is it simply instead a comforting nostalgic move, emphasizing

¹⁰⁹ In many ways, the status of such films as *Slacker* (1991) and *Clerks* (1994) as definitive ‘indie’ films further emphasizes such tropes of failure and inactivity as essential to the movement’s identity.

the textual surfaces of a bygone era so that we will remain undisturbed by the equivalent socio-political pitfalls of the present? I will consider these questions throughout the case studies to be featured in this chapter and the two that follow it; there is an optimistic sense in which the best auteurist approaches to these independent directors are those that are able to hybridize the methods of classical auteur theory with the goals of such post-structural conceptions of power as theorized throughout the 1970s.

One can locate the forceful foundation for such work within the writings of Timothy Corrigan and Dudley Andrew, in which phrases such as ‘the auteur-text’ and ‘the unauthorized auteur today’, respectively, speak to a curious reclamation of the discourse around directors that posits an emerging (need for) renewal of faith in what one might call the ‘indexicality’ of the author. Once again, the importance of nostalgia, the ever present sense of loss makes itself felt within this discourse; indeed, there is even a sense in which academia has itself suffered an almost Oedipal guilt over its successful enactment of the ‘death of the author’ and now must resurrect this important, guiding paternal figure within its endeavors, by articulating his cultural significance in ways that are no longer literal (as in the form of French New Wave auteurs who made films that freed cinema from the shackles of stately literary adaptations) but are instead often explicitly religious, a cry for the return of a textuality that is worthy of (literary?) interpretation.

But is this rebirth itself just one more ‘80s-era Conservative reclamation over the Liberal gains that were made in the ‘60s and ‘70s? The immediate equation of

religion with conservatism is politically dangerous, even potentially counterproductive. In his book, Dude, Where's My Country?, Michael Moore identifies a knee-jerk dismissal of religion as a crucial weakness of the left: "Too many of us [liberals] have a hoity-toity view of religion and think the religious are superstitious fifteenth-century ignoramuses. We're wrong, and they have as much a right to their religion as those among us who have no religion. This arrogance is a big reason the lower classes will always side with the Republicans."¹¹⁰ Such issues are not absent in academic work; there is an extent to which the resurrection of the auteur may ultimately be a means for academia to sustain the approaches of the pre-theory, pre-Cultural-Studies moment, while avoiding labels of conservatism. The references Andrew makes to God, for example, are not automatically 'reactionary' signifiers. As I have stressed, it is unavoidable that academic writing is itself historically determined: one must view present auteurism through a current moment in which religion is itself unfortunately politicized (fears of Jihad, George W. Bush's reference to "a higher father" in invading Iraq, debates over the ethics of Stem Cell research) as well as one in which politics appear distressingly polarized. As a result, academic work is itself under attack – Horowitz's The ProFessors, and Prof. Ward Churchill's views on 9/11 come to mind – thus emphasizing more than ever a need for academic self-interrogation.

It is important to recall, for example, the extent to which Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author," written in 1968, based its progress – a free play of

¹¹⁰ Moore, 192.

multiple readings in direct opposition to an established canon of accepted textual interpretations – upon a firm rejection of the religious aspect of auteur-worship. As he noted, “a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.”¹¹¹ Barthes subsequently champions an “anti-theological [reading practice], an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law.”¹¹² Is it fair, tempting as it may be, to replace ‘theology’ with ‘patriarchy’ throughout this discourse and suggest that the recent reappearance of the auteur within film analysis is a sure sign that the revolution to which Barthes refers has ultimately failed? Revealingly, in Timothy Corrigan’s words, “it is the text and not its author that now may be dead.”¹¹³

There is much that brings André Bazin to mind in this discourse: now, however, it is not merely the photographed subject that is embalmed but also the filmmaker himself. Bazin’s writing originally applied a post-war perspective upon cinema’s turn-of-the-century appearance; it is almost redundant to note here the extent to which the memory of the second World War’s atrocities shaped his redemptive, even sermonizing approach to questions explored decades earlier by such figures as Hugo Munsterberg and Rudolph Arnheim. As with the post-war Bazin, in stressing the self-aware, historically determined nature of this piece (as

¹¹¹ Barthes, 146.

¹¹² Barthes, 147.

¹¹³ Corrigan, 43.

much as possible given inherent difficulties in historical reading of the present), I would suggest that my work ideally aims to use recent trends in American Studies to present academic work as itself a set of determined narratives, rather than pure objective truths. This is inescapably a piece of post-9/11 writing, from an author ambivalent about the value, or even the existence of, what are referred to as the Culture Wars. Moreover, I am, as are many, subject to seductive myths of the auteur, as well as the academic authority that gives me status as a ‘tastemaker.’ Thus, I leave present in the text my own subjective, evaluative remarks regarding the films discussed herein, but do so as a reminder to the reader that such subjectivity is on some level inescapable.

Bazin writes in “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” that, “for the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man ... [thus there is an] irrational power of the photography to bear away our faith.”¹¹⁴ For Bazin, it is the removal of man’s direct intervention that enables cinema to bring its viewers closer to their gods; by the time of Andrew’s article, however, it is the evidence of a ‘human stain’ upon a now irrevocably postmodern machine that presents the possibility of transcendence through cinema. For Andrew, our current moment is “a struggle of faith in an atheist world, for the author is surely an analogue of God, the creator and source of the world ... despite Nietzsche and the

¹¹⁴ Bazin, 13-14.

freeplay he ushered in, the word ‘auteur’ ... can thicken a text with duration, with the past of its coming into being and with the future of our being with it.”¹¹⁵

When such contemporary auteurs as Andrew, then, attempt to redeem the author as an indexical signifier, in contrast to what might be called the ‘virtual authorship’ of Spielberg, Lucas, James Cameron et al, one can see that they are railing against what they recognize as our present complacency. It is a complacency that allows us to accept, all too readily, a cultural field of cinema that is over-reliant on a dichotomy of product that, in either direction, offers little more than an increasing sense of familiar brand identity. In the decades following the ‘deaths’ of various auteurs such as Coppola and Friedkin, we have been told to enjoy, and even identify with, either small-scale independent fables or the sensational postmodern attractions of ‘epic’ studio production; it has become almost unthinkable, however, that we might find work that is able to combine the best of both fields, and paradoxically unite audiences by offering a variety of different experiences. Indeed, if a film were able to do so within our present filmmaking context, it would surely be viewed as nothing short of a ‘miraculous’ event.

Many have suggested that the American independent film, as we have come to understand and celebrate it during the Sundance era, is now effectively dead; a further step to have been proposed is that it is now able to contentedly rest in peace because its life’s work has been completed – the aforementioned miracle has, in fact, occurred. Specifically, my selection of Jarmusch, Tarantino and Soderbergh as the

¹¹⁵ Andrew, 27.

independent auteurs to be considered here as case studies, has more to do with their embodiment of a dialectical progression within the movement than it does with their notoriety alone. Furthermore, the chronology of their selection is no accident: considered in order of their acclaim (at its most intense), one is able to recognize within these figures a decisive shift in how each is considered to literally embody the notion of the American independent film, as well as the ways in which such a mode of filmmaking might be expected to challenge the product of Hollywood studios.

Certainly, Quentin Tarantino has consistently been celebrated as an antithesis, acclaimed equally for the early-Sundance independent cinema conventions rejected by his films as for the new ones they defiantly assert. It is especially noteworthy that his status as this antithesis positions him as less of a challenge to Hollywood dominance as he is to a perceived complacency within the rarefied, almost genteel mode of “indie” film that preceded him. Jarmusch’s multiple allusions to modernist and, importantly, global art cinema, particularly the tranquil surfaces found in the films of Yashuziro Ozu, helped to establish him as the thesis of the ‘indie’ phenomenon as it began to develop in the early 1980s. To celebrate, however, the dynamic, violent work of Tarantino at the expense of Jarmusch’s increasingly marginalized, decreasingly successful films came at a price. Seemingly as quickly as he appeared, a notable backlash began to develop against Tarantino and his celebrity status. Though this well-publicized backlash is multifaceted in its causes and significance, the recognition of Tarantino as potentially a postmodern auteur of roughly equivalent status as Lucas and Spielberg

is a crucial moment that necessarily prefigures the appearance of Soderbergh as a synthesis to the dialectic of recent Hollywood and Independent American cinema.

In some ways, the selection of Jim Jarmusch as the first post-70s independent American auteur to be considered here is purely a matter of serendipitous timing. As Elsaesser's chronology suggests, "If the political event that inaugurated the protest movement was the Vietnam war ... there is general agreement that it was the election of Ronald Reagan as president in November 1980 that brought the New Hollywood along with the counter-culture to a close."¹¹⁶ Jarmusch's first feature film, *Permanent Vacation*, was released in December 1980, a convenient and compelling coincidence, as well as a reason to consider him of significance on some level as simply continuing the trends initiated by the celebrated Hollywood filmmakers that preceded him. Alexander Horwath's essay on the New Hollywood, "A Walking Contradiction (Partly Truth and Partly Fiction)", from the same collection as Elsaesser's article, offers a thorough assessment of the period's qualities. It is worth citing here in full for the extent to which Jarmusch's films seem both to embody and respond to its essential characteristics. For Horwath, the New Hollywood of the late 60s and 70s is significant for its

films about cynical drifters and alienated social misfits who are forced to or choose to remain in a state of constant motion because 'staying at home' smacks of corruption. Films with a loose, undramatic pace and open endings – because no alternative destination or 'home' can be found. Films that rediscover the wide open spaces, the street and everyday life, in search of a new realism and an open-ended production process, substituting the conventions of genre with more authentic means of experiencing time and space. And, lastly, films

¹¹⁶ Elsaesser, 59.

which allegorize their own limitations through their protagonists – independent-dependent (studio) productions about independent-dependent men who reject an oppressive system of rules without being able to even entertain the (political) notion of a less constraining system beyond the current one.¹¹⁷

All four of Horwath's qualities are visible in *Permanent Vacation*, and in many ways the romanticization of Jarmusch as an auteur suggests he is seen by many as a nostalgic throwback to the strengths of the New Hollywood period, and worth championing in part because he represents a rare persistence of this mode during the harsher filmmaking climate of the 1980s. Already in his first feature, however, one can recognize the ironic tone, the potential parody and the sly sense of humor (throughout many reviews of Jarmusch's first features, he is identified not as a 'dramatic' director but as a new *comedic* talent) that will mark his break from, and even interpretation of, the pieties of the earlier period's films. In many ways, Jarmusch is thus the progenitor of the current school of ironic American 'smart cinema' identified by Jeffrey Sconce, and discussed extensively in future chapters.

As outlined in Horwath's model, the protagonist of *Permanent Vacation* is indeed a cynical drifter, Aloysious 'Allie' Parker; as he is introduced wandering throughout the deserted alleyways and crumbling buildings of lower Manhattan, his voice-over narration directly addresses his compulsive need to keep moving:

That's how things work out for me. I go from this place, this person, to that place, or that person. And, you know, it doesn't really make that much difference. I've known all different kinds of people, hung out with them, lived with them ... to me, those people are like a series of rooms. Just like all the places where I've spent time. You walk in

¹¹⁷ Horwath, 95.

for the first time, curious about this new room – lamp, TV, whatever – and then after a while, the newness is gone. Completely. And then there’s this kind of dread ... after a while something tells you, some voice speaks to you, and that’s it: time to split ... this thing tells you, and you have to start the drift.

As this monologue progresses, an accompanying montage of static empty rooms literalizes this notion of other people, and other places, as essentially one and the same: a pool hall, a lavish dining room, a bar, a fancy living room set, a jail cell, a studio apartment. As in Horwath’s formulation, much of *Permanent Vacation* is devoted to exploring the authenticities of lower Manhattan streets, and, similarly, the film also evokes his identification of open-ended narratives as a necessary element of this filmic mode. In the same opening monologue, Allie calls attention to the decidedly ‘undramatic,’ non-narrative qualities of the events that are about to unfold: “What’s a story anyway except one of those connect-the-dots drawings that in the end forms a picture of something? ... A story, this part of the story, well, is how I got from there to here, or maybe I should say from here to here.”

Finally, Allie explicitly identifies himself as rejecting a capitalist system of consumption and property ownership, but reveals through his actions (as well as the lethargic performance of the actor, Christopher Parker) that he is unable to conceive of any viable opposition to this system. At the film’s close, Allie has decided to take a cruise to France, having suddenly seized an opportunity to steal a car and sell it for the boat fare; once again, his voice-over outlines his marginal relationship to society as most of us know it. “How can you explain something like this [sudden departure] to someone? I’m just not the kind of person who ever settles into anything. I don’t

think I ever will be ... I don't want a job or a house or taxes. I wouldn't mind a car, but I don't know. Now that I'm away I wish I were back [in New York], more than even when I was there."

Given that he has left behind a girlfriend, Allie's seemingly pointless, arbitrary decision to run away somewhere, anywhere, at the film's conclusion is in many ways reminiscent of the devastating finale to *Five Easy Pieces*, in which Jack Nicholson's Bobby Dupea also deserts a (pregnant) girlfriend opportunistically without apparent motivation. But Allie's fleeting desire for a car, cited above, gets a laugh in its suggestion that this drifter may not be particularly committed even to his own non-conformity. This gently comic moment explodes into outright absurdity a moment later, as Allie meets what amounts to his French doppelganger arriving, literally, 'fresh off the boat' in New York just as he is preparing to leave it. The two men share notable surface similarities – each sports the jeans, checkered shirt, white socks, black shoes and gelled hair that signify Beat culture of the 1950s – but more importantly the two men are linked by their restlessness. Jarmusch's status as an artist of the 1980s engaging with the history and iconography of the 1950s, particularly through a self-aware mode of ironic celebration and interrogation is notable for evoking similar debates within the present field of American Studies; here we begin to see the cultural work of academia being performed by the texts it previously claimed to master.

After a brief casual exchange in which the twins reveal that each sports a similar tattoo, the Frenchman tells Allie that he is arriving for reasons that are nearly

identical to the American's reasons for leaving. It is tempting to read this conclusion as an optimistic incarnation of the notion of a French cultural exchange, in which communication between the two nations and, more importantly, two national cinemas, will enhance each's understanding of the other as well as facilitate cultural growth. Given that Jarmusch is often identified as a director whose filmic influences are substantially more global than those of his contemporaries in American independent cinema, an auteurist reader is all the more likely tempted towards this optimism. But the Frenchman is equally vacuous and disaffected, offering as little to Allie as the New York drifter is able to offer him. *Permanent Vacation* does indeed display the influence of European cinematic modes, but it does so in a nostalgic key, suggesting irruption, rather than progression of history. As the 70s give way to the 80s, as Reagan has been president-elect for less than a month, it becomes retrospectively damning for this film to end by suggesting the contemporary fruitlessness of communication between these two cultures. The comic irony, however, predicts a filmic trend which playfully mocks the debate itself over the years to come.

To end the film on such a shaggy-dog punchline also suggests an almost parodic relationship to *Five Easy Pieces* and similar films of Horwath's model; the fact that the main character presents himself as an embodiment of 50s iconography further implies that something more complex is occurring in *Permanent Vacation*. In addition to his costume's similarity to the Neal Cassady-Jack Kerouac photo that adorns the Penguin edition cover of On the Road, Allie announces in voice-over that,

as his last name is Parker, he will name a son Charles as an homage to the legendary be-bop saxophone player (the display of any enthusiasm at all for a potential offspring is itself a decisive break from *Five Easy Pieces*, in that the girlfriend left stranded at the truckstop by Nicholson's character is carrying his child). Allie is later seen at a movie theater screening Nicholas Ray's *The Savage Innocents* (1959), a moment easily read as an underlined auteurist signature, as much early publicity about Jarmusch noted that he worked as an assistant to Ray while the director taught at NYU. Given, however, that this particular film is largely devoted to Inuit culture's awkward relationship to the capitalism of white Christians, the reference is also a reminder of non-conformism and filmic independence visibly predating the '60s New Hollywood model. The film is able to mock Allie's generic fetishization of 1950s symbolic markers while promoting awareness of the era's lesser known cinema – the suggestion being that alternate modes of viewing history are being proposed.

There is also a suggestion, however, that the film's engagement with tropes of '50s and '60s filmmaking in the United States will not bear close scrutiny beyond a level of surface play; what is most compelling about *Permanent Vacation* is the consistent, almost surreal extent to which it problematizes any reductive attempts to read it as a film 'about' any specific moment of American history. If the film makes literal comedy of our attempts to categorize it alongside similar films of the previous decade, then it will also render absurd its own evocation of post-war American cinema. If the film is mocking the notion of a French-American cinematic dialogue

(or any cultural exchange); if it is parodying the predominantly left-wing, counter-cultural pretensions of the beloved '60s-'70s New Hollywood; if it is furthermore displaying a consistent fetishization of 1950s era clothes, films, and attitudes alongside this satire, and more importantly, doing this during the Reagan 80s; then one is forced to confront the possibility that this film is on some level a conservative, reactionary work.

Elsaesser cites the 80s as a period that saw the industry develop new generic models to respond to profound cultural change: a notable example he offers is that of the 'time travel nostalgia film.' To be sure, films such as *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986) and the *Back to the Future* series (1985, 1989, 1990) are only the most explicit examples of a trend throughout 80s Hollywood cinema that valorizes the relative 'innocence' of the Eisenhower years¹¹⁸ as a tantalizing corrective to the apparent excesses of the '60s and '70s, literalizing a latent desire to turn back the clock. *Permanent Vacation*, by way of contrast, compels viewers to recognize the fetishization, mocking it just as playfully as it does the drifter portraits of Horwath's formulation. The historicity of the film, as previously mentioned, is surreal: by retaining the non-narrative aspects of the prior decade's work, one is unable to receive facile comfort from its attitudes towards the country's cultural past. Instead, Allie evokes Kurt Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim, who finds in the novel Slaughterhouse Five that he has somehow come "unstuck in time."

¹¹⁸ Again, an 'innocence' able to exist despite the Cold War, Korean War, Hiroshima/Nagasaki guilt, Civil Rights awareness, Communist witch-hunts, etc...

The most notable example of this approach to history is set in motion by Allie's sudden announcement that he will today visit his Mother at the mental institution to which she has been committed; by whom, and for what cause, are never directly revealed (the general nature of her dysfunction itself suggesting the potential for national allegory). Instead, Allie's behavior immediately following this declaration seems designed to emphasize his inability to face any sort of traumatic past, that of his own family or otherwise. Before visiting his Mother, Allie tells his girlfriend, "first I'm gonna go back to where I was born, the building that my Mother and Father lived in." The aforementioned laid-back style of delivery that characterizes Parker's performance becomes increasingly soporific, seemingly narcotized, as he continues: "It was blown up during the war. I'm gonna walk through the rubble there. And just look at it one more time." By now, the dialogue is a mantra to be intoned: "Look at how the building is all bombed out. Walk through the rubble of the building where I was born." Confused, his girlfriend attempts to snap Allie out of this daze: "What are you talking about? What war?" Allie: "The building was blown up during the war." Girlfriend: "Blown up by who?" Allie: "The Chinese."

From here, the film cuts to Allie walking through abandoned, hollowed-out buildings along the New York waterfront while exploding bombs, air raid sirens and airplane propellers can be heard distantly on the soundtrack. The sequence seems both weighted with significance and, at the same time, unable to bear this burden: the images of a 'war-ravaged' urban environment suggest an homage to Italian neo-

realism (a perspective later encouraged by Allie's happening upon an anguished, mysteriously wailing woman wearing only a slip, a cross around her neck, and a red smear of lipstick), while the Manhattan setting confirms that Allie is misremembering, supplanting one trauma with another that has not necessarily occurred. The moment becomes triply loaded when Allie's lonely drift is interrupted by the sudden appearance of a potential playmate: an apparently homeless man who, as if conjured forth by Allie's imagination, can also hear the soundtrack's non-diegetic warfare. Allie shares a smoke with the man, as well as offering comfort through a now-semi-diegetic awareness of the aural cacophony: "Take it easy. They're not even planes. They're choppers. The 'Cong don't have choppers. You see? These are American."

This misunderstanding of ethnicity (confusing Chinese and Vietnamese), setting (confusing Vietnam and New York), and history ('enacting' the Vietnam war in the early 1980s), now suggests a child's improvisatory play,¹¹⁹ using the materials at hand to act out a scene based on a shallow understanding of old war movies and TV shows. Just as this tangled historicity evokes Elsaesser's 1980s time-travel nostalgia film, so too does it bring to mind the decade's glut of naive child-heroes, turning away from the adult conflicts of the New Hollywood era and renewing an innate American innocence. This passage of the picture now enables us to see *Permanent Vacation* as occupying a liminal place in American film history. On the

¹¹⁹ Again, we shall see this sense of a child's play explored and expanded in the subsequent chapter on new technologies – Henry Jenkins has written extensively on video games as a means for children to engage with a virtual frontier, to regenerate that which has been lost, etc.

one hand, despite featuring many components of the New Hollywood's confrontational movies about angry young men, it seems to display them solely in order to be depicted as agents of an absurd attempt at meaning, as opposed to its predecessors' comparatively noble depiction of a moral response to an absurd world. On the other hand, its infantilized protagonist, its nostalgia for the 1950s as a way to avoid presently visible trauma, and, most importantly, its ironic, mocking parody of the earlier 'drifter film' conventions locates *Permanent Vacation* much closer in spirit to the post-'77 mainstream blockbuster trend than one might expect. The result is a film that is "Not '80s Hollywood" due to its small budget, alternative funding, and non-spectacle-driven narrative, but simultaneously "Not '70s Hollywood" due to its postmodern citation of that cinema's surfaces. Thus, *Permanent Vacation* becomes perhaps the earliest example of the recurring elements and tensions that will ultimately coalesce into a visible definition of the American independent film, as well as iconicizing Jim Jarmusch into a figurehead for the movement, throughout the years following its release.

But how fair is it to over-simplify 'indie' cinema with such a reductive formulation as "All the low budget Euro-modernism, now with none of the difficult politics," or, "Our drifters are now merely ironic/sarcastic"? Once again, *Permanent Vacation* becomes instructive; its engagement with history seems prescient. Another article in [The Last Great American Picture Show](#), Christian Keathley's "Trapped in the Affection Image" invokes both Gilles Deleuze and Hayden White to frame the New Hollywood cinema as a troubled response to overwhelming historical traumas:

centrally the Vietnam war, but extended also to include the era's assassinations, political protests, and corruption-in-Washington scandals. Keathley cites Deleuze's schema of perception-image, affection-image and action-image as particularly relevant to the era's filmic attempts to grapple with history; his brief summary of how this schema operates is worth citing here: "Though it is perhaps something of an oversimplification, one can understand these three components as roughly analogous to the shot sequence in Kuleshovian montage: 1) we see a person looking; 2) we see what he or she is looking at (perception-image); 3) we see his or her reaction (affection-image); and this reaction leads him or her to take some action (action-image)."¹²⁰ Keathley refers to Deleuze's recognition of a post-war 'crisis of the action-image', particularly within the early works of Italian neo-realism; confronted by perception-images that are unbearably intense (such as the seemingly infinite disarray of a war-torn city), the protagonists of such films often find themselves in the eponymous stasis to which Keathley's title refers.

Unable to perform the narrative-driving action required so intensely by Classical modes of cinema, such protagonists necessarily become "characters who lack clearly defined goals and thus slide passively from one situation to another; [the films in which they appear feature] a cause-and-effect narrative structure whose looseness opens space for digressions into 'contingent daily reality' or the 'subjective reality' of the film's complex characters."¹²¹ Keathley's article goes on to propose the New Hollywood cinema of the '60s and '70s as a brief, peculiar moment

¹²⁰ Keathley, 294.

¹²¹ Keathley, 295.

in which this dominant mode of filmmaking, ostensibly antithetical to international art cinema, was also notably characterized by filmic experimentation as a response to intense, national historical trauma of its own. Keathley is quick to point out that this cycle appears to have run its course by the 1980s, during which time a new cycle of blockbuster spectacles emphasized their heroes' redemption through a renewed embrace of hyperbolically cartoonish action-images.

Permanent Vacation, then, becomes particularly significant in its alternative depiction of a character similarly caught between perception and action. Allie observes the rubble about him, idly wanders through a series of episodic encounters, and only at the film's close is capable of any action whatsoever. Now, however, the trauma faced by the protagonist is not possible to identify: *Permanent Vacation* instead appears to tease us with both the Italian neo-realist setting (bombed buildings, wailing woman) and the Vietnam era context ("the 'Cong don't have choppers") as potential sources of this trauma, only to reinforce each as fundamentally untrue. (Even the potentially 'Italian neo-realist' character in the film is explicitly named 'Latina woman' in the credits.) Here, the fundamental historical trauma at the heart of this crisis seems to be the hero's disconnection from history itself. An invisible trauma of some sort has interrupted Deleuze's model, so that the perception-image is now itself not to be trusted, as when Allie misreads the New York buildings as those of a post-war, even Vietnamese, environment or mishears bombers flying overhead on the soundtrack.

In addition to Deleuze, Keathley cites Hayden White's essay, "The Modernist Event," as a means to characterize the sudden appearance of art cinema's formal flourishes and irruption within the typically hermetic Hollywood mode. Keathley's reading of White is that "such traumatic historical events demand a modernist style of representation, for the formal strategies of fragmentation, discontinuity, chance and incoherence that are common to modernism are also the characteristics that mark one's experience of a traumatic event."¹²² In White's own words, modernism is a discourse that is fundamentally 'about' historiography on some level: "it is [difficult] to conceive of a modernist fiction that did not in some way or on some level make claims about the nature and meaning of history."¹²³ It is intriguing that both Keathley and White are only marginally interested in postmodernism: Keathley refers in passing to the post-'77 blockbuster entertainments as working through prior traumas largely through a repressive denial of them, while White makes brief mention of postmodern literature as collapsing "the distinction between the real and the imaginary."¹²⁴ Given that the dominant interpretation of the split between 60s-70s Hollywood and that of the 80s-90s is often one that pits the interrogative challenges of modernism against soothing postmodern spectacles, one is left to ask, what would a 'postmodern event' be? And, following from this, to what extent does this postmodern engagement with history characterize the films of this post-'70s, postmodern American independent cinema?

¹²² Keathley, 302.

¹²³ White, 21.

¹²⁴ White, 19.

There is a sense in which *Permanent Vacation* already provides us with some potential answers. Allie is aware that a trauma of some sort has taken place, but he is distanced from it both by time and his interpretive skills. This separation is partly generational – we are not told why his Mother has been committed to an asylum; however, upon visiting her it is revealed that she too has experienced a similar break from past history. As the soundtrack reintroduces the sounds of combat, she moans, “I can hear the planes sometimes. I haven’t heard them since the war, when we were bombed.” Is Allie simply exculpating himself from the (crypto-Vietnam-era) sins of his Fathers? Perhaps, but this sense of a conscious youth rebellion has already characterized the vigor of the New Hollywood, in which, for example, the Roger Corman ‘biker film’ genre was able to mature into the dissent offered by *Easy Rider* (1969). Allie also rebels against capitalist values, but he does so as part of a near-total rejection of reality itself: his wardrobe is a ‘50s pastiche, he hangs out in movie theaters, and he turns his engagement with the traumatic evidence of crumbling cityscapes into a child’s playful enactment of TV images.

An implicit question asked by *Permanent Vacation* is, if not a ‘war’ with ‘the Chinese’, what did cause such destruction in this part of New York City? The only answer conceivable is one of invisibility: that is, the hidden operations of global capitalist economy. Rather than making invisible the traumas of the postmodern present, as occurs in the reactionary nostalgia of so many big budget entertainments, *Permanent Vacation* materializes this invisibility into itself a crucial element of its design. Therefore, if the foundational traumas of WWII and Vietnam came to define,

or haunt, post-war Europe and New Hollywood cinemas, respectively, then the defining trauma of the postmodern equivalent becomes a pervasive, vaporous sense that cultural power has severed our ties to our own historical knowledge of that trauma. Modernism is no longer the appropriate formal analogue for events so overwhelming they seem to deny or preclude the possibility of meaning; instead, postmodernism is a perfect contemporary expression for our state of cynical skepticism about meaning. I call this “conspiracy fatigue.” Exhausted by our awareness of past conspiracies, clinging desperately to optimism, we find little solace in either. We want to flatter ourselves with the appearance of having knowledge, our access to information more immediate (satellite dashboard maps, the Internet, cell phones) than ever before; yet our dimming memories of “the ‘60s” nag at us – how much agency do we really have? Is this an illusion of control, of choice? Now, the crisis is not to determine the meaning of a fundamental trauma, but to determine the reality-status of such an event, to be sure of whether it has even occurred.

This is the context in which Jean Baudrillard can write The Gulf War Did Not Take Place: despite a hyper-abundance of media technology with which to represent this (seemingly modernist) event, all that can be finally determined about it, suggests Baudrillard, is that representation of it occurred. Or, our only trustworthy knowledge of the war is that there was media coverage of it. *Permanent Vacation*, then, evokes Susan Hayward’s identification of a marked split between mainstream and oppositional postmodern culture: the former works to reinforce such operations

of power, through a distracting intensity of self-reflexive formal-textual play, while the latter employs the same techniques in order to highlight the conditions that have led to their codification.¹²⁵ The first group is a series of texts that are merely symptoms of our postmodern moment (*Godzilla*, *Wild Wild West* etc.) while the second comprises those works that are instead on some level *about* it (*Blade Runner*, *The Player*, *Pulp Fiction*, etc). Though a tempting conclusion, it is not my intention to argue here that we can comfort ourselves with the knowledge that the American independent film flourished in the postmodern era as a necessary, corrective oppositional postmodernism in response to Hollywood's mainstream mode. Rather, it is my suggestion that this is itself a deliberate fiction that drives the present discourse around independence. Our coming to grips with this fiction and our varying degrees of accepting or denying it as 'truth' constitute the primary meaning of this discourse, as well as the specificity of its appearance during this period of postmodernity. Along with White and Deleuze, Keathley also cites Claude Levi-Strauss, noting the famed anthropologist's conclusions regarding a culture's use of myths to resolve its own traumas and ideological ruptures.¹²⁶ For Keathley, the significance of Hollywood's modernist output is its consistent refusal to provide the resolutions to which Levi-Strauss refers; I would suggest that the equivalent significance of postmodern American cinema is its extra-textual enactment of such myths. The most relevant cultural conflicts are not expressed any longer through the film texts themselves, but instead through the spectator's cultural awareness of those

¹²⁵ in "Postmodernism", *Key Concepts in Cinema Studies*.

¹²⁶ Keathley, 298.

texts as operating within a discourse of an entertainment industry, of global capital – of money.

If we could look to the 1960s and identify, for example, *The Graduate* (1967) as a film whose central character undergoes a narrative journey that reflects contemporary cultural concerns about tensions in generational relationships, then I would suggest that the films of the subsequent period do not offer such relevance through their narrativity. The Benjamin Braddocks of our age are instead Jim Jarmusch, Quentin Tarantino and Steven Soderbergh themselves (and I would not be the first to suggest that Tarantino has made himself a wealthy man by indeed choosing to go into ‘plastics’). The generational conflict they presently face is not one of literal parents and children but instead one between past film influences, current sources of financing and present-day audiences: a key issue they struggle to resolve is whether the hyper-textuality they employ allows us to better understand our present through the cultural crises of the past or, conversely, utilizes past images to aid in obscuring or even ignoring our knowledge of the present.

If the conflict between mainstream and oppositional postmodernism only conforms to the distinction between Hollywood and independent film in an illusory way, then a more productive conflict that reflects this distinction is indeed one of authorship. This is a period in which Timothy Corrigan can propose, in *A Cinema Without Walls*, a binary opposition between directors who are ‘commercial auteurs’ and those who are instead ‘auteurs of commerce.’¹²⁷ The former are those

¹²⁷ Corrigan, 107.

filmmakers of such celebrity status that “their agency produces and promotes texts that invariably exceed the movie itself, both before and after its release.”¹²⁸ As one might expect, George Lucas and Steven Spielberg are the first names mentioned on Corrigan’s list.

Lucas in particular is able to generate a rather fluid textuality for his *Star Wars* series, for example, reworking earlier episodes’ special effects so they have a palimpsestic relationship to their former selves. This act seems deliberately calculated to inspire religious fervor amongst a devoted cult of fans, poring over slight deviations from one version to another as scholars might debate the finer points of the Talmud, or the Old and New Testaments; it seems almost cruelly relevant to point out that such analysis seems insular to the point of irrelevance. Such fan debates, many occurring while ritualistically dressed in the flowing robes of an on-screen ‘Jedi’, camping outside a theater for days to buy tickets, have yet to demonstrate a compelling new interpretation of the movies themselves. Instead they exist primarily as media images through which the films can be promoted: cruelly relevant, as I said, because the ultimate function of these images is to convince the public that the release of a new *Star Wars* episode is, literally, ‘an event.’

Think of how many teaser posters for Hollywood’s summer spectacles consist solely of an emblematic image (Batman’s insignia, Darth Vader’s helmet) and a date, concretizing the historical validity of the films’ appearances. If the postmodern event would be one whose significance lies in our very struggle to

¹²⁸ Corrigan, 107.

identify it as an event, then the postmodern Hollywood film will attempt to assuage this anxiety by simulating 'event' status for the releases of its significant products. Here is a compelling instance, within this discourse, of our current disconnection from our own sense of history being complicated by the entertainment industry's attempts to usurp that history; this is the context in which Corrigan can write that "it is the text and not its author that now may be dead."¹²⁹ Here is another example of media industries capitalizing, literally, on fractures within the academy, of Hollywood usurping its role as taste-maker as Cultural Studies scholars debate the value of that status.

Corrigan expresses the result of this conflict in linguistic terms, thus himself engaging with Foucauldian, theoretical, post-structural academic work. As he puts it, "the mechanisms for identifying with a speaking subject, usually a director, have become as important to communication in film culture today as the so-called textual statement of a movie itself or the different ways it is received by different audiences: the commercial drama of a movie's source can say as much today as the drama of the movie and the disposition of its viewers."¹³⁰ American independent cinema, then, defined as it is by its ostensible rejection of Hollywood's promotional apparatus, becomes doubly bound within this formulation of Corrigan's: by using the armature of media promotion to inform audiences that its pictures exist outside this promotional drama, the makers and distributors of independent films ensure simultaneously that their films will be read through this drama (are they truly able to

¹²⁹ Corrigan, 43 (quoted in Lewis).

¹³⁰ Corrigan, 118.

exist outside of the Hollywood system?) as well as, crucially, against it (can they exist as a source of independent textual meaning? do they have something ‘real’ to ‘say’ in contrast to their better-funded counterparts?). As they say, herein lies the game: when we buy a ticket to a film that has been advertised to us as on some level a meaningfully independent film, we convince ourselves that we will be particularly likely to derive textual meaning from that film, while facing the knowledge that we are ourselves acting out roles in an extra-textual drama of film promotion: how ‘independent’ can a film be if it was produced, for example, by Disney subsidiary Miramax with such stars as Bruce Willis and John Travolta?

A further question worth exploring in some detail is this: if the ticket buyer for an ‘indie’ film him or herself becomes a participant in the extra-textual drama of that film, simply as a result of buying a ticket and standing in line for it (effectively, enacting an extra-textual drama whose conflict is the struggle of the film in question to contain valid textual meaning), then what, precisely, is this ticket buyer’s difference from his geeky counterpart in line for the next *Star Wars* episode? How can one determine which one is the dupe and which one is the discerning consumer? The simplest answer is that of predetermined demographics: the art-house consumers of the independent film are statistically likely to be older, better-educated and more informed about their position in relationship to the Culture Industry that has generated the product they are about to watch (indeed, they might even pride themselves on having read Adorno and Horkheimer’s writing on that industry while in college).

A more complex answer is that the independent film is also likely to be a better movie than the latest *Star Wars* prequel: educated or not, the ticket holder in line for *You Can Count On Me* (2000) is usually correct to expect a 'real' movie, with rich characters, an identifiable setting and the intricate morality recognizable in one's own life. This argument suggests the *Star Wars* fan is the dupe simply because he or she has been made willing to accept a collection of action scenes set against computer generated backdrops as a substitute for 'actual' narrative. Similarly, narratives of highbrow independent cinema set against the lowbrow blockbuster have been thoroughly dismantled by the work of New Americanists, Cultural Studies theorists, et al. Notwithstanding the Henry Jenkins-influenced fan studies, and other Cultural Studies approaches that depict such fans as having more agency in this exchange than the previous account would allow, one should also consider the literal, textual sense in which these two types of ticket holder find themselves on common ground. The question is asked: why does the industry bother with such smaller films? When a studio subsidiary, Paramount Classics, makes roughly \$10 million in profit from *You Can Count on Me* while blockbuster films can potentially earn one hundred times that amount at the global box office (as Paramount's own *Titanic* proved in 1997), it is worth asking why the studio's 'indie' subsidiary remains in business. The ultimate answer is that the industry as a whole seeks to resolve this extra-textual drama of film production: if there is a conflict between these two types of films (Hollywood blockbuster and low-budget independent), as well as these two types of audience (infantilized teenage fans and educated adults), then Hollywood will

inevitably seek to maximize audience appeal, and thus profits, by integrating the strengths of each mode into a single product. The independent discourse here narrativizes a ‘farm team’ developing talent for the major leagues, and the extra-textual narrative becomes one of Hollywood learning how to reconcile filmic oppositions when creating new texts.

Take the case of *Gangs of New York* (2002), a film whose 21st century significance in part appears to claim that this extra-textual narrative has reached its climax: the film is just as meaningfully an ‘independent’ film as it is a quintessentially Hollywood production. On the one hand, it was made by Miramax; on the other, Disney’s funding of Miramax saw the film’s budget reach well over \$100 million, expensive even by studio standards. As with the George Lucas film, part of the appeal of *Gangs of New York* is its display of spectacle: it is advertised around the massive ‘New York’ set built at Italy’s Cinecitta, as well as a series of prolonged, ‘epic’ battle scenes that feature hundreds of extras (and can be enjoyed as discrete action sequences). *Gangs of New York* is also presented, however, as a ‘quality’ film – a period reconstruction evoking, perhaps, a Merchant-Ivory production – that will appeal to those with rarefied tastes: its screenplay, for example, was co-written by Kenneth Lonergan (writer-director of *You Can Count on Me*, previously); it is the product of several years of meticulous research on its subject matter, from Herbert Asbury’s original book to Martin Scorsese and screenwriter Jay Cocks’ additional efforts; and, in an intriguing parallel to the *Star Wars* prequel episodes, it was made by a director for whom audiences have nostalgic

associations with the (better) movies he made in the ‘New Hollywood’ era of innovation and creativity.

I propose Jim Jarmusch, then, as the thesis component of this recent dialectic within contemporary American filmmaking in large part because he has never ‘gone Hollywood.’ Though the films he makes are opposed to their 60s and 70s-era counterparts by their engagement with postmodernism, this engagement remains meaningful in accordance with Hayward’s conception of oppositional postmodernity. Consider Jarmusch’s own, oft-quoted description of his second film, *Stranger than Paradise* (1984): it is “a semi-neorealist black comedy in the style of an imaginary Eastern-European film director obsessed with Ozu, and familiar with the 1950s American television show *The Honeymooners*.”¹³¹ This quote suggests that the experience of watching *Stranger than Paradise* will involve little more than catching a series of references to other media texts; it also displays, however, a postmodern ironist’s fascination for juxtaposing high (the Japanese art cinema of Yashuziro Ozu) and low (early American sitcoms) cultural texts.

The quote also alludes to a slippage between the real and the imaginary that is often invoked in discussions of postmodernity: one might imagine, for example, that *Stranger than Paradise*’s mix of ‘real’ and ‘simulated’ textual influences has resulted in what Baudrillard would call a hyper-real text, in which an author’s originating purity is lost. Indeed, much of the critical debate around Jarmusch’s work is founded on these tensions to the point of forming an extra-textual narrative about

¹³¹ Hertzberg, vii.

the status of the subject in the postmodern age, ultimately offering an implicit conclusion about authorship that invokes Corrigan and Andrew. Reading reviews of Jim Jarmusch films, one can observe a struggle amongst critics to decide whether the films present a mere list of the director's artistic influences, offered for our fleeting amusement, or Jarmusch is instead able to transcend such simple quoting and present a style of his own in his work. They generally choose the latter; faith in the reappearance and existence of an auteur behind the scenes, ordering and assembling his pop culture citations into a single, unified text becomes the means by which critics are able to tell themselves that 'meaning' is in their presence.

Jarmusch himself has contributed to this narrative in interviews. Asked if he is influenced by, for example, the films of Wim Wenders, Jarmusch bristles:

Well, I've been influenced by anyone whose films I've liked; by Godard, Antonioni, Wenders, Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer. Of course, I'm influenced by things that move me, but when people say that my work is imitative of his, I think, it's just the idiots in the press that have to relate everything to something else. They can't see anything in its own right. It's got to be influenced by this or that, and that comes from the whole way that movies are thought of in the United States. Everything refers back to something else. I got a script, after *Stranger* was successful, from Hollywood they wanted me to direct, and they said they'd pay me a quarter of a million dollars to make a teenage sex comedy. The letter said, 'We know that this script reads a little like *Risky Business*, but, take our word for it, after the re-write it will read much more like *The Graduate*.' ... They always have to refer to something else. Nothing stands on its own.¹³²

Much of the Jarmusch discourse is contained within this lengthy excerpt. Firstly, it reminds us that he is steadfast in his refusal to 'sell out': many interviews suggest

¹³² Hertzberg, 52.

that, after early successes, Jarmusch was repeatedly offered jobs to direct films in the *Porky's* series (and their ilk). Secondly, it suggests that the industry is here attempting to locate Jarmusch within a discourse of 'youth culture' consistent with the mode of Roger Corman's AIP output during the 1960s.

Thirdly, this passage invokes an 'indies vs. the studios' binary: Jarmusch implicitly draws a connection here between mainstream and oppositional postmodernism, and, respectively, Hollywood and independent film. Though he may be influenced by Ozu and Antonioni, in Jarmusch's case these are genuine aesthetic influences (themselves made by genuine artists) that remain subservient to authorial control precisely because he does not work within the Hollywood system; were he to do so, Jarmusch would inevitably become a cog in a machine, filming God-only-knows which draft of a screenplay whose content only has meaning in terms of the earlier Hollywood films it references.

Fourth, it is significant that Jarmusch identifies this postmodern hyper-referentiality as a problem with the 'way that movies are thought of in the United States.' It is my suggestion that the 'American-ness' of the American independent film comes not from a monolithic sense of nationality, in which 'indies' are the 'true' national cinema, while Hollywood makes global blockbusters; instead, this discourse consistently portrays an America divided against itself. Here, the American independent auteur is able to identify the errors of his nation and work to correct them; crucially, he is able to do so because he has renewed himself in a fundamentally American way. Like Henry David Thoreau, Jarmusch has chosen to

march to the beat of his own drummer, setting an example for the rest of us by rediscovering the foundational notions of independence and indeed recharging those notions by illuminating their contemporary relevance. As Thoreau's stay at Walden Pond was (partially) a protest against the hypocrisies of slave ownership, so too does Jarmusch's work constitute an implicit rejection of an increasing American cultural isolationism throughout the last two decades: he is an American independent auteur, but the strength of his work, and his engagement with the idea of 'America,' comes from an embracing of the interdependent diversity amongst his multicultural, multinational sources.¹³³ By comparing Jarmusch to Thoreau, I hope to offer the figure of the independent director as one of Schmidt's good citizens one may hope to emulate, himself offering a productive emulation of a notable American before him; the result being that we ourselves are inspired to be more engaged and active citizens ourselves in response.

Another Jarmusch quote reinforces this notion of the independent filmmaker looking back to a 'truer' sense of America in the face of a present-day nation that has lost its way: asked if he sees the country 'through the eyes of a foreigner' because of the diverse influences and characters that drive his films, Jarmusch responds:

¹³³ There is a great deal of writing within the field of American Studies on the subject of the 'cosmopolitan' American world traveler that evokes the figure of Jarmusch. John Carlos Rowe, for example, in "Edward Said and American Studies," notes that "Said never connected this cosmopolitanism with Americanness or even with modernism, but it has very strong roots both in the myth of American selfhood criticized effectively by American myth critics and in American expatriates' careful cultivation of their 'otherness' abroad." (40) Such matters, particularly as they relate to his study of Native Americans, *Dead Man*, and his participation in the documentary/ethnography, *Tigrero: A Film That Was Never Made*, will be addressed at length in my chapter on American Studies.

America is made up of foreigners. There are indigenous people that lived here for thousands of years, but then white Europeans tried to commit genocide against them all. I'm a mongrel, I have Irish blood, bohemian blood, some German blood. All of America is a cultural mixture, and although America is very much in denial of this, that's really what America is.¹³⁴

Here the presence of Jarmusch as auteur works to correct against a failure of American memory; a seeming contradiction with the status of the auteur within the postmodern Hollywood economy, in which authorship is but one more means to advertise a product that is essentially of the present, immediate, ahistorical. (Despite the large dates on those posters, struggling to convince us that the release of each Hollywood blockbuster is an 'event,' these films rarely achieve such historical weight; it is unlikely that one is able to remember such films, if at all, in terms of precisely what day they were released.) Jarmusch's statement seems to echo Dudley Andrew's conclusions about authorship, worth repeating once more: "the word 'auteur' ... can thicken a text with duration, with the past of its coming into being and with the future of our being with it."¹³⁵ The extra-textual presence of Jarmusch becomes the weight that critics have been known to find lacking in his 'slight', 'minimalist' film narratives.

And yet it must be noted that there is a lingering sense of academic heresy that attends such citations of Jarmusch: the act of invoking the director's own words in a study of his work is seen as the gesture of a student all too willing to ignore the intentional fallacy – in which the author's assessment of the meaning of his work is

¹³⁴ Hertzberg, 193.

¹³⁵ Andrew, 27.

too hurriedly taken as the final word on that meaning – as well as a progressive understanding of filmmakers as multiply determined by social and economic factors. The texts an auteur creates are shaped by far more than his or her own authorial intentions; however, recent reconceptions of auteurism, in which the status of the auteur is examined both through his or her texts as well as extra-textual media performances of ‘him/herself’, seem designed to redeem both the auteur and our own desire, as analytical writers, to cite his or her words as significant. The excerpts I’ve taken from Jim Jarmusch interviews throughout the last few pages are not necessarily useful in understanding any of his films directly; they are, however, crucial to the understanding of Jarmusch’s own significance as an evolving cultural discourse.

As I’ve been suggesting, as an independent auteur, Jarmusch is also on some level a media-constructed framework for the work of myth-image-symbol American Studies criticism within a public forum. It is revealing, for example, that many of Jarmusch’s comments in interviews do more to illuminate Walden than they do his own films; both Jarmusch and Thoreau repeatedly articulate a fundamental incompatibility between the American desire for personal wealth and the American love for ideas, and ideals, of independence. Take, for example, the following passages from Walden:

And when the farmer has got his house, he may not be the richer but the poorer for it, and it be the house that has got him.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ Thoreau, 76.

I respect not his labors, his farm where every thing has its price; who would carry the landscape, who would carry his God, to market, if he could get anything for him ... whose fruits are not ripe for him till they are turned to dollars. Give me the poverty that enjoys true wealth.¹³⁷

It looks the poorest when you are richest. The fault-finder will find faults even in paradise. Love your life, poor as it is ... The town's poor seem to me to live the most independent lives of any.¹³⁸

Now consider Thoreau's words alongside the following excerpts from interviews with Jarmusch:

I love America as a country itself and the landscapes, and, for the most part, people that I meet just out on the road somewhere. But as far as the government and the recent attitudes of the American public, I find them appalling. I really love a lot of things about America, but at the same time I feel like I'm a stranger in terms of general sense of economic and political direction that people even my age have in America – that's really disturbing to me ... [I'm talking about] Yuppies and the fact that, you know, if someone had told me ten years ago that Ronald Reagan would be our president I would have fallen on the floor laughing.¹³⁹

In America, there's such a concern with ambition. We're so fed up with it, this idea about ambition and success. Sure it's everywhere, but especially in the U.S. It's something I'm not interested in, something I don't like, that all my life I've been taught that I have to achieve a certain stage on some economic scale.¹⁴⁰

I don't like the idea of fashioning your life around money, or lifestyle ... There are so many other ways of living. There are people who aren't aspiring to be fashion photographers. I've been getting scripts from Hollywood that I've been reading just out of curiosity. Some I've refused by their descriptions on the phone. But I've read maybe ten of them and every single script is concerned with ambition and

¹³⁷ Thoreau, 244.

¹³⁸ Thoreau, 376.

¹³⁹ Hertzberg, 42-43.

¹⁴⁰ Hertzberg, 79.

rise. If there is any class consciousness in the stories, it's always someone rising to the top.¹⁴¹

Throughout these passages, one can recognize a developing sense of Jarmusch's career consistency as a form of protest against a corrupt government, much as Thoreau refused to pay taxes to a slave-owning state as the foundational act of civil disobedience. Both Jarmusch and Thoreau, furthermore, use historical definitions of the nation in order to criticize the contemporary inequalities of their own America; again, there is a sense in which each man is significant for his attempts to renew, refresh and reinvigorate an America that has lost touch with its initiating ideals. It is also worth noting that the extent to which the discourse around American independent film has evolved over the past two decades can be seen by reading Jarmusch's words against the Steven Soderbergh film *Erin Brockovich* (2000), which may as well have been one of the ambition-fueled scripts the earlier auteur discarded. Here, the Julia Roberts character's climactic receipt of a new SUV and a steady job at a law firm allegorize Soderbergh's own acceptance as an A-list commercial director of Hollywood movies. Soderbergh will be seen to grapple with such matters, and the significance of *Brockovich* and *Ocean's Eleven* (2001) being his two biggest hits, in the pages to come.

But what of Jarmusch's textual significance? Current academic debates hinge on the possibility of throwing the baby out with the bathwater; though Corrigan suggests that the 'text may now be dead', he is quick to add that a film's extra-

¹⁴¹ Hertzberg, 15.

textual meaning is just as potentially a complement to filmic meaning as it is a replacement of it.¹⁴² A large part of our ability to discern a meaningful auteur discourse around Jarmusch comes from the fact that his films are sufficiently similar in form and content to sustain that discourse. There is a sense in which, as the proposed dialectic of the history of recent American independent film progresses, Jarmusch's films are those that are most directly applicable to their accompanying extra-textual discourses. By the time of Tarantino and Soderbergh's ascendance, such popular auteurism is more consistently a means to avoid textual engagement with their films and instead market the romanticization of the auteur himself. If there remains significance to be derived from the fact that interviews with Jarmusch engage with notions of nationality and American class structure, part of this significance comes from the fact that the content of his films still leads to such questions being asked of him. Thus, by interpreting them according to these earlier models of American Studies work, his films are revealed to be very much concerned with the same progressive conceptual issues as those of the New Americanists.

Broadly speaking, Jim Jarmusch films tend to deal with issues of nationality, ethnicity, and difference, often expressing conflicts of identity through the use and abuse of language; at the same time, as alluded to regarding *Permanent Vacation*, Jarmusch's films express meaning as a direct result of their postmodernity. Though one can identify the influences of, and direct references to, other American,

¹⁴² Indeed, in *A Cinema Without Walls*, Corrigan, after re-envisioning auteurism in this manner, goes on at length to perform textual analyses of films by Francis Coppola, Alexander Kluge and Raoul Ruiz.

European and Asian filmmakers throughout Jarmusch's work, such citations are rarely an alternative to textual meaning; instead, they consistently enhance that meaning by allegorizing the central culture clashes that repeatedly drive his films' narratives. Such are the tensions that haunt this filmography: will the American slacker learn anything from his French counterpart in *Permanent Vacation*?; will the Hungarian cousin connect with her American family in *Stranger than Paradise*?; will the Italian prisoner abet the escape of his American cellmates in *Down by Law* (1986)?; will the Japanese tourists' encounters with Memphis locals enhance their appreciation of American rock music in *Mystery Train* (1989)?; and, perhaps most significantly, will the white man come to any spiritual growth as a result of traveling with a Native American guide in the western *Dead Man* (1995)?

Often, what is at stake throughout these films is a potentially mindless cultural assimilation; the ironic wit of the films is typically derived from the characters' gradual recognition of, or ultimate failure to recognize, that which has been evident all along to an implicitly savvier audience member. Again, what we are seeing here is not merely the films' allegorizing of their own making, but also the primary shift in American Studies thought – the films themselves argue for a new means of knowing, a multiplicity of theoretical paradigms. Those stuck in the past are not able to make productive sense of the world. When Allie meets the Frenchman at the climax of *Permanent Vacation*, the humor comes from our awareness that he doesn't see the futility of his escape attempt. In *Stranger than Paradise*, similarly, the film's characters repeatedly take journeys – from Budapest to New York, from

New York to Ohio, from Ohio to Florida, and finally back to Budapest – only to find an essential sameness to each location. In this film Jarmusch seems to undercut the significance of the ‘American’ aspects of American independent film; the redundancy and even blankness of the landscapes visited (tellingly, the black and white photography over-exposes a snow-covered Lake Erie to the point that it is literally invisible when our heroes go to see it) suggests that the country is now no longer one of identifiable regional diversity but, instead, an all-consuming monotony. There is a relationship, however, between the tensions within the diegesis of *Stranger than Paradise* and our extra-textual knowledge of it; though the characters are repeatedly confronted with (and confounded by) the annihilating sameness of the American landscape, the film’s viewers are able to receive it as an exhilarating instance of novelty and innovation.

Stranger than Paradise’s success, as with that of *Permanent Vacation*, is thus contingent upon its status as a rare evocation of New Hollywood’s ‘drifter films’, alongside the repressive aesthetic of 1980s producers’ Hollywood, that simultaneously utilizes the period’s increasing engagement with postmodernism to adjust the manner in which such a drifter film is able to convey meaning. Where films such as *Five Easy Pieces* aggressively court reading protocols that engage with their Vietnam contexts, Jarmusch’s work instead forces viewers to confront a deadpan irony that for many is the quintessence of postmodernism. In the earlier period, such American films conveyed meaning through their angry, insistent relevance:

they communicated, as their champions have repeatedly told us, an immediacy that indicated they were nothing if not ‘of the present.’

By the time of Jarmusch’s career, this urgency – of a film’s central character, of an American counterculture, of contemporary film criticism – has dissipated, replaced by an ennui that suggests we should be happy for those films that are able to convey any meaning whatsoever. The postmodern ‘blankness’ of the texts now suggests the impotence of traditional academic paradigms to read meaning into them. This apparent absence of meaning forces the viewer to embrace new theoretical perspectives in order to understand that which is apparently invisible.

At stake in Jarmusch’s career has been a potential embrace of ironic distance for its own sake, devoid of critical content. Recall the words of *Clerks* director Kevin Smith, in Spike, Mike, Slackers and Dykes: “I’m a student of American independent cinema. ... I don’t feel that I have to go back and view European or other foreign films because I feel like these guys [such filmmakers as Jarmusch] have already done it for me, and I’m getting filtered through them. That ethic works for me.”¹⁴³ The implicit suggestion here is that of an American film movement that no longer viably engages with a reality-crisis, but instead addresses one that is purely meta-cinematic: the American independent film is that which usurps the nationality of other countries’ cinemas while erasing a history in which previous generations of young people sought out and savored such foreign films. Here, the young independent American filmmaker Kevin Smith sees Jarmusch’s films as, effectively, so culturally

¹⁴³ Pierson, 32.

and historically distant that they might as well be forty-year-old documents of the French New Wave, fading in their relevance to the essence of popular “indie”’s today. Such is the discourse in which Jarmusch’s films exist: they are the last gasps of an American independent cinema struggling to reach meaningful engagement with a context of their global influences. At the same time, they are both embodiments and, finally, victims of this slippage of meaning in a postmodern period.

Naturally, by presenting Jim Jarmusch as this starting point of a historical dialectic, I suggest that part of his significance must be to go away, to die out or be replaced by other sets of terms offered by subsequent popular auteurs.¹⁴⁴ Though Jarmusch and his films represent a significant moment in the development of reading practices regarding American independent film, nowhere can this symbolic resonance of the historical ‘past-ness’ of that ‘indie’ movement be seen so clearly as in his recent film, the deceptively simple *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2004). At first glance, the film might appear destined for irrelevance, appearing as a mere footnote in such academic projects as this one: it is comprised of eleven short films Jarmusch periodically shot, in between and at times during his feature work, since the mid-1980s. Each of the films can be described as a conversation between two or three characters as they indulge in the eponymous legal stimulants.

As with the ill-fated *Four Rooms* (1995), in which Allison Anders, Alexandre Rockwell, Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino each contributed a short film to

¹⁴⁴ Such is the very subject of *Dead Man*, both on-screen, and in the extra-textual story of Miramax’s poor handling of it. Disillusioned with Harvey Weinstein’s aggressive tactics, Jarmusch made a temporary retreat from filmmaking for some time afterward.

commemorate their near-simultaneous appearance as “indie” directors (the self-described ‘Sundance class of ‘92’), *Coffee and Cigarettes* can simultaneously be read as both a nostalgic homage to such episodic European films of the 1960s as *RoGoPaG* (1963) and *Boccaccio ‘70* (1962), as well as an attempt to create an historic document of the American independent movement from within. Given that Jarmusch’s shorts were made from 1986 to the present, the sense of *Coffee and Cigarettes*’ significance as a time capsule of sorts is especially strong. Though the films were originally meant to stand alone and are certainly entertaining as such – the first, in which laconic comedian Steven Wright is contrasted with always-already hyper-caFFEinated Roberto Benigni, was originally made for *Saturday Night Live*¹⁴⁵ – seen together, they have a cumulative impact that is essentially a reflection upon the entire period of “indie” film under discussion here.

When watching *Coffee and Cigarettes*, one is confronted with a similar narrative trajectory that does not exist within the diegesis of any of the individual shorts. Instead, one becomes gradually aware of their ongoing indexical evidence of Jarmusch’s own filmography: the Benigni short was likely made when actor and director were together for *Down by Law*; the next, featuring Cinqué Lee and Steve Buscemi, reminds us that both were in *Mystery Train* together; we recall one of *Night on Earth*’s (1991) five cab drivers when Isaach de Bankolé’s short is featured;

¹⁴⁵ Even the present evocation of *Saturday Night Live* here suggests an important historical shift: from a defiantly independent media forum, able to nurture and encourage its primary cast as well as such occasionally contributing talents as Albert Brooks, Andy Kaufman and Jarmusch, to a commodified exchange in which the show’s creator-producer, Lorne Michaels, now retains the rights to characters created by the cast in order to develop them into consistently unsuccessful movie vehicles for his self-named production company.

if one wonders why British comedian Steve Coogan is involved, one imagines the connection to his scene-mate Alfred Molina, who also appeared in *Dead Man*; and Bill Murray's exchange with two members of the Wu-Tang Clan reminds viewers that a member of the group wrote the score for Jarmusch's previous feature, *Ghost Dog: the Way of the Samurai* (1999).

It is tempting to suggest that the aesthetic failure of *Four Rooms* and the equivalent success of *Coffee and Cigarettes* have more than a little to do with issues of authorship: where the former film is unable to make a statement about this movement of independent cinema (except to suggest that its directors are so divergent in style and tone that to put their work together is foolhardy), Jarmusch's film succeeds in part because it is so consistently Jarmusch's. *Coffee and Cigarettes* is inherently a celebration of an auteur's longevity: it is a potentially thin text that Jarmusch has thickened, as Dudley Andrew would say, with the fact of his own duration. The dissonance offered throughout *Four Rooms* results in both an empty film and empty statement regarding the American 'indie': here, the movement is ultimately less than the sum of its parts, since it combines directors of such inconsistency that no coherence as a movement can flourish.

In *Coffee and Cigarettes*, conversely, the film gradually develops a startling cumulative impact. In its own way, the film is structured around the same sort of dialectic I'm proposing here as representative of the recent history of American 'indie' cinema. As the title suggests, much of the film is devoted to provocative juxtapositions: if caffeine and nicotine, with their compelling contrast of thick black

liquid and evanescent white smoke, seem to naturally complement each other, what other disparate elements can be synthesized in this way? Most of the shorts present characters who are somehow opposite, either in terms of their typical personae (the quiet Wright and hyper Benigni) or due to a rivalry established by the narrative conflict of the short (musicians Tom Waits and Iggy Pop, playing themselves, attempt a neutral chat but can't help turning it into a bitter argument). By repeating the formula so many times within the same feature, this conflictual strategy itself becomes a kind of narrative: what will be the next combination? who will 'win'?

The more recently made installments, furthermore, begin to refer back to the early shorts (by presenting them in the chronological order of their making, this sense of a documentary historical statement is emphasized): the Wu-Tang Clan's RZA, for example, mimics a humorous claim by Waits, asserting that he has substantial medical training ("I inhabit the space where music and medicine intersect," both announce in their shorts). Furthermore, the Wu-Tang episode, in which a white waiter (Bill Murray) interrupts a conversation between two black characters, mimics Steve Buscemi's own earlier harassment of Spike Lee's siblings Cinqué and Joie Lee. The pleasures of the film's self-reflexivity – many actors play themselves; they are often combined in deliberately jarring ways (Bill Murray improvising with rap stars, for example); repeated dialogue and motifs – make us aware that Jarmusch himself is ultimately the great synthesizer of its multiple elements. Through the redemptive presence of an auteur, they become more than a list of influences, or references to catch, but a definitive summary statement: the

American “indie” is already the subject of our nostalgia, a moment of past history. Though each of the segments features a conflict of some sort, it is typically expressed as a matter of casual inconsequence: these are slacker snapshots of little more than sitting around and doing nothing and, as such, they recall the inactive, lethargic characters that populated so much of early Jarmusch, such as *Permanent Vacation* and *Stranger than Paradise*. The final episode of *Coffee and Cigarettes* concerns itself most fully with the wistful awareness of time’s passing: its players, Bill Rice and Taylor Mead, are both elderly men who discuss their (real) work in avant-garde theatrical productions. Imagining their cups of coffee to be champagne flutes, they toast ‘Paris in the ‘20s’ as a source of inspiration and artistic vitality for their ongoing work on the stage. But this toast is not sufficient: they also raise their Styrofoam ‘glasses’ to ‘New York in the ‘70s’ (recalling the linking of France and Manhattan at the close of *Permanent Vacation*), citing it as an equivalent period of innovation and creativity.

The power of this moment, emphasized by its final placement in *Coffee and Cigarettes*, is linked to our fluid reading of it: on the one hand, it is a generous gesture, granting a segment of American culture the worldly sophistication thought to be so effortlessly found in a European counterpart. On the other hand, the historical comparison emphasizes our present-day distance from both periods: though the punk music scene, underground film screenings and Warhol Factory events of the city during the era toasted were important influences upon the then-embryonic auteur, they are currently as forgotten to the average viewer (or to

independent director Kevin Smith) as are ‘jazz age bohemians.’ As *Coffee and Cigarettes* ends, one is left to reflect upon the fact that independent films just don’t look like this anymore: grainy black and white film stock has been largely replaced by the ubiquity of digital video as a formal signifier of low budget production circumstances, and the prospect of watching nothing more than characters sit around and talk seems like a comic punchline about the pretensions of the movement (for example, a character ‘furiously’ playing the *My Dinner With André* video game at an arcade on *The Simpsons*).¹⁴⁶

I’ve repeatedly stressed the word ‘statement’ in my description of *Coffee and Cigarettes* to suggest that, both in the specific film and consistently throughout Jarmusch’s contribution to the discursive field of recent independent film, the manner in which meaning is conveyed – addressing authorship, for example, while refusing to clearly adhere to its primary tenets – closely follows Michel Foucault’s depiction of an enunciative field enabling statements to be spoken in The Archaeology of Knowledge (and the Discourse on Language). Again: the films’ content suggests New Americanist traditions of academic debate, while paradoxically being shown to offer such meaning through the classical prism of auteurism. Throughout much of Foucault’s writing, the operations of cultural exchange are never as linear as we have led ourselves to believe. As previously alluded to, post-structural theorizations such as those of Foucault are particularly

¹⁴⁶ The opening of Quentin Tarantino’s first film, *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), could be said to open with a direct homage to this tradition, with its principal characters enjoying a spirited chat around a diner’s breakfast table; here, however, it is an ‘indie’ convention to be ‘shot down’ in more ways than one over the course of the film. More on this later.

applicable to postmodern cinema: indeed, it may be here that the latent relationship between post-structuralist thought and postmodern visual culture may be the strongest.

In its restless, compulsive need to display traces of multiple influences, on an overt textual level, the postmodern art work challenges conventional notions of meaning: if a statement is being made by, for example, *Blade Runner*, the multiplicity of the text itself tells us not to look to Ridley Scott's authorship as the source of that statement. Instead, the film's meaning is to be found in the context that unites a commodity-exchange director (originally from TV commercials) with an aesthetic discourse that combines: Frankensteinian science-fiction tropes; the femmes fatale, wounded men and art deco styles of film noir; antebellum escaped slave literature; and a narrative device that directly engages with contemporary concepts of memory as artifice. Though the flourishes of postmodernism suggest an awareness of Culture Industry operations – it often seems that a primary pleasure of postmodern cinema is our laughing at the audacity of the latest juxtapositions and recombinations that are being used to make us spend money on the industry's products – power nevertheless remains firmly in place. A destabilized text such as *Starship Troopers* (1997) may raise uncomfortable ideological questions about the relationship of warfare and the media, 1930s fascism and the present, but its special effects, ironic distance and fast pace ensure that its primary statement continues to be that of our love for expensive studio movies; similarly, the first lesson children are taught by the ostensibly benign *Sesame Street* program, with its barrage of mixed

media clips, is to love the experience of channel surfing the vast wave of television itself.

The paradox of Jarmusch's importance, then, has to do with his very presence as an auteur enabling his readers to make more self-aware conclusions about the industrial sources of statements; his roots in the modernism of the New Hollywood era ensures that Jarmusch's films retain the appearance of auteur-driven meaning, while simultaneously stressing the impossibility of such statements being made at a textual level. Again and again, his movies play out encounters between characters of differing language and/or nationality, in which communication fails (and often fails so spectacularly that the viewer can't help but laugh). A beloved example can be found in *Down by Law*: as the three men languish in their jail cell, Benigni's character draws a crude window frame on the wall and imagines what it might enable him to see, the better to pass the time. "Which do you say," he asks the others, "I look out the window, or I look at the window?" Warily, one responds, "Unfortunately, in this case, you look *at* the window"; we do not see him explain the point any further to the Italian, and so the joke remains solely for the benefit of the audience and the on-screen Americans.

Jarmusch himself has joked in interviews that he has deliberately led astray Benigni's actual attempts to learn English by mistranslating key words and inventing bizarre colloquialisms that do not exist; though this makes for amusing international press conferences, it also suggests an authorial signature when such moments appear in Jarmusch's films. In *Stranger Than Paradise*, such an exchange occurs as Eva

helpfully offers to vacuum her cousin's apartment, to which he responds by 'helpfully' teaching her that the common American slang expression for doing so is the pseudo-masturbatory 'choking the alligator.' Indeed, throughout Jarmusch's work there is a seemingly analogous relationship between the minimalism of his formal style and the minimal amount of genuine communication that is exchanged amongst his characters. In addition to the vacuum gag, for example, are scenes in which: Willie gives up, almost immediately, in his attempts to explain the rules of American football to his cousin; his friend Eddie tries repeatedly to tell Eva a joke involving untied shoelaces, but cannot recall all of it; and Willie unconvincingly explains to Eva that TV dinners are all that are ever eaten in the homes of the United States.

If Jarmusch's films are thus not merely texts that can be productively applied to post-structural analytical concepts, but are also significantly postmodern texts that themselves reflect such post-structural ideas in their very construction, then one could argue that the *mise-en-scène* of this author's oeuvre is itself meaningfully discursive. Throughout The Archaeology of Knowledge, for example, what is significant to Foucault about statements is their rarity; as he bluntly puts it, "relatively few things are said."¹⁴⁷ As a result, the few statements that do find themselves uttered are easily confused with, and consumed by, the act of interpretation:

To interpret is a way of reacting to enunciative poverty, and to compensate for it by a multiplication of meaning ... to analyze a

¹⁴⁷ Foucault, 119.

discursive formation ... is [in one sense] to weigh the ‘value’ of statements. A value that is not defined by their truth, that is not gauged by the presence of a secret content; but which characterizes their place, their capacity for circulation and exchange, their possibility of transformation, not only in the economy of discourse, but, more generally, in the administration of scarce resources.¹⁴⁸

I would suggest that Jarmusch’s films are themselves largely set within a milieu as much notable for its ‘enunciative poverty’ as for its economic poverty; both for Jarmusch and Foucault, the economies of discourse appear to be substantially related to economies of capital resources. The result suggests a level of truth beyond that classic cliché of mainstream film criticism, “this film is important for what its characters don’t say as much as for what they do,” with its suggestion of a pretentious cinéaste’s ability to perceive great significance where others are merely bored. In Jarmusch’s work, the inarticulate nature of his characters is indeed significant; however, rather than merely suggesting viewers pay greater attention in order to ‘read’ his films textually, this lack of dialogue instead directs our attention to read the American independent movement itself as a fertile discursive field.

Consider Foucault’s assessment of our ultimate ability to read the statements we encounter: “To describe a formulation *qua* statement does not consist in analyzing the relations between the author and what he says (or wanted to say, or said without wanting to); but in determining what position can and must be occupied by any individual if he is to be the subject of it.”¹⁴⁹ Here one can begin to recognize the evolution of auteurism’s utility in engaging with this recent period of

¹⁴⁸ Foucault, 120.

¹⁴⁹ Foucault, 95-96.

independent film: rather than rely solely on the auteur theory as a pure, decontextualized-dehistoricized source of meaning, instead one must acknowledge the fact that the author himself is but one more means by which power and/or textual meaning can operate.

Our attempts to read Jarmusch's films, then, despite their teasing insistence on their own enunciative poverty, lead us to read our own auteurist analyses of Jarmusch themselves as a defining methodology for engaging with such 'indies' as somehow special, textually richer than their corporate kin. Recall once more the elliptical nature of *Permanent Vacation*: we are confronted with this enunciative poverty both through the lower Manhattan setting and the words of the main character. Moreover, any attempts by the text to present a thesis for such poverty are explicitly mocked as dead ends, literal jokes on the act of interpretation itself (the falsity of a mysterious 'war' with 'the Chinese' taking place in New York). Given Foucault's emphasis on the multiplicities of cultural history as offering more weight than the comparatively simplistic top-down conception of authorial meaning, it is notable that here is an instance in which we observe Allie making statements for which we cannot access the traumas that have caused him to speak them; *Permanent Vacation* places us in the presence of an 'author' who half-heartedly narrates the events of his life, while firmly denying the reliability of that narrator-author as a means to productively interpret those events. Instead, we are left to study the mode of cinema that has presented us with this interpretive enigma: why has this authorial force become impotent at this time? Why are our standard reading practices,

previously applicable to so many other youthful rebel/drifter films, failing us in this instance?

To ask these questions at all speaks to an increasing acceptance of such post-structural thinkers as Foucault and Roland Barthes; to answer them, however, requires us to recognize the appearance of postmodern films that themselves depict this textual instability. Indeed, such a parallel relationship of theory and textuality is only possible through post-structural paradigms that blur even the previously unassailable distinction between the text to be studied and the methodology with which one studies it. As I have suggested elsewhere, Foucault offers his readers not merely rigorous thought but intricate textual pleasures; the density of his sentences are a notable style, allowing us to recognize the play between the force of his ideas and his playful unwillingness ever to be completely pinned down by the finality of their utterance. One would be unlikely to imagine Claude Lévi-Strauss or Tzvetan Todorov claiming that the cultural myths they have unearthed offer a potential reading protocol for their own efforts in structuralism; nevertheless, in the present moment, the textual reconceptions offered by Foucault inevitably suggest that our chosen texts of analysis can at times themselves be infinitely diverse manuals for reading. Or, to put it simply, the potential, the possibility of each film is to offer us a new and unique way of watching. They remind us that previous modes of knowing are themselves historically determined narratives, rather than the purely objective academic science they might otherwise claim to be.

Throughout Jarmusch's work, repeated encounters between foreigners who mutually fail at communication dramatize the gaps between the subject of a statement and the statement being uttered at the level of both textuality and auteurist analysis. The Archaeology of Knowledge is useful here: "So if the subject of the statement should not be regarded as identical with the author of the formulation – either in substance, or in function. He is ... a particular, vacant place that may in fact be filled by different individuals; but, instead of being defined once and for all, and maintaining itself as such throughout a text, a book, or an oeuvre, this place varies."¹⁵⁰ Jarmusch initially offers us the appearance of a modernist auteur conveying meaning, but instead replaces such a direct transaction of meaning with a post-national, cosmopolitan manifestation of postmodern polyvocality.

What is the implication, then, of Quentin Tarantino being promoted as a defiant antithesis to this?

¹⁵⁰ Foucault, 95.

CHAPTER THREE
FUNCTIONS OF THE INDEPENDENT AUTEUR
(ANTITHESIS: QUENTIN TARANTINO)

Jonathan Rosenbaum, the Chicago Reader film critic who has long been a primary champion of Jim Jarmusch, is not the only figure to suggest that his films are antithetical to those of Quentin Tarantino; he does, however, do so more forcefully and directly than any writer I have encountered. In his provocative collection, Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Limit What Movies We Can See, Rosenbaum summarizes the relationship between the two figures of ‘indie’ discourse thusly:

My idea of an independent filmmaker is someone who has final control over his or her work, and Tarantino has never enjoyed this freedom. Jim Jarmusch ... who [has] final cut on all [his] own features and even own[s] all [his] negatives, obviously qualifies, but in recent years it has been Tarantino and not [Jarmusch] who has been celebrated as an American independent – a gross misperception that will continue to prevail as long as the studio’s shell-game persists.¹⁵¹

The ‘shell game’ to which Rosenbaum is referring here may also remind the reader of a major conglomerate, Disney, by definition a producer of largely ‘dependent’ films, owning a company, Miramax, that is culturally symbolic of independent filmmaking, and which seems to employ (and endlessly promote) Quentin Tarantino as its house director. Rosenbaum’s words are significant in a number of ways. As always, one can recognize the fluidity of filmic independence as a concept: Rosenbaum is gracious enough to define what he means by the term, but in doing so

¹⁵¹ Rosenbaum, 12.

is just as quick to remind readers, implicitly, that the majority of his peers do not do so themselves because in their hands the word is effectively meaningless.

Elsewhere in Movie Wars, Rosenbaum suggests that there is presently no useful distinction between film criticism and film promotion; by stressing the value of a such a distinction, he makes a compelling defense for film canons and respect for opinions on cinema held by those who have closely studied the medium.

(Another of his books is entitled Essential Cinema: On the Necessity of Film Canons.) It is in this spirit that I have retained my subjective, evaluative remarks throughout this text – rather than pretend that I do not have any such opinions, I openly acknowledge this fact and leave it to the reader to determine the extent to which they affect my more objective historical argument. I call attention to this blurring now because Tarantino is himself a celebrity whose appeal lies in this dual work – on the one hand he is a creative artist, making films that speak his voice, while at the same time he is a lover of a cinema, making interpretive value judgements and pronouncements about the movies that fascinate him.

Tellingly, Rosenbaum refers once again to Miramax as a facilitator of this blurring between criticism and promotion – by stressing their own bravery in acquiring the controversial *Kids* (1995), the company ensured that media coverage of its actions “became, in effect, a critical reading of the film.”¹⁵² Again we can see the media impact upon interpretation – if this dissertation is ultimately a conspiracy narrative, to what extent is academia exempt from it? Is academic work to be valued

¹⁵² Rosenbaum, 148.

at least for making such operation not only visible but often the subject of study itself? At the heart of Rosenbaum's contribution to this discourse seems to be the suggestion that something real has been lost, both at the level of film criticism as well as that of aesthetics and content. For Rosenbaum, the loss of the former has caused that of the latter. Throughout these pages, I'll attempt to draw parallels between this loss of film criticism and the currently contested 'loss' of earlier models of American Studies work, with its emphasis on traditional interpretation, valuing of aesthetic judgments, etc.

Though Rosenbaum identifies Tarantino as a less important director than Jarmusch (*Pulp Fiction* is a film that displays "at best a ravenous hunger for media that constitutes most of [its] surprise as well as [its] 'courage'"¹⁵³), he also suggests that the explanation for the recent romanticization of one at the other's expense lies in the extent to which film critics now allow themselves to be agents of the industry's power. In the same way that critics are too quick to substitute 'covering' the controversy around *Kids* for a genuine critical analysis of it, so too does the figure of Tarantino, as suggested earlier, prevent the act of reading his films, instead of facilitating it.

In many ways, the discourses around Tarantino and Jarmusch have a great deal in common: both men are depicted as 'cool' by the media – Jarmusch as laconic artist, Tarantino as ultimate film connoisseur – and both make films that are often read primarily in terms of the references they make to other films. Though both men

¹⁵³ Rosenbaum, 30.

are easily applicable to the larger category of ‘hip indie director’, Quentin Tarantino’s status as antithesis to Jarmusch has a great deal to do with the films to which he makes reference in his own work. When his *Pulp Fiction* won the Palme d’Or at the Cannes film festival in 1994, the embrace of French film culture¹⁵⁴ seemed in part to be a reciprocal response to Tarantino’s love of it: his production company, ‘A Band Apart,’ makes homage to Jean-Luc Godard’s portrait of rebellious youth, *Bande à Part* (1964), while in interviews the director would often explain *Pulp Fiction*’s alinear structure by citing Godard’s maxim, “A film should have a beginning, a middle, and an end, just not necessarily in that order.”

The excitement around *Pulp Fiction* initially seemed meaningfully global: an American crime film reinterpreting and engaging with the French New Wave films that themselves reworked American crime films of the 1940s. On closer inspection, however, such connections quickly dissipate. In Jarmusch, high cult global art film elements blend with ‘low-life’ American characters and settings to dramatize a specific historical engagement with the conservative isolationism of 1980s America(n cinema). Conversely, Tarantino’s work appears largely interested in its display of predominantly American cultural texts that suggest, ultimately, not only that there is no ‘real’ content at the heart of his work but that there is little ‘reality’ about Tarantino himself – now, the auteur himself is the fictional text, constructed out of the earlier elements to which he makes reference.

¹⁵⁴ Of course, even the ‘French-ness’ of the Cannes festival is illusory, given that it is an international event and that Clint Eastwood presided over the jury in 1994. Nevertheless, the moment was one of global ‘high’ culture embracing a text, ostensibly, for only appearing to wallow in the low, while in fact qualifying as valuable art.

It is revealing that Tarantino himself could easily be a character in one of the youth comedy screenplays that Jarmusch was earlier referred to as rejecting for their blatant depictions of class aspirations and social climbing: the Tarantino myth repeatedly stresses his years spent toiling at a video store before suddenly winning the lottery of instant celebrity status. When Rosenbaum is upset that Tarantino is being celebrated as an independent director at the expense of Jarmusch, he is effectively expressing disdain for the implication that Tarantino has somehow ‘rescued’ the American independent film from a state of lethargy and irrelevance. The sudden, intense success of Tarantino would prove to be as much curse as blessing: on the one hand, his films reveal that such independent productions can compete directly with those of Hollywood, while on the other, they profoundly alter the discourse of independence by suggesting that this is the best to which such producers can aspire.

Similarly, the master narrative that Peter Biskind depicts in Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film, is one of the movement falling victim to its own success, a success increasingly defined by the standards of a dominant industry it once had tried to resist. By the time of Tarantino’s meteoric rise to fame, Jarmusch’s work was increasingly difficult to separate from clichéd, reductive notions of what defined the American ‘indie.’ Biskind refers to such codification in this way: “Later, in the 1980s, the kind of salt-of-the-earth regionalism these films celebrated would degenerate into mindless

boosterism for barnyards and square dancing, Garrison Keillor-style”¹⁵⁵; recall also Emmanuel Levy’s more direct assessment, in Cinema of Outsiders: “if there was a stereotypical ‘indie’ in the 1980s, it could be described as a ‘sensitive’ coming-of-age story about a Midwestern farm girl.”¹⁵⁶ This is the period in which much that became championed at the Sundance festival was referred to as ‘granola film’: regional, earnest, these films were probably good for you but not especially appetizing. Indeed, health food is a recurring signifier of ‘indie’ discourse: the Village Voice’s J. Hoberman, for example, has referred to *In the Bedroom* (2001) – a film with many markers of the ‘quality’ American independent cinema – as “the granola *Death Wish*.” One could go so far as to suggest that Tarantino’s apparent obsession with junk food (diners, breakfast cereals, fast food joints such as *Pulp Fiction*’s ‘Big Kahuna Burger’) is part of a desire to break with this prior culinary model of independent cinema.

Though Jarmusch’s films are not completely applicable to this ‘granola’ category, they do reflect the extent to which the originating myths of this ‘indie’ movement had to do with the realities of expressed place: to contrast the Hollywood product that consistently glamorized Los Angeles or New York, these independent films would prove their value simply for their indexical display of an alternate, ‘real’ America that does not define itself by its influence upon cultural power. Though Jarmusch’s first features use New York as a setting, it is significant that they emphasize the marginal lives of lower Manhattan residents. Increasingly, Jarmusch’s

¹⁵⁵ Biskind, 16.

¹⁵⁶ Levy, 41.

subsequent features have been more directly interested in this regionalism, exploring the Louisiana bayou and Memphis backwaters; in *Dead Man*, moreover, the untamed West is itself the film's primary subject.

Conversely, much of Tarantino's work seems to shun reality: the heavily anticipated *Kill Bill* volumes (2003, 2004), for example, were promoted around Tarantino's adamant desire to shoot them in Japan and China, and yet the display of location shooting in each film is negligible. For Tarantino, runaway production was necessary so that he could work with the original cast and crew members of the beloved genre films to which his opus was making reference; furthermore, promotional materials often stressed that a given sequence of *Kill Bill* was shot on the same soundstage as an earlier favorite of the director's. Here, then, the 'authenticity' to be displayed by shooting on another continent has to do with an indexical relationship to artifice itself: the pleasures of the films often derive from Tarantino's preservation of such actors as Sonny Chiba and Gordon Liu, as well as his embrace of Yuen Wo-Ping's 'wire fu' approach to fight choreography.

Predating *Kill Bill*'s display of authentic simulacra is Dana Polan's dissection of *Pulp Fiction* as a theme park in his BFI Reader on the film. As might be expected, such a comparison is made as part of a larger consideration of the film's postmodernity:

If *Pulp Fiction* and Disneyland are constructions of imaginary universes that in postmodern style make manifest their artificial nature, we might even directly compare the experience of watching *Pulp Fiction* to visiting a theme park ... *Pulp Fiction* moves the spectator from one set piece to the next, creating a roller-coaster

experience made of lulls and high sensations ... and on this narrative ride, the primary goal for the spectator is not to look for meanings (one doesn't interpret Disney so much as live it) but to have an experience, to luxuriate in sensations.¹⁵⁷

As a result, one might compare Tarantino's 'Jack Rabbit Slim's' (the *Pulp Fiction* restaurant that immerses patrons into a world of memorabilia, projected film clips and 1950s-era celebrity look-alike waiters) with Steven Spielberg's 'Jurassic Park' – both are critical locations in postmodern films that directly engage with their own acts of simulation, effectively simulating the already hyper-real qualities of a theme park visit itself. One would be hard pressed to find critics who would describe either example as meaningfully oppositional postmodernism: given that the Spielberg film is about the horrors of exploiting advanced technology simply in order to create a lucrative tourist enterprise, *The Globe and Mail's* late film critic Jay Scott aptly noted in 1993 that “*Jurassic Park* is ‘Jurassic Park.’”¹⁵⁸

Critics are somewhat more generous in ascribing a certain display of wit to the Tarantino example, to the extent that they see *Pulp Fiction* as postmodern commentary on the state of our present pop culture; but just as many suggest that interpretation of the film is not encouraged by the film, and that it is instead simply a dazzling spectacle of 'cool.' Indeed, such are the last words Polan gives to *Pulp Fiction*: “Two hip guys who can maintain cool (even with inappropriate dress). Style winning out over substance. This is how the film ends. More than any explicit

¹⁵⁷ Polan, 76-77.

¹⁵⁸ Scott, 344.

message, this is the point of *Pulp Fiction*. This is why it is a phenomenon.”¹⁵⁹ The similarities to a theme park ride and the endless display of spectacular surfaces also lead Polan to compare *Pulp Fiction* to the work of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg: “There is in these directors a concern for building magical kingdoms which characters react to with amazement and into which they adventure ... on a journey that leaves ordinary cares behind.”¹⁶⁰

In and of themselves, however, such details are not necessarily significant: one could cite any number of films that evoke theme park rides, exist almost purely on a surface level, and owe a debt to the work of Spielberg and Lucas.¹⁶¹ What makes such details worth pointing out in the case of *Pulp Fiction* is its status as an independent film, ostensibly meant to oppose all of the preceding qualities with their suggestion of Hollywood artifice and polish. Effectively, part of what constitutes the legend of *Pulp Fiction* is not just the textuality it displays, but the promise it represents as well: the film’s timing suggested it would not only redeem the dreary, ‘granola’ mode of independent filmmaking, but the tired, mainstream postmodernism of Hollywood product as well. As with the old quip about Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers – that he ‘gave her class’ and she ‘gave him sex (appeal)’ – so too with Tarantino bridging the gap at this time between the two fields of film production. If

¹⁵⁹ Polan, 86.

¹⁶⁰ Polan, 76.

¹⁶¹ One could conceivably argue, moreover, that 20th Century Fox’s Andrew Dice Clay vehicle *The Adventures of Ford Fairlane* (1990) already had many of *Pulp Fiction*’s qualities – a playful, semi-parodic relationship to hardboiled crime fiction; characters who continue to be ‘cool’ even in absurd circumstances; a fetishization of musical and automotive signifiers of the 1950s; an excessive display of style, to a self-reflexive extent; otherwise sympathetic characters comfortably using politically incorrect language to describe women and African Americans as ‘chicks’ and ‘niggers’, respectively – all except, of course, quality itself.

'indie' films in the early 1990s were popularly dismissed as moribund for their dry preoccupation with 'adult' concerns, then Tarantino would alter the discourse by depicting a cartoonish formal world with infantilized characters (endlessly putting food in their mouths; Polan even cites a book on Tarantino that asks, "what else is Butch [Bruce Willis] but a big baby?"). At the same time, however, the director brings a dark, adult character to the mode of cinema defined by the children's fantasies of Spielberg and Lucas: here, characters use heroin, kill one another, and appear to get away with their crimes.

The excitement – and ultimate curse – of Tarantino, then, has been his tantalizing suggestion that the independent film could now compete with and even beat Hollywood at its own game, in terms of both aesthetic value and box office performance (at \$200 million globally, *Pulp Fiction* is a blockbuster by any standard). As Gavin Smith suggested in a Film Comment interview with the director, such boundary blurring was evident from the outset of his career: "Tarantino's 1992 debut, *Reservoir Dogs* will, I think, prove pivotal in the history of the American independent film, for legitimizing its relationship to Hollywood genre."¹⁶²

Reviewing *Pulp Fiction* in the Village Voice, J. Hoberman depicts a similar shift in a far more colorful manner: "Just as *Un Chien Andalou* travestied the poetic avant-garde of the 1920s, so the independently produced *Reservoir Dogs* single-handedly shifted the Sundance film festival diet from granola and skim milk to french fries smothered in ketchup, after its world premiere there." Hoberman

¹⁶² Smith, 32.

cements the shift by comparing Tarantino's work to that of the previous symbol of vital American independent film: "Every character has a rap or a riff, if not a full-fledged theory of life (at times, *Pulp Fiction* suggests a two-fisted Jarmusch film)." ¹⁶³ Hoberman's analogy implies that the fast food properties of Tarantino's films will necessarily prevent them from offering nutritional substance; one can recognize the pattern of a sudden intense high followed by a hard depressive crash, both in one's response to excessive fast food as well as the media's depiction of 'Too Much Tarantino.'

Though many cite his ubiquitous self-promotion as the primary reason for a backlash against Tarantino in the wake of *Pulp Fiction*'s success, there is also a sense in which the public resisted the near immediate branding of the director by others: when Miramax is repeatedly referred to in the press as 'the House that Quentin built', it is not difficult to, by extension, consider Tarantino its Mickey Mouse, simultaneously spokesman and logo. What is interesting about this backlash is that it assumed the virulence commonly reserved for an artist who has 'sold out' by making a populist piece of entertainment that discards the intricacy and integrity of their earlier work; in Tarantino's case, however, *Pulp Fiction* is uniquely both at the same time. With Tarantino, one simultaneously applauds his genuine talent as a writer-director (the former skill in particular reinforcing his status as an auteur) while deriding the speed with which he is celebrated as such, having made so few movies. If the Tarantino discourse is about the loss of reality, the vacuum of meaning offered

¹⁶³ *Pulp Fiction* DVD supplement.

by the rise of postmodernism, then it is particularly significant that reality is now under attack both at the level of text and author – as we shall see, the intensity of his legend suggests that there is something unreal about Tarantino himself.

Consider again his relationship to Spielberg-Lucas models of filmmaking: often in Tarantino's work, there is the suggestion of a complete 'world' of his design, not particular to any individual film but instead connecting them all. Characters from one connect to another. For example, there is the suggestion that Michael Madsen's *Reservoir Dogs* character and John Travolta's in *Pulp Fiction* (respectively, Vic and Vincent Vega) are brothers, a reading encouraged by Tarantino's professed desire to one day make a 'Vega Brothers' movie with the two actors¹⁶⁴. Again there is a sense of conflict: Tarantino is simultaneously a creative artist and a skilled orchestrator of his own one-man film franchise. Though *Pulp Fiction* is a sufficiently dense text to encourage fan obsession over it, this obsession has quickly been maximized as a source of potential profit. Tarantino's 'two' recent films, the volumes that comprise his *Kill Bill* epic, were ostensibly separated due to the extreme length of the complete work; yet there is also a sense in which the volumes resemble episodes of the *Star Wars* series, ending on a familial cliffhanger revelation equivalent to Darth Vader's fathering of Luke Skywalker.

However, even the mixture of infantilized cartoon style and R-rated adult subject matter is not exclusive to Tarantino. Though the director has been compared by Polan to Spielberg and Lucas, and repeatedly by many others to Martin Scorsese

¹⁶⁴ <http://everythingtarantino.com/data/2003/0521-200931.shtml>

(specifically his modernist gangster films, with their flourishes of pure style and jarring juxtapositions of comedy and violence), one auteur's name for the most part absent, surprisingly so, from the Quentin Tarantino discourse is that of Brian De Palma. Tarantino has often cited John Travolta's performance in De Palma's *Blow Out* as a favorite example of screen acting, and has elsewhere named De Palma one of the auteurs whose films he obsessively watches more than once the day they are released¹⁶⁵; few, however, have made detailed reference to De Palma's films in their writing on Tarantino. Given that it has been suggested that *Pulp Fiction*'s Jack Rabbit Slim's sequence is something of a mise-en-abyme, both for the film itself as well as the entirety of the contemporary postmodern film viewing experience, it is worth comparing to a similar set piece, made for a major studio a decade earlier, at the center of the De Palma thriller *Body Double* (1984).

The sequence in question depicts the hero, Jake Scully (Craig Wasson) entering the world of pornographic films (represented by a decadent nightclub) in order to meet Holly Body (Melanie Griffith), whose involvement he suspects in a murder that, in one of De Palma's frequent references to Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), he has recently failed to prevent. As with the Jack Rabbit Slim's sequence, this passage of *Body Double* depicts a somewhat passive hero (Travolta's character so rendered both by his recent heroin use as well as his boss' strict orders to behave himself with the boss' wife) overwhelmed by a hyper-cinematic space, teeming with film references and a self-reflexive approach to musical performance. Just as the

¹⁶⁵ MacFarquhar, 152.

Pulp Fiction twist contest directly cues viewers to recall Travolta's frequent dance numbers in *Grease* (1978) and *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), so too does *Body Double* rupture its own diegesis by designing this sequence as a discrete music video (indeed, in his analysis of this passage in High Concept, Justin Wyatt notes that De Palma had intended the sequence also to be played on MTV to promote the film, set as it is to Frankie Goes to Hollywood's suggestive hit, "Relax"). Jack Rabbit Slim's is populated by doubles of such stars as Marilyn Monroe and Buddy Holly; *Body Double*'s club prominently features a model dressed to resemble Gloria Swanson as Norma Desmond in *Sunset Blvd.* (1950), and Jake is led through the club by Holly Johnson, lead singer of the band whose song is playing.

Jake ultimately meets Holly Body in the club's bathroom – a site of repeated vulnerability throughout *Pulp Fiction* – and their simulated sex, as with the Travolta-Uma Thurman number, is simultaneously a climactic moment of performance within the sequence as well as a notable film quote. Their embrace is shot with a 360 degree pan, complete with swelling orchestral music and a noticeably subjective use of blue-screen backdrop, cross cut with Jake's earlier kissing of the murdered woman, that deliberately recalls James Stewart's 'recreation' of the second Kim Novak character in *Vertigo*. It is revealing that the sequence in the purely Hollywood director's film is the more conceptually sophisticated: here, postmodernism makes explicit the sexual content of looking – and thus, cinema itself – previously implicit within the earlier thrillers of Alfred Hitchcock. Whereas *Vertigo*'s Scotty Ferguson is only coded as a 'filmmaker' in his control over Madeline/Judy's hairstyle, costume and even

lighting, *Body Double*'s Jake must explicitly enter the realm of filmmaking in order to meet the woman of his fantasies: at the precise moment he penetrates the ladies' room, intending to do the same to Holly, its mirrored portal swings to reflect the porno crew just off-screen. Though the Jack Rabbit Slim's sequence is also that of an infantilized male led into the sexualized pleasures of film itself, represented by the performance of a musical number with an alluring femme fatale, it is difficult to interpret beyond its suggestion of an independent filmmaker defiantly asserting that Hollywood films are 'cool'. Once again, Tarantino's postmodernism is mainstream where it could potentially be oppositional. De Palma's film satirizes such implied male viewers; Tarantino's proudly announces the director as himself one of them.

There is, of course, another crucial difference between the sequence in the Hollywood film and that of the independent *Pulp Fiction*: the Jack Rabbit Slim's sequence is predicated less on formal matters and instead emphasizes 'content' in the form of dialogue. We are reminded here, ultimately, that *Pulp Fiction*, despite its energetic allure, remains a low-budget 'indie' (as Polan notes, much of the film's budget was spent on constructing the Jack Rabbit Slim's set¹⁶⁶) whose only 'special' effect, as is the cliché, must necessarily be that which its characters say to each other. Much of the fifteen minutes spent at Jack Rabbit Slim's is a dinner conversation between Vincent Vega and Mia Wallace that would not be out of place in a film such as *Coffee and Cigarettes*.

¹⁶⁶ Polan, 69.

Tarantino's film, however, complicates this binary relationship – of Hollywood special effects and independent film dialogue – through the characters' repeated reference to their conversation itself. The sequence not only gives us compelling dialogue to appreciate, but also features dialogue that calls viewer attention to just how good the dialogue is: Mia's description of her *Fox Force Five* TV pilot creates suspense as to whether she will presently tell Vincent the joke it featured; after a conversational lull, Mia wonders aloud, "Why do we feel it's necessary to yak about bullshit in order to be comfortable?"; and finally, after instructing Vincent to think of something to say while she goes to the ladies' room, Mia responds to his efforts with "Ooh! This doesn't sound like the usual mindless, boring gettin'-to-know-you chitchat. That sounds like you actually have something to say." Indeed, suspense is built once more here, now around whether Vincent will in fact say what is on his mind, given its potentially offensive content; on the suggestion that the topic would be better left forgotten, Mia declares, "Trying to forget anything as intriguing as this would be an exercise in futility." Here, dialogue actually serves the same function as the special effects of a big Hollywood movie: this matter is not to be interpreted, it is simply meant to be enjoyed for its purely formal pleasures.

The most generous interpretations of *Pulp Fiction* would defend the apparent emptiness of the Jack Rabbit Slim's sequence by suggesting that the film's very structure presents a decisive shift from mainstream to oppositional postmodernism (and that this is why *Pulp Fiction* is achronologically ordered to present the

Hawthorne Grill confrontation between Tim Roth's and Samuel L. Jackson's characters as a climax). If the Jack Rabbit Slim's sequence contained the interpretive complexity of its *Body Double* equivalent, the impact of this finale would be lessened. As with so many exchanges in *Pulp Fiction*, the dialogue between Mia and Vincent includes discussion of a pop culture text (in this case, the hypothetical *Charlie's Angels* clone *Fox Force Five*), however, the only act of genuine textual interpretation – of reading – occurs at *Pulp Fiction*'s climax.

Forcing Ringo (Roth) to stare coolly down the barrel of his gun, Jules (Jackson) tells of his penchant for quoting the Bible to people before killing them:

I been sayin' that shit for years. And if you heard it, that meant your ass. I never gave much thought to what it meant. I just thought it was some cold-blooded shit to say to a motherfucker before I popped a cap in his ass. But ... now I'm thinkin' maybe it means you're the evil man and I'm the righteous man, and Mr. Nine Millimeter here, he's the shepherd protecting my righteous ass in the Valley of Darkness ... But that shit ain't the truth. The truth is, you're the weak and I am the tyranny of evil men. But I'm tryin', Ringo. I'm tryin' real hard to be the shepherd.

In a film so full of 'hollow' celebrations of low cultural texts, it seems significant that Jules' escape from its diegesis, walking out of the restaurant alongside the doomed Travolta character (an escape which is itself nevertheless likened to the TV show *Kung Fu*) can occur only after he is able to perform a close textual reading of the ultimate example of 'high' culture. *Kill Bill* ends similarly, with the Bride's daughter watching an old Tex Avery cartoon on a motel's television set; here, a magpie (like Tarantino, a species known for constructing a home from a collage of

glittering refuse it has collected) asserts his finer qualities, announcing, “the magpie is your friend. The magpie deserves your respect.” In both films a last-minute case is made for the ‘redemption’ of all that has gone on before. The viewer is directly asked to take matters more seriously than might previously have been indicated.

Effectively, Tarantino ends *Pulp Fiction* by looking forward, evoking Roland Barthes in doing so: “we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.”¹⁶⁷ For many critics of the film, this last minute attempt at (a ‘conversion’ to) content is likely insufficient, or, too little too late; indeed, Polan suggests “we might want to note how much of the Jules-redemption plot is rendered as a curiosity, one more part of the weird turn of events in a film given over to detours and unpredictability ... for all the avowed announcement of a conversion on his part, Jules is still caught up until the last moment in the flirtation with the unexpected.”¹⁶⁸ Such reactions to this moment in the film seem related to a certainty that the film and this character are not capable of being meaningfully religious: such other signifiers as the briefcase whose mysterious glowing contents can be reached only through the 666 combination lock are seen more as jokes than as substance. Jules’ final scene is more convincing, however, when placed in a context of being meaningfully interpretive rather than religious: a good Christian or no, Jules is shown to have reflected upon a number of alternative readings before settling upon that which feels like ‘the truth.’ Part of the meaning of this moment, I would suggest, is derived from

¹⁶⁷ Barthes, 148.

¹⁶⁸ Polan, 82-83.

its apparently autobiographical nature: here we have a seemingly indexical relationship to Tarantino himself.

To use another formulation of Barthes', it is worth recalling his distinction between studium and punctum in Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography. If the studium refers to an immediately accessible level of signification, the punctum is instead "this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me ... the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points ... A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)."¹⁶⁹ It is easy to imagine an immediate outcry over my invocation of Barthes' punctum in this case: how can this term, with its emphasis on extreme viewer subjectivity in catching, or being caught by, accidental details, possibly be relevant to a scene that is so clearly underlined for all in the audience as *Pulp Fiction*'s climactic turning point?

I would suggest that the term is applicable here because in this moment we are presented not with Quentin Tarantino as auteur but as auteurist, asserting the presence of meaning in a given director's body of work. That is to say, the author in this case is not making a meaningful 'statement' about religious faith through cinema; however, a crucial element in the Tarantino discourse is the suggestion that he himself has such a faith in cinema. Despite all of the artifice on display in his films, despite their attention to surfaces and self-reflexivity, these films do confront us with 'the real' – in the form of Tarantino himself. Indeed, such moments

¹⁶⁹ Barthes, 26-27.

throughout Tarantino's films do serve as 'puncta' that shatter their surface 'studia'. Moreover, to read such moments in this manner – as puncta rather than postmodern self-reflexivity that breaks the fourth wall only for the sake of doing so – is to locate the essence of the director's significance as a filmmaker in the public eye. This is the subtext of the Tarantino mythology; this is the manner in which his postmodernity is revealed to display the critical edge of Hollywood's oppositional mode.

I would argue that there are three dominant types of punctum to be found throughout Tarantino's work: his sensationalistic use of violence (and the word 'nigger'); his repeated emphasis on the act of storytelling, as performed by his characters; and, most importantly, his films' own display of the typically auteurist work of collecting film references in order to strengthen their arguments. Using each of these techniques throughout his films, Tarantino is able to ensure that their textuality is inseparable from his autobiography, and thus that their subtexts are themselves expressions of his own status as simultaneous auteur and auteurist. As a result, in Tarantino's oeuvre one can indeed find a meaningful statement about the loss of the canon as a relevant academic guide to this field.

Recall my earlier statement about the 'virtual auteur': if the meaning of the auteur has shifted in this period of contemporary filmmaking, so that the structures of film promotion threaten to render a director's function synthetic, simulated or virtual, then it remains for the 'real' auteur to subsequently participate in the ostensibly academic task of auteurism, rendering it, too, 'virtual' by means of its inaccessible, commodified nature. As we shall see, Tarantino represents an

infuriating development for Jonathan Rosenbaum not simply because the ‘unreality’ of his films displaces the meaningful content to be found in Jim Jarmusch’s work, but also because Tarantino represents the utter collapse of official and/or academic structures of taste. Later, I will explore the impact of this development upon our reading of independent film as what Pierre Bourdieu would call a cultural field; for now, it is worth taking a moment to consider in turn each of the ways in which Tarantino is able to effect this collapse.

The first, as mentioned earlier, has to do with Tarantino’s apparent desire “to create meaning by an imposition of will.”¹⁷⁰ The phrase is Dana Polan’s. Polan is referring here, in his article ‘Auteur Desire’, to the imposition of will that underlines an auteurist’s desire to compete with his fellow auteurists by displaying the most complete and convincing knowledge of his subject. As I will demonstrate in a moment, Tarantino is himself revealingly guilty of this; here, however, I am invoking Polan’s phrase out of context to characterize the manner in which Tarantino’s approach to controversial material is also about a display of, or an exertion of, his own will. Consider Polan’s description of the director’s use of the word ‘nigger’, in his BFI reader: “One senses that above all Tarantino fills his films with outrageous behavior (including racial attitude) because he *can* do so, because no one will stop him. Indeed, an oft-repeated story about Tarantino’s visit to the National Film Theater recounts how a black man in the audience angrily said that the

¹⁷⁰ Polan, 10.

director couldn't get away with using 'nigger', to which Tarantino calmly replied, 'I do.'¹⁷¹

A substantial portion of the discourse around Quentin Tarantino has to do with his sudden acquisition of (cultural) power and the willing ease with which he readily exerts it. Appearing on the Criterion Collection laserdisc release of *Pulp Fiction* (and replicated on the recent Miramax special edition DVD), Tarantino's introduction to scenes deleted from the film is quick to point out that such material would not comprise a so-called 'Director's Cut' of the film: he announces, smugly (there is no other word for it), "I made the movie I wanted to make the first time." As Polan points out, Tarantino is brazen about more than his use of a single word; he is consistently defiant about his own use of violence. Consider the following interview excerpts:

I love violence in movies, and if you don't, it's like you don't like tapdancing, or slapstick, but that doesn't mean it shouldn't be shown. My mom doesn't like Abbott and Costello or Laurel and Hardy, but that doesn't mean they shouldn't have been making movies.¹⁷²

It comes down to what some people like and don't like ... I'm not afraid of showing violence. I think it's very cinematic. I like Godard's quote in *Pierrot le Fou*: 'There is no blood in *Pierrot le Fou*. There is only the color red.'¹⁷³

As many have noted, a unilateral, self-serving display of will is itself an example of the American character, particularly as it applies to the nation's

¹⁷¹ Polan, 59 (emphasis mine).

¹⁷² Peary, 33.

¹⁷³ Peary, 64.

conservative role in international affairs – ignoring the Kyoto treaty on protecting the environment, or the United Nations in pursuing another war with Iraq – and so it is perhaps not surprising that such posture on the part of Tarantino has led a number of critics to claim that *Pulp Fiction*, and by extension ‘the Tarantino film’, is inherently right-leaning, ideologically. (One could certainly argue that Tarantino’s lack of concern about how others react to his use of the word ‘nigger’ is meaningfully isolationist and that such isolationism is ultimately the true ‘independence’ of Tarantino’s work: a resistance to the global, interdependent network of cinema at play in the Jarmusch oeuvre.) The suggestion seems to be that, ultimately, all Tarantino has accomplished is another evolution of the Hollywood action-crime film: just as *Die Hard* (1988), for example, emphasized the sensitized, fallible nature of its protagonist, the better to protect its latent Republicanism from being too closely identified with the monolithic (in every sense of the word) performances of Stallone and Schwarzenegger, so too has *Pulp Fiction* created a newly energized cinematic context for the genre’s conservatism.

As argued in Cineaste, Tarantino appears to have accomplished what Mike Davis has called ‘political transvestism’¹⁷⁴: where Davis was referring, however, to John Carpenter’s apparently right-wing vigilante film *They Live* (1988) actually containing a left-wing anti-capitalist critique, Cineaste’s position is that Tarantino’s role as an ‘indie’ director has allowed him to accomplish the reverse. As Pat Dowell put it, “Quentin Tarantino, the genius of the moment embraced by so many who

¹⁷⁴ Davis, 344.

would never vote Republican, is the hip version of the angry white guy who does.”¹⁷⁵ This ‘transvestism’ is enabled both by Tarantino’s insistent denial that his films are political (the word ‘nigger’ isn’t loaded because I say so; I include violence in my films just because I like it), as well as the apparently inherent ‘left-ness’ of independent film as a field. Consider Tarantino’s recent defense of, and explanation for, the violence in *Kill Bill*: during a lengthy New Yorker interview, the director suggested that such moments are, in fact, part of what make him a meaningfully international director. As the profile notes:

Because of the violence, Tarantino has made two different versions of *Kill Bill*, one for America and Europe, one for Asia. (Tarantino does not consider himself an American filmmaker. ‘America is just another country for me,’ he says.) ... [In Japan], audiences are used to gorier and more brutal scenes than anything a ratings board would permit in the US, and they take violence as he wants them to – as an especially thrilling and intricate form of choreography.¹⁷⁶

If part of Tarantino’s impact on contemporary cinema is the extension of the 1980s crime film’s conservative tendencies, then it is important to note that the results are now inescapably complex. This is not the laughable propaganda of Rocky draping himself, literally, in the American flag after defeating his Soviet foe, or even Holly Gennaro introducing herself proudly as ‘Holly McClane’ after her husband rescues her from German terrorists and Japanese businessmen in *Die Hard*. Instead, we are returned here to, naturally, the muddy ambiguities of the 1970s New Hollywood period; the conservatism on display throughout the recent Tarantino discourse recalls

¹⁷⁵ Dowell, 4.

¹⁷⁶ MacFarquhar, 154.

that of the liberal architect played by Charles Bronson in *Death Wish* (1974), or the sensitive Jon Voight in *Deliverance* (1972).

In these examples, right-wing ideology is the ‘repressed’ that always threatens to return with a vengeance, all the more potent for the extent to which liberal white males have struggled to keep it in check: the potency of such men in crisis lies in their very ambivalence. Unlike the subsequent ‘80s cartoon heroes, here was the uncomfortable suggestion that ‘we’ should all like to smuggle a gun on the subway and ‘blow away’ all those who threaten us. In the postmodern ‘90s, Tarantino is able to play with elements of both 70s and 80s American cinema: the cartoon-archetype characters are on display, while at the same time, their very stylization is itself abstracted – through their violence, though their use of ‘nigger’ and ‘bitch’ – so that the conflicted white male with which we are presented is now the author himself. As the same Cineaste article puts it, “*Pulp Fiction* has an agenda; it’s actually a very political film. In fact, it is precisely the film’s play on classic film noir, blaxploitation, and kung fu films, among other action genres, that leads one directly to the core of its politics: masculinity and the anxiety of the male hero.”¹⁷⁷

The author in this case is referring to the film as a single text, arguing that its use of genre conventions is directly, textually relevant to the characters on display. But the quote is also very revealing in its use of the word ‘play’ – what gives the game away, as it were, in the question of politics is the suggestion that the teasingly naughty qualities of sensationalism in Tarantino’s films are themselves the puncta

¹⁷⁷ Dowell, 6.

that bring viewers in direct contact with the auteur. Tarantino's own playful insistence that such elements are apolitical, present in his films only because he likes them, is precisely what communicates best the notion of masculine anxiety in this moment. The sudden appeal of Quentin Tarantino has everything to do with the suggestion that he himself is the repressed conservative springing forth from within the soul of the genteel liberal/'indie' auteur (or, it is his hand that erupts from the placid surface of water during the final frames of *Deliverance*).

Both Jarmusch and Tarantino depict characters who loaf, who endlessly converse, who sit there and reflect. The energy – the shock value – that so many celebrate in the latter's work, however, is the unpredictable, violent rupture of 'Hollywood' into this placid discourse of independent film. The suggestion is that Tarantino does what Jarmusch is afraid to do, or that all men who identify themselves as left-leaning secretly long for the unabashed, unilateral displays of power that have come to characterize the right.¹⁷⁸ Moreover, if Tarantino is accused of representing the 'worst' of the American character (both in terms of embracing its lowest cultural texts and their isolationist, exceptionalist role in global politics), he is able to ultimately transcend the debate by declaring himself to be, as he did in the previous New Yorker excerpt, 'post-American.' ('If you find my films too violent, that's because you are an American who is unable to process the international qualities of my work.') As Cineaste suggests, "There is in *Pulp Fiction* ... a kind of

¹⁷⁸ One might contrast here the pointed use of the word 'interdependent' to describe America's global position by both Ted Kennedy and Bill Clinton at the 2004 Democratic National Convention with Rudy Giuliani's emphatic rejection of Europe for its passive handling of WWII-era 'terrorism' at the Republican counterpart.

post-civil rights bravado ... [and] the movie's attitudes towards gender follow a similar pattern of displaying stereotypes under the guise of postfeminist sensibility."¹⁷⁹

The cumulative impact of such puncta, the ultimate result of his use of such politically loaded signifiers as violence and 'nigger', is the sense of Tarantino himself struggling to reset the terms of the debate ('Aren't we past this?'). The question that remains is whether or not Tarantino represents the potential of actually taking cinema someplace new, genuinely moving past exhausted conflicts, or instead offers a regressive, reactionary move back to persistent stereotypes and power relations. The answer cannot simply be found in this punctum alone, however; our direct access to Tarantino is also to be found through his repeated depiction of the writerly act.

Characters in Tarantino films are constantly telling each other stories, performing parts, even "turning life into narrative,"¹⁸⁰ as Polan suggests. Here too we are in the potential presence of Tarantino as a substitute for 'genuine' textual engagement: what is going on here? What is the significance of this? A number of sources, including the director himself, have suggested that there is a case to be made for Tarantino as a significant literary figure, as much as, if not more than a cinematic one. Tarantino has called *Reservoir Dogs*, for example, "the pulp novel I'll never write"¹⁸¹; many have commented on his films' structural play with flashbacks,

¹⁷⁹ Dowell, 5.

¹⁸⁰ Polan, 79.

¹⁸¹ Polan, 16.

chronology, chapter headings, etc. as essentially novelistic; and his key influences are often themselves printed rather than celluloid-based. Indeed, the opening frames of *Pulp Fiction* present a dictionary quote celebrating, in part, the medium of paper itself. Part of what is happening here appears to be a conscious effort to remove Tarantino from one canon (“American independent director, 1980-present”) and cement his place in another (“Writer of American Crime Fiction, undervalued in his own time but now celebrated as creator of highbrow works”).

The tenth anniversary DVD edition of *Reservoir Dogs*, for example, includes an elaborate special feature entitled ‘the film noir web’, which attempts to emulate the hypertextuality of the internet in order to cross-reference noir films with recurring noir characters, familiar noir actors, classic noir novels and films, as well as the great noir auteurs. The latter group, significantly, is presented as both ‘Writers and Directors’; here, such figures as Raymond Chandler, Ross MacDonal and Charles Willeford are to be found alongside Robert Aldrich, Mike Hodges and John Woo. On the same DVD, however, is a feature entitled ‘Class of ‘92’, exploring the film’s debut at the Sundance film festival alongside films from many of the fellow directors with whom Tarantino would later collaborate on *Four Rooms*. This feature seems designed to emphasize Tarantino’s exclusion from this ‘Class’, recounting the experiences of the director alongside recollections from a number of his peers. Part of its footage includes Tarantino’s memory of the explanation he received from the judges upon *Reservoir Dogs*’ failure to win any of the festival’s prizes: “Well, Quentin, you didn’t need our award. You’re set. Your career is set. Your talent was

there, Hollywood's knocking down your door; you don't need us.' What the fuck does that have to do with anything?"¹⁸² The director's blunt words are immediately legitimized by Amy Taubin, then a film critic for the New York Times: "If you follow that logic, it turns the prizes and the juries into a kind of charity event. 'We'll give it to some dull-but-worthy, needy film.'"¹⁸³ The Tarantino discourse, then, is about more than simply re-energizing the flaccid Sundance film festival and by extension the American independent film; it is about proposing and celebrating an alternate canon of its own. Equally, it is about the promotion of Tarantino as himself an authority with the power to establish such a canon; thus the lines between the official academic and the artist are blurred once more as Tarantino becomes simultaneously a producer of texts that belong in a film canon as well as a primary guardian of that canon.

Like *Pulp Fiction*, *Reservoir Dogs* includes a notable example of authoritative textual interpretation; here, however, it is featured not as a climax but instead more of an underlined prologue (indeed, the first line of dialogue is "Let me tell you what 'Like a Virgin' is about"). The resulting scene is memorable for Tarantino's diner monologue about the song's sexual subtext; however, it also includes another character's acknowledgment that an oldies radio station has recently enabled him to newly appreciate 'The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia'. "This is the first time I ever realized that the girl singing the song is the one who shot Andy!" he announces triumphantly. "I must have zoned out during that part before."

¹⁸² *Reservoir Dogs* DVD.

¹⁸³ *Reservoir Dogs* DVD.

So, simultaneously, Tarantino's first film presents us with a character enjoying a previously forgotten bit of pop culture from the 1970s and emphasizing the importance of close textual analysis in order to enjoy it fully. (The detail also acts as a particularly sly bit of foreshadowing, regarding the film's own ambiguities about who shoots whom during the memorable Mexican stand-off finale.) It would appear to be just as important to Tarantino that his viewers do not 'zone out' themselves when engaging in the textual nostalgia of his films; here, memory and attention are equally valued.

Nowhere in Tarantino's films is the need for such attention made more explicit than in a brilliantly sustained 'chapter' of *Reservoir Dogs* devoted to Mr. Orange (Tim Roth), the undercover cop amongst the thieves. A fellow detective has instructed him to learn 'an amusing anecdote about a drug deal', in order to cement his cover with the other criminals; when Orange balks at the effort required, he is told, "Just think about it like it's a joke, all right? You memorize what's important, the rest you make your own ... Now the things you gotta remember are the details. It's the details that sell your story. This particular story takes place in a men's room, so you gotta know all the details about that men's room." The sequence then becomes a montage devoted to Mr. Orange's increasingly confident telling of the story: scenes of the cop practicing at home, beginning to perform it for his partner, and eventually telling it to the gang of thieves are cut together both to compress time and to present the viewer with a single, complete enunciation of the narrative.

Remarkably, as Orange's tale reaches its climax, in which he finds himself stuck in the men's room with four police officers and their drug-sniffing dog, the montage builds to a spectacular flourish of its own: cross-cut with his relating the incident to the crooks is Mr. Orange himself in the fictitious men's room, performing the story in front of the cops, as if they are his audience. Orange has succeeded at creating this narrative world so well that the police now become semi-autonomous agents within it, one telling the others a story about a foolhardy driver nearly getting shot while reaching for the registration in his glove compartment. At this point, the scene has become so vivid that it does in fact generate suspense; despite knowing of the incident's fabrication, one is nevertheless sympathetic towards Mr. Orange as he struggles nervously to finish urinating while the narrating officer loudly recounts his yelling at the frightened driver. Orange's story builds, in fact, to a pleasing irony as the cop concludes, "Stupid fucking citizen doesn't know how close he came to getting blown away!"; this detail is amusingly contrasted with Orange's knowledge of his own close call, as well as the cops' stupidity in letting a drug-carrying thug slip past them in the men's room.

To be sure, the sequence, lasting a full ten minutes (of a ninety-nine minute film) is easily read as a self-reflexive tribute to storytelling itself, suggesting that the joy of Tarantino's work, for both director and viewer, lies in the power of narrative to bring vitality to tired genre clichés (cop perfects voice, costume before going undercover). In its own way, however, the sequence is also a tribute of sorts to the benefits of the Sundance institute, at whose labs *Reservoir Dogs* spent some time

being ‘workshopped’; in fact, some of this footage is also included on the recent DVD release. In the same way that Orange is seen working with a mentor to practice and develop his material before the polished end result is displayed, so too does the DVD’s footage present Tarantino and Steve Buscemi acting out scenes from the film in isolated rustic cabins. Orange’s story seems incongruous as performed in his cozy apartment, just as Tarantino and Buscemi seem literally ‘out of place’ confronting each other in the Rocky Mountains. Despite the film’s gangster genre context, then, there is nevertheless the suggestion that its independent nature is the partial source of its creativity and quality. The “Mr. Orange” chapter of *Reservoir Dogs* could in fact stand alone as a short film depicting an experiment in which the ‘indie’ mode of production is applied to the discourse of Hollywood crime film, with positive results. The field of independent film is shown here to be the source of quality, as well as, significantly, itself a primary signifier of that quality.

Simultaneously, it is notable that Tarantino here is performing the ostensible work of a (film) professor, instructing his students to read the text closely in order to fully appreciate the details it has to offer. In this respect, the second and third ‘puncta’ that express the indexical presence of Tarantino himself through his films are closely related. Consider the following words of Tarantino’s, excerpted from the DVD commentary for *True Romance* (1993). The passage in question occurs late in the film, as the director’s geeky alter ego, Clarence (Christian Slater), is conning a movie producer into buying the cocaine he has inadvertently acquired; while

watching the sequence, Tarantino seems struck by the power offered by knowledge of the Hollywood industry when dealing with its various ‘agents’:

One of the things about being a movie geek, and it was one of the biggest things that I noticed when I actually got to Hollywood ... [is that] the movie geek has two things in his corner: [one,] he probably knows a hell of a lot more about movies than most of the people, not the filmmakers, but the people who make movies. He probably has more of a history of what he likes and what he doesn't like in the history of movies. And it's not based on box office dollars, it's based on what [the geek] responds to. A lot of people in Hollywood – the agents, the executives and everything – they don't have strong opinions ... They're guided by information and they're guided by conventional wisdom. A movie geek will dedicate their entire life to cinema, not because they're making any money from it – most movie geeks never make any money from their passions and obsessions. Not for money, not for position, not for anything other than just the sheer love of it. And the only thing they have to show for this 100% devotion to an art form is their opinion. Their finely crafted, highly tuned opinion. And they'll fight for that to the death ... Having a strong opinion in Hollywood is like a superpower, because a lot of people don't. There's an old adage... the way it works in Hollywood is, when you go into a meeting, the one with the strongest opinion in the room wins. Well, I normally have the strongest opinion in the room, so that stuff kind of went okay [for me].¹⁸⁴

Part of what is initially impactful about this quote is the sheer volume of it, through which it simultaneously conveys Tarantino's passion and the potentially overwhelming manner in which he performs the presentation of his opinions. It is more important, however, as Tarantino's tribute to the attentive viewer of film; here is a romantic view not of the auteur but of the reader, of the auteurist.

To clarify: Tarantino is not here evoking auteurism specifically in the sense of a cinephile who structures his or her analysis around the figure of the director;

¹⁸⁴ *True Romance* DVD commentary.

however, he is capturing the competitive sense of the auteurist as one attempting to achieve the most complete collection, as suggested by Polan's 'Auteur Desire.' As Polan points out:

there are many copies of [Andrew Sarris'] The American Cinema like mine with its pencil lines crossing out the films viewed, offering thereby a veritable score card of viewing accomplishments and future screening goals ... auteurists [find themselves] caught up in a feverish agon to see more films, accumulate more listings ... there is frequently competition among collectors, a will to accumulate more examples and to master them better than others have.¹⁸⁵

The obvious distinction between Polan's auteurist and Tarantino is that the former lives in the shadow of "Sarris' hierarchies of value"¹⁸⁶; the legacy of auteurism is in its implicit – and often explicit – declarations of quality, ranking auteurs against one another, as well as auteur films against those made by mere 'metteurs-en-scene'. Tarantino, conversely, takes great joy in celebrating works that are so low in terms of genre and quality that their directors would never have been noticed by Sarris.

Both through interviews and by re-releasing films through his company, Rolling Thunder (itself named for a somewhat obscure '70s genre film), Tarantino has publicly declared his admiration of: the many forms of Corman-produced exploitation directed by Jack Hill, including sexploitation (*The Swinging Cheerleaders*, 1974), blaxploitation (*Coffy*, 1973), and biker film (*Switchblade Sisters*, 1975); the forgotten Spaghetti Westerns of Sergio Corbucci (*Django*, 1966; *The Long Silence*, 1968); and the colorfully gory 'splatter' horror films of Italy's

¹⁸⁵ Polan, 10.

¹⁸⁶ Polan, 10.

Lucio Fulci (*The Beyond*, 1981; *Zombie*, 1979). Concurrently, however, Tarantino has also expressed his love of the films of more visibly celebrated auteurs, such as Brian De Palma, Douglas Sirk and Howard Hawks; as the recent New Yorker tribute put it, “it’s hard to pin down Tarantino’s taste because he likes nearly everything.”¹⁸⁷

The article, intriguingly, makes the case that Tarantino’s intense celebrity enables him, implicitly, to present through his films an alternative canon to the one(s) enforced by established criticism: “whereas most critics are interested only in the difference between good movies and great movies, Tarantino finds the other end of the scale *equally* fascinating. He is interested in the phenomenon of what might be called the good-enough movie: the movie is basically terrible, but just good enough ... to make you care.”¹⁸⁸ Here is Tarantino as impetuous graduate student – the ‘good enough movie’ could be a particularly cheeky title for a conference panel on B films – expressing his interest in an area of cinema and accumulating as much data as possible about that area before presenting his findings.

By emphasizing the extent to which Tarantino finds equal fascination in texts both high and low, I mean to point out the peculiarity of the director’s position as an auteurist: here is the collector against whom it is impossible to compete. Whereas the academic auteurist is forced to specialize in order to survive, the field of cinema to which Tarantino devotes himself is quite simply the cinema itself. As the New Yorker article puts it: “When Tarantino’s detractors rage, then, about his asserting the influence of revered figures such as Godard and Howard Hawks as though he

¹⁸⁷ MacFahrquhar, 155.

¹⁸⁸ MacFahrquhar, 157 (emphasis mine).

were claiming membership in an elite canon, they are missing the point. It was not Tarantino but his fans who anointed him a canonical figure in that sense. Tarantino's own canon is so vast, so generous – indeed, so very nearly all-inclusive – that to claim membership in it amounts to little more than claiming to have finished a movie.”¹⁸⁹

Such auteurism on Tarantino's part not only takes place at the level of interviews, re-releases, or even the small annual film festival the director annually programs in Austin, it is on display in Tarantino's films as well. In many ways, Tarantino films are themselves fully stocked collections – of film references, of stock characters, of generic narrative tropes – offered in a context that seeks to display their worth simply by the fact of their mere existence as cinema, their inherent historical status as having existed, having occurred. One suspects that this inclusive attitude is precisely what polarizes opinions about Tarantino: on the one hand, he validates and legitimizes those who also adore the obscure, the low and the dismissed, while on the other hand he seems to negate the very concept of quality itself. Here we are in the presence of not merely virtual authorship but simulated auteurism as well, in which the surface adulation and close textual analysis are almost inescapably visible, but the analytic subtexts of the discourse are nowhere to be found. Tarantino's sole 'thesis' appears to be: “[the forgotten films I cherish] may not be the best movies ... but they are movies and, as such, are worthy of respect.”¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ MacFahrquhar, 157.

¹⁹⁰ MacFahrquhar, 157.

Inherent within the Tarantino discourse, then, is a debate about the value and meaning of auteurism as an endeavor, co-existing uneasily alongside consideration of the individual value of his own films. Just as Tarantino's consistently self-reflexive approach to narrative (through the endlessly emphasized moments of literal storytelling and interpretation amongst his characters) evokes a strict professor urging students towards sustained textual analysis, so too is Tarantino here usurping the project of canon building through auteurism long dismissed by the academy as a hopelessly retrograde enterprise. In many ways, then, the significance of Tarantino has much to do with his status as post-film school auteur: while Spielberg and Lucas' exposure to Kubrick, Kurosawa and John Ford informs their films, Tarantino proudly cites instead the texts of his formative 'grindhouse' experiences. As he has often put it in interviews, "People ask me if I went to film school ... and I tell them, 'No, I went to films.'"¹⁹¹

The ensuing debate hinges on the political significance of this popular auteurism: what is the meaning of its existence outside, even instead of, the academy? Rosenbaum would argue that the impact is a decline in global film culture, particularly as viewed from within the United States, and that Tarantino's entire career is an extreme manifestation of Kevin Smith's aforementioned quote about foreign films being safely filtered through American directors. To celebrate Tarantino (and even Jarmusch) in this manner becomes, in effect, a celebration of a middle-brow 'Book of the Month Club' / Reader's Digest approach to cinema. By

¹⁹¹ Peary, 127.

‘subscribing’ to Tarantino’s career, one is effectively encouraging him to seek out the little-known cult films of the past and re-present them without the boring parts for friendlier audience consumption, much as Shakespeare’s plays were popularly truncated and Bowdlerized throughout the 19th century American west. Herein lies the unpleasant result of the peculiar burden popularly placed on Tarantino’s emergent career: by expecting him to energize and redeem both the independent and Hollywood modes of cinema, he instead combines high and low into a defanged middlebrow. The narrative of Tarantino has become one of a promise that could not possibly be fulfilled, resulting in an auteurism without purpose, context, ideas.

Dana Polan cites Susan Stewart’s On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection to suggest there is an innate tendency within any form of auteurism to disregard history in favor of the interpretive will displayed by the auteurist. Once again, the similarities between the auteurist’s work and a Tarantino film are evident in both Stewart’s and Polan’s depiction of such texts as collections. As Stewart puts it, “the past is at the service of the collection ... The collection replaces history with classification, with order beyond the realm of temporality”¹⁹²; Polan reinforces the point by noting that “Whatever these objects might have meant in their original context matters less than the new meaning that can be created for them in the act of collection.”¹⁹³ The optimism of his conclusion, moreover, is a direct rejection of this ahistorical tendency: “We could, for instance,

¹⁹² Quoted in Polan, 10.

¹⁹³ Polan, 11.

imagine auteurism as itself a historical activity – arising in particular social and cultural situations as a way of responding to them.”¹⁹⁴

For all the citation and celebration of 1970s pop culture that is to be found in Tarantino’s work, there is surprisingly little meditation on why such films and TV shows were popular in their original context, or indeed how they might be made newly meaningful in the present (with *Jackie Brown* a notable exception, as will be shown in a moment). Instead, Tarantino offers the pleasures of a simplified auteurism, where the reader is newly empowered to do little more than please him or herself through obsessively attentive readings, from which only the Culture Industry itself is guaranteed to profit (via ticket and DVD sales). Polan’s book on *Pulp Fiction* notes the numerous internet websites devoted to fan-worship of Tarantino; though the subject deserves a study of its own, it seems more than coincidental that Tarantino’s celebrity status occurred simultaneously with the rise of such websites as Aint-it-cool-news. Here, and on sites like it, the promise of film debate as itself akin to fast food is made manifest: all the precision and intensity of academic work is on display, but without the healthy ‘granola’ of history, politics or ideology.

Indeed, the Tarantino discourse strives to be as apolitical as it is ahistorical; asked about his leanings in an interview with J. Hoberman, Tarantino evasively replies, “[Silence.] I guess I’m a liberal. Definitely not a conservative – I’m definitely not a Republican. Most people, [however] when they’re on one side or the other, don’t paint with a small brush, they paint with a f---in’ roller and wipe

¹⁹⁴ Polan, 15.

everybody into pansy liberals or dictator fascists.”¹⁹⁵ Though a salient point is being made here about the polarized nature of contemporary political debate that is probably even more relevant today than when first uttered in 1996, the quote is also intriguing as an apparent attempt on the director’s part to maintain his own ‘tough guy’ status. Here is an instance of Tarantino appearing to take his medicine by choosing the ‘correct’ side of the culture wars, while nevertheless immediately rejecting the potential suggestion that he is rendered somehow unmanly as a result of any left-leaning tendencies.

Moments such as this one present a fundamental rupture between the two halves of the Tarantino persona: on the one hand, he gleefully embraces violence as a two-fisted crime film auteur, scoffing at those who would deny his right to do so. On the other hand, he is also a somewhat infantilized figure by virtue of his wearing the crown of ultimate film geek: by being so closely aligned with the receptive love of cinema, rather than the active, virile role of creating cinema, Tarantino becomes a curious public figure whose ‘real’ biography is difficult to discern from either extreme. For every tale of Tarantino the film brat – punching Don Murphy, producer of the disavowed *Natural Born Killers* (1994), outside a Melrose Ave. restaurant, for example – there are many more that emphasize Tarantino as a hopelessly passive film addict.

In a recent Vanity Fair profile, for example, Peter Biskind refers to this side of the director in a manner that evokes the character of Norma Desmond, the former

¹⁹⁵ Peary, 163.

Hollywood icon haunting a Gothic mansion for much of *Sunset Blvd.* (1950). During the six year break between the release of *Jackie Brown* and the two volumes of *Kill Bill*, the director moved “into a grand home in the Hollywood Hills near Universal, which some of his friends derisively referred to as ‘the castle’. Recalls [his friend, Robert] Rodriguez, ‘Quentin spent most of a year designing and building this home theater. He said, “All my friends made a movie this year. I made a theater.” ’ ”¹⁹⁶

The cinephilia that was to occur here, however, appears to have been in control of Tarantino, rather than vice versa:

[he] went through periods of withdrawal. He’d hole up in his new home, stay up all night watching movies and smoking pot. ‘This was not Martin Scorsese watching Michael Powell’s movies, where there’s a reason to get excited about it,’ says an acquaintance who occasionally joined him. ‘I’m not even talking about something that’s kitschy or trashy – an A.I.P. picture. These were lousy made-for-TV movies. Flat, one-dimensional. And still his eyes would be glued to the tube. After a while, I realized you could literally be showing him anything – a white screen, even – and he’d be watching it like a kid with a pacifier, a lonely little boy in his living room, where he was safe. It was sad and beautiful at the same time.’¹⁹⁷

By the time of *Kill Bill*, even the making of a film represented a potentially submissive state for Tarantino; the cover of Rolling Stone recently promised to go ‘Inside Quentin’s obsession with Uma,’ while the title of the article itself, ‘A Magnificent Obsession,’ similarly depicted the director as analogous to the lead character in classic female melodramas.

¹⁹⁶ Biskind, 313.

¹⁹⁷ Biskind, 313.

Tarantino's consummate, consuming love for cinema here becomes a desire that can never totally be fulfilled; he is eternally in the shoes of Barbara Stanwyck at the close of *Stella Dallas* (1937), desperately watching her daughter's domestic bliss through a wrought-iron fence before a patriarchal cop pushes her back into the real world. In *Stella Dallas*, however, the cinephilia is merely metaphorical, the on-screen maternal love affirming the implied female audience's desire for fleeting catharsis through the film-going experience. This depiction of Tarantino, conversely, suggests that a movie geek's love is as powerful and fulfilling as that of a mother. The Rolling Stone profile, for example, suggests that his 'obsession' with Thurman, despite its apparently transcendent ability to stun him into momentary silence, is ultimately a desire for an obsession worthy of film history:

He found himself stumped when it came to talking about Uma ... and the question of how it is that she operates as his muse, which is what he calls her ... 'I don't know ... I mean, von Sternberg has Marlene Dietrich, Hitchcock had Ingrid Bergman, André Techiné has Catherine Deneuve. It's a special bond that I'm proud to have, and hopefully, one day, people will reference me and Uma like they do the others. But the thing about it is, it just kind of is, and there are certain things I don't really want to understand subtexturally (sic).¹⁹⁸

Cumulatively, there is the suggestion here that Tarantino himself is the innocent boy figure being led through Jack Rabbit Slim's (or the porno club/set from *Body Double*), experiencing cinema itself through youthful eyes that, crucially, represent the best potential to refresh and even redeem the medium at the same time.

¹⁹⁸ Hedegaard, 42.

One feature film of Tarantino's not yet discussed here is *Jackie Brown*; it is significant that much of the praise this film received was for its maturity, both in terms of its primary characters as well as its approach to film style. Both it and *Pulp Fiction* run approximately two and a half hours; here, however, the film's length is not related to an episodic attempt to combine multiple narratives into a single text. Instead, much of *Jackie Brown* is devoted to the leisurely delineation of characters. Though promoted around a central caper, the better to present it as a genre exercise consistent with Tarantino's other films, *Jackie Brown* is predominantly about the fifty-something title character's attempt at a dignified retirement, as well as her developing romance with a middle-aged bail bondsman, Max Cherry (Robert Forster).

Critical response to the film was not unanimous – many felt that its relaxed pace signified an inability to equal the energy of *Pulp Fiction* – but those who celebrated *Jackie Brown* did so by declaring it to be a meaningful step forward for the young director: towards maturity, towards greater dramatic coherence, towards reality. The apparent realism of *Jackie Brown* is inseparable from its engagement with maturity – the dramatic intensity that attends Jackie's attempt to rob her corrupt employer while cementing her relationship with the bail bondsman meant to be watching her, is directly connected to her age and, with it, the suggestion that her life will end in prison if she fails. *Pulp Fiction*'s moments of dramatic intensity, conversely, are derived from the audacity of their narrative invention (now he has to

stab a needle into her heart! now there is a torture chamber in the shop's basement!) as opposed to character complexity.

The qualified success of *Jackie Brown*, then, suggests there is a potential maturity of talent within Tarantino that is not yet fulfilled, in which his ability to render complete, multifaceted people evokes the extent to which such dramatists as Tennessee Williams were renowned for emphasizing character over plot. This dialectic of quality through characterization and excessive plotting as juvenile distraction, is perfectly encapsulated in Roger Ebert's *Jackie Brown* review: "A lot of crime films play like they were written by crossword puzzle fans who fill in the easy words and then call the hotline for the solution. (The solution is always: Abandon the characters and end with a chase or a shoot out.) Tarantino leaves the hardest questions for last, hides his moves ... and gives his characters dialogue that is alive."¹⁹⁹

As much as *Jackie Brown* was seen as a step forward for the director's ability to depict character, it was also praised for what many viewed as implicit political progress. Though many of the film's characters continue to casually use the word 'nigger', the fact of Jackie's blackness, and her potential inter-racial romance with Max, are not sensationalized, deployed for shock value or laughter. Indeed, Tarantino's tradition of self-reflexivity through casting here contributed to the film's status as oppositional postmodernism: by using Pam Grier in the title role, the film is able to emphasize its distance from the exploitation films in which she made her

¹⁹⁹ Ebert, rogerebert.suntimes.com.

name throughout the 1970s. Though occasional flourishes of music and dialogue remind viewers of this legacy, such moments are not mere nostalgia: they instead conversely demonstrate the level of *Jackie Brown*'s quality. Here, finally, is postmodern citation as historically self-aware interpretive work.

In this film, Pam Grier's shirt is not ripped off (before a women's-prison catfight); she does not lose her temper and yell a self-righteous tirade against her male oppressors; indeed, she is barely required to raise her voice. This is pointedly resistant to the fantasies of superhero avengers that are so pervasive throughout blaxploitation cinema; instead, the dearth of options available to Jackie due to her age and race are simply, elegantly equated with the similar vacuum that has faced and continues to face Pam Grier herself for the same reasons (and despite her considerable talent). By affirming its title character's dignity, *Jackie Brown* also reinforces that of its star; here, then, postmodernism enables us to pay closer retroactive attention to the exploitation films of Grier's past, despite their implicit suggestion that we 'zone out' and receive their simpler pleasures. This is the myth-shattering that Barthes is encouraging when he writes of the need for the birth of better readers in 'The Death of the Author.'

But what of the Tarantino myth? The aforementioned Vanity Fair profile suggests that the mixed reaction to *Jackie Brown* is what drove him to inhabit his castle as a recluse. Here, the mythology of the director as a character locates him in an American literary tradition that is far more extensive than the crime film contexts in which he's typically placed. Consider the assessment of R.W.B. Lewis, in The

American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century: “We may suppose that there has been a kind of resistance in America to the painful process of growing up, something mirrored and perhaps buttressed by our own writers, expressing itself in repeated efforts to revert to a lost childhood and a vanished Eden, and issuing repeatedly in a series of outcries at the freshly discovered capacity of the world to injure.”²⁰⁰ Lewis’ subject is the deployment of what he calls ‘Adamism’ throughout American literature; it is particularly revealing that the media’s depiction of Tarantino locates him, effectively, not within the canon of great American writers, but instead as himself a fictive character within an extensive national tendency of fiction.

As depicted in Biskind’s profile, Tarantino is a figure who excels at playful artistic creativity within the world whose borders are defined by the extent of his own film knowledge. Upon attempting to set foot outside this world with *Jackie Brown* (indeed, its leisurely pace, oppositional postmodernism and talkative slackers evoke the style of Jim Jarmusch more than what is commonly thought to be Tarantino’s) and, in so doing, embrace reality, Tarantino came uncomfortably close to failure, racing back to the formalism offered by *Kill Bill*. As Biskind put it:

[*Jackie Brown* is] a more mature work than *Reservoir Dogs* or *Pulp Fiction*. It is also quieter and gentler; thanks to Grier and Forster, Tarantino gets more deeply into his characters ... [however,] he seems to feel he let his fans down ... The same anxieties that some say made for the lengthy stretch between *Pulp Fiction* and *Jackie Brown* followed ... In some ways, [*Kill Bill*] is the anti-*Jackie Brown*, splashy, with no more than a smattering of the signature Tarantino dialogue, and no middle aged actors save for [David] Carradine ... As

²⁰⁰ Lewis, 129.

one friend put it, 'Quentin has always felt that his core audience is adolescents, geeky boys. He wanted to give one to his fans, something with tons of action, motorcycles and sexy chicks.' The director himself sees *Kill Bill* as his true follow-up to *Pulp Fiction*.²⁰¹

In the figure of Tarantino, then, one can recognize a conflict of American master narratives. On the one hand, he defies the conventional understanding of Sundance and the mode of independent film promoted there, in that *Jackie Brown*, made at a moment of extreme stability as a 'house director' for Miramax, most closely embodies the institute's defining values. That is, Sundance is meant to be the type of place to which one flees upon (or ideally, before) tiring of a career making violent *Pulp Fictions* for Hollywood; the natural environment is equated with the genteel pace and placidity of character-driven films that resist heavy plotting. On the other hand, Tarantino's career suggests a desire to run from the filmmaking mode that takes credit for having given birth to him; this desire to run in itself is part of what defines him as a meaningfully American figure. Consider Lewis' assessment of the "noble but illusory myth of the American as Adam," in light of Biskind's description of Tarantino's response to *Jackie Brown*:

What some novelists were to discover was that the story implicit in American experience had to do with an Adamic person, springing from nowhere, outside time, at home only in the presence of nature and God, who is thrust by circumstances into an actual world and an actual age. American fiction grew out of the attempt to chart the impacts which ensued, both upon Adam and the world he is thrust into.²⁰²

²⁰¹ Biskind, 314-315.

²⁰² Lewis, 89.

The realism and maturity of *Jackie Brown* seem very much like the ‘actual world and actual age’ with which the Adamic Tarantino has struggled; by replacing Lewis’ reference to ‘nature and God’ with Tarantino’s oft-professed worship at the altar of The Church of Cinema, the parallels are striking.

Lewis, as with many of his contemporaries, would likely suggest that Tarantino’s significance as a key figure of our present discourse on independent film will not lie in his future ability to resolve such a conflict; rather, it is already defined by his very embodiment of that conflict. (Indeed, such a constant, essential tension between playful, creative freedom and controlled aesthetic rigor, between the modes of Hollywood and independence is more consistently visible within the recent career of Steven Soderbergh, as we shall see.) Leslie Fiedler is one such figure of American Studies who would likely find greater significance in *Jackie Brown* itself than would Lewis, whose work is instead largely applicable to Tarantino as himself an American character. Fiedler’s Love and Death in the American Novel paints a portrait of national literature that consistently dramatizes flights such as Tarantino’s, from the subjects of age, race and mature love, in favor of violent escapism directed at ‘geeky male adolescents’ (or, in Fiedler’s phrase, “our classic literature is a literature of horror for boys”²⁰³); moreover, Fiedler is better able to articulate the relationship between the appeal of youth within the text and the aura of youth around it.

Fiedler’s American literature is one that consistently celebrates the new, the innovative, the vigorous in order to reaffirm the equivalent qualities of the nation

²⁰³ Fiedler, 29.

that produced it: “between the novel and America there are peculiar and intimate connections. A new literary form and a new society, their beginnings coincide with the beginnings of the modern era and, indeed, help to define it.”²⁰⁴ By equating the nation and its fiction so closely, Fiedler is also able to suggest that the avoidance of history characteristic of the latter is also notably endemic throughout the former: as he puts it, “the American writer ... is forever beginning, saying for the first time (without real tradition there can never be a second time) what it is like to stand alone before nature, or in a city as appallingly lonely as any virgin forest.”²⁰⁵ This repeated emphasis on the new and the youthful seems inherently related to an American identity that repeatedly declares its own ‘loss of innocence’ (after September 11th, Vietnam, World War II, The Civil War, etc.) in order to suggest, partly, that it has always been there to lose.

The present day effects of such historical ignorance are almost painfully clear as I write this: a current debate over the potential significance of gay marriage appears to rest on the immutable definition of the word, conveniently forgetting that the nation has already redefined the term on a number of occasions. The literally ‘inhuman’ attitude to black people (first as slaves, then as free citizens who might want to marry whites) exempted them from legal marriage until the 1960s; current attempts to block homosexuals from marrying on the basis of an attempt to retain the institution’s own innocent purity now appear as darkly ironic hypocrisy.

²⁰⁴ Fiedler, 23.

²⁰⁵ Fiedler, 24.

The suppressions of liberty contained within our current Patriot Act are not without precedent, either; Howard Zinn's A People's History of the United States reminds us, for example, that "the Sedition Act of 1798 ... made it a crime to say or write anything 'false, scandalous and malicious' against the government, Congress, or the President, with intent to defame them, bring them into disrepute or excite popular hatreds against them."²⁰⁶ Nevertheless, the primary justification for the extreme measures of the Patriot Act is consistently cited as the new kind of enemy to be found in the new kind of war we are fighting.

If one's response to all this is to exclaim, 'Why do we have to go through this all over again?', a large part of the answer has to be the extent to which American culture retains an ideology of the endless present. The sudden appearance of Quentin Tarantino and with him his own 'rebirth of cinema' suggests his significance as an auteur is but the latest manifestation of this ongoing national conflict. Now, one debates as to his engagement with the older texts to which his movies refer: is this an actual engagement with history, or instead an attempt to block, rewrite, suppress it? So too with the inherent Adamism of independent film in the Sundance era: the cable channel makes the occasional concession to history by programming a Samuel Fuller film from the 1950s, but otherwise this is largely a forward-looking discourse. As Peter Biskind writes in Down and Dirty Pictures, "indie cinema is almost exclusively a cinema of first films,"²⁰⁷ indicting the discourse's ultimate inversion of its own romantic ideals: by constantly watching for the birth of a new savior who will bring

²⁰⁶ Zinn, 100.

²⁰⁷ Biskind, 474.

redemption to the world of film, recently celebrated directors are conveniently discarded as they attempt to build a substantial body of work – that which was formerly the key element required of its subjects by the auteur theory.

As Fiedler has suggested, ‘Without real tradition, there can never be a second time.’ It is for this reason that one is able to imagine Fiedler’s championing of *Jackie Brown* for its greater honesty in dealing with the past, and the effects of that past upon the present. For Fiedler, the American author’s relentless drive to begin is, implicitly, sexist – within the romanitization of the Edenic natural world as a place of male adventure and rebirth there is also a rejection of the essentially maternal component of creation. In his words, “Our great novelists ... tend to avoid treating the passionate encounter of a man and woman ... Indeed, they shy rather away from permitting in their fictions the presence of any full-fledged, mature women, giving us instead monsters of virtue or bitchery, symbols of the rejection or fear of sexuality.”²⁰⁸ If *Jackie Brown* does embody the type of three-dimensional female character to which Fiedler is referring here, then it is worth considering the extent to which she represents an evolution in Tarantino’s talents by comparing her to equivalent figures throughout *Pulp Fiction*.

In many ways, *Pulp Fiction* is a film surprisingly full of romance, largely in the form of several devoted couples amidst the myriad outrageous narrative developments. The film opens with ‘Pumpkin’ and ‘Honey Bunny’ sweetly declaring their love for one another before threatening to ‘execute’ all of their fellow diner

²⁰⁸ Fiedler, 24.

patrons; Mia Wallace is simultaneously shown to be devoted to her husband Marcellus while also relatively demure in her flirtation with Vincent (after his phallic penetration of her by hypodermic needle, she offers him a shy acknowledgment of their earlier date during Butch's boxing story); Butch himself is particularly sensitive to his girlfriend Fabienne, remembering to ask if she found some pie while he has been off retrieving his watch; and even minor characters are shown to have love in their lives (Eric Stoltz' drug dealer lives with multiply pierced Rosanna Arquette, Harvey Keitel's 'Wolf' makes time to playfully tease his girlfriend Julia Sweeny after rescuing Jules and Vincent, and Jules refers to a 'vegetarian girlfriend' while debating the merits of pork).

Significantly, however, none of these details is addressed thoroughly; they are simply the signifiers of a complete universe extending beyond the borders of the frame. Much of *Pulp Fiction*'s appeal lies in the verisimilitude of its fully developed 'world', which fans can repeatedly visit. When allusions to romance appear throughout the film, they tend to be coy, patronizing, adolescent: Mia and Vincent have a 'first date', Butch infantilizes Fabienne with his baby-talk, and Pumpkin similarly reduces herself through her panic at seeing her boyfriend threatened by Jules, her attempted bravado of "Don't you hurt him!" quickly followed by "I have to pee!" Many have pointed out the derivative influence of the sitcom upon the sequence in which Jules and Vincent accidentally blow a friend's head off in their car and must clean up the mess before an authority figure (here, a friend's wife) catches them – a reliable formula of children getting into trouble upon parental

absence, left to desperately fix things before their return. Much of the film's depiction of romance is similarly at the level of the crush, the first date, the chaste exchange of banter.

Jackie Brown is scarcely more explicit in its treatment of sexuality; however, its progress is nevertheless felt at the level of self-awareness regarding fear of that sexuality as a primary subject. Jackie's competence and self-assurance at both her deception and her pursuit of Max are shown to scare the passive bail bondsman: before inviting him to join her on a celebratory vacation she asks, "Are you afraid of me, Max?" His confirmation of this fact then stands as his primary reason for remaining alone, or at least with no one but his muscular African-American bodyguard for companionship in the pursuit of bail jumpers. Fiedler's thesis throughout much of Love and Death in the American Novel is derived from an earlier article entitled "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey," which suggested a bond between infantilized black and white men as consistent substitute for depicting true heterosexual union; similarly, Max's resignation to life on the fringes of crime at the close of this film echoes Jules and Vincent's boyish exit (complete with T-shirts and short pants) at the close of *Pulp Fiction*. Even *Reservoir Dogs* ends with an instance of 'male marriage', as Roth's Mr. Orange confesses his identity to Keitel's Mr. White despite his imminent rescue.

At the final observation, then, Tarantino's cinema may be considered to offer progress for such American archetypes through its implicit rejection of the virginal wilderness as offered by the Sundance selections that preceded it; it is nevertheless a

filmography that speaks to a deeper national tradition than is readily apparent. Here, postmodern self-reflexivity equates the formal play of the director's citations with the adolescent play of his characters' criminal games, resulting in a cumulative fear of reality and of female sexuality, as well as a naively optimistic belief in a progress for American history. The question remains as to whether the career of Steven Soderbergh offers a visible alternative to this trend, whether he embodies nothing beyond a more tasteful manifestation of precisely the same concerns, or is at last a figure through whom the film industry is able to offer only virtual progress, a choice that is in fact no choice at all.

CHAPTER FOUR
FUNCTIONS OF THE INDEPENDENT AUTEUR
(SYNTHESIS: STEVEN SODERBERGH)

The recent excitement around *Kill Bill* notwithstanding, it is the renaissance of Steven Soderbergh's career as a director that has dominated mainstream coverage of the American independent film; since his return to critical favor upon the release of *Out of Sight* in 1998, his narrative has largely usurped Tarantino's. That it was the comedically violent Elmore Leonard adaptation *Out of Sight* that appeared to accomplish this is an important irony worth addressing later. For the moment, it is worth reviewing the Soderbergh-narrative as it is commonly told by the press. The story consistently begins in 1989, with a twenty-six year old director making a shocking success at both the Sundance (then still the United States Film Festival) and Cannes film festivals with his first feature, *sex, lies and videotape*. A certain amount of controversy was generated when Soderbergh's film received the Palme d'Or at Cannes, much of it directly generated by fellow competitor Spike Lee, whose *Do the Right Thing* had lost. Many have since suggested that Soderbergh's receipt of the top prize was intended to reward the young American director for his evocation of French cinema traditions; Eric Rohmer is but one of many such filmmakers suggested as a potential inspiration for the sexual candor, character emphasis and stylistic understatement of Soderbergh's film. *sex, lies and videotape* would go on to a profitable release that summer amongst such Hollywood blockbusters as *Batman* and *Lethal Weapon 2*, and its critical status would be cemented by an Academy Award nomination for Best Original Screenplay.

For several years after this initial success, Soderbergh was increasingly viewed as a director failing to live up to his substantial early promise: his subsequent *Kafka* (1991), *King of the Hill* (1993) and *Underneath* (1995) were consistent box office failures and generally met with critical apathy. Soderbergh's considerable talents were consistently visible within the films; however, they were equally consistent at being difficult to fully embrace – the intelligence behind the films rendered them, for most critics, odd and off-putting. Soderbergh himself later spoke of his own lack of personal engagement during the making of *Underneath*, a 'neo-noir' remake of *Criss Cross* (1949) for Universal Studios. What happened at this point is now the stuff of legend for those interested in 'indie' films: Soderbergh wrote, directed, photographed and starred in *Schizopolis* (1997), a microbudgeted film whose status as 'personal' was compounded by the casting of his ex-wife, Betsy Brantley, as the increasingly distant spouse of Soderbergh's own character. Casting himself in the lead also reinforced the notion of *Schizopolis* as especially personal to the director. The budget of *Schizopolis* was "a mere \$250,000 – about one-fourth the budget of *sex, lies and videotape*,"²⁰⁹ as one journalist noted; indeed, much of the film's significance would eventually be discussed in terms of its lack of immediate impact.

Schizopolis was not a box-office success; it barely received a theatrical release. When promoted at the Cannes festival as a 'mysterious' new film from the director once championed there, it was met with further critical indifference. Nor

²⁰⁹ Kaufman, 89.

was it particularly well-reviewed back home; for many critics, it was yet another mark of the director's on-going creative descent. The New York Times suggested that Soderbergh had "evolved from the much-admired director of *sex, lies and videotape* into the perpetrator of a goofy, ineffectual prank ... [his] offbeat intelligence is tantalizingly evident even as he sinks the film with shallow tricks."²¹⁰ Todd McCarthy's Variety review seemed more prescient, calling *Schizopolis* "as mangy, indecipherable and from-the-hip as his previous films are precise, literate and meticulously calibrated ... Ultimately, it is less interesting to try to discern what the film is about than it is to imagine what drove Soderbergh ... to make such a cranky, disgruntled effort."²¹¹

McCarthy's remarks are particularly significant here. Firstly, he positions any potential discourse around the film in the shadow of the discourse around Soderbergh himself; following Corrigan's formulation, this is not an auteurist reading of a film but instead a direct admission that the auteur is himself the more meaningful text. Second, McCarthy here predicts what has since become the popular myth around the film, namely, that it is an expression of Soderbergh's 'cranky' and 'disgruntled' status. *Schizopolis*, upon its release, was not so much a quintessential auteur's film in that it represented the familiar thematic and formal obsessions of a single originating artist, instead, it encouraged and effectively pre-validated such responses as McCarthy's by making the auteur its explicit subject; here was a film

²¹⁰ Maslin, B1.

²¹¹ McCarthy,

<http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117905314.html?categoryid=31&cs=1&query=Schizopolis>

that was about nothing if not the relationships, interests and enthusiasms of Steven Soderbergh. Frustrated by the creative rut in which he found himself, despite having already achieved the power to make ‘quirky’ personal projects such as *King of the Hill* and *Underneath* at a major Hollywood studio, Soderbergh embarked upon a Thoreauvian retreat into the creative garden of fully independent filmmaking. Having renewed his artistic energies thusly, Soderbergh was then able to mount an impressive ‘comeback’ with *Out of Sight*, one of the best reviewed films of its year.

What followed was an equally impressive body of work, in which Soderbergh was able to attain what for many is almost a cliché of a major American filmmaker’s dream career: alternating between small independent features (i.e. personal ones) and larger studio productions (made primarily to maintain financial viability in the business). *The Limey* (1999) was followed by *Erin Brockovich* (2000); next, *Traffic* (2000) followed by *Ocean’s Eleven* (2001); and finally, *Full Frontal* (2002) by *Solaris* (2002). By the time of these most recent features, it was increasingly difficult to identify what made some of these choices personal and others populist: *Full Frontal* was aggressively promoted by Miramax as a long anticipated ‘sequel’ to the prior hit *sex, lies and videotape*, whereas 20th Century Fox’s expensive science-fiction Thanksgiving release *Solaris* was a quiet remake of a little-seen Russian film adapted from a Polish novel. Similarly, Soderbergh’s dual Oscar nominations for best director (an accomplishment not achieved since Michael Curtiz did it in 1938) were often interpreted as validation of his now bifurcated talents: with *Erin Brockovich*, he took a potentially empty Julia Roberts ‘feel-good’

vehicle and invested it with character and realism, while with *Traffic* he conversely elevated a potentially didactic instance of political prose by energizing it with genre pleasures and Hollywood star power.

If Jarmusch represents a coolly distant intelligence, and Tarantino instead suggests the passionate play of a hot-headed child, then for many Soderbergh can now signify a satisfying completion to the narrative of post-Sundance independent film through his ability to synthesize the best of both directors. What is perhaps even more impressive, and particularly relevant to our present purposes, is that Soderbergh appears to have utilized the discourse's fixation on the auteur in order to negotiate for himself a career in which he is not meaningfully required to *be* an auteur. How Soderbergh was able to achieve this and the significance of this achievement are the focus of the remainder of this chapter.

Consider that the differences between *sex, lies and videotape* and *Out of Sight* on the surface suggest not so much a figure of synthesis but instead a savvy businessman attempting to follow and emulate important market trends. Soderbergh's first film in many ways embodies the quintessential traits of the 'granola indie' film championed at Sundance throughout the 1980s: its aesthetic values are based primarily in the literary qualities of script and performance and its Baton Rouge setting emphasizes a region of the country not commonly depicted in Hollywood film. By the time of *Out of Sight*, nine years later, Soderbergh was now working with Jersey Films, a production company that had funded both *Pulp Fiction* as well as the subsequent hit *Get Shorty* (1995), adapted from yet another Elmore

Leonard novel.²¹² It might appear as if Soderbergh is simply able to emulate the styles and subjects of Jarmusch and Tarantino, when each is in favor, in order to leverage his own success, and there is little reason to suggest this is inaccurate.

It is not, however, the full story; the recent success of Soderbergh is ultimately far more revealing about the film industry's self-regulation than it is about the agency of any single figure within it. In many ways, this is precisely the problem with any retroactive engagement with *sex, lies and videotape*: it conveys little more than the smooth running of a healthy American film culture, able to locate and nurture small, talent-bearing films alongside opposing corporate products. Upon revisiting the film, one is likely to find oneself wondering what the fuss was all about; such is the power of the 'indie' discourse that *sex, lies and videotape* might be considered shocking and revolutionary upon its release when it is ultimately conservative, comforting and reminiscent of other 'great works.' In some ways this is suggested by the film's title alone, with the particular combination of quality, controversy and (potential) nudity that has inspired curious Americans to visit art house theaters since the 1950s.

Others have suggested that the film's connection to the post-war era is far more substantial than this, identifying *sex, lies and videotape* as a descendant of topical taboo-challenging melodramas ranging from *Picnic* (1955) to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966). The cultural critic Greil Marcus, for example, noted the early presence of synthesis in Soderbergh's work when he wrote that "ultimately,

²¹² James Mottram offers a lengthy comparative analysis of *Out of Sight* and *Jackie Brown* in his study, *The Sundance Kids: How the Mavericks Took Back Hollywood* (pp. 229-238)

sex, lies and videotape is very '50s – therapist, adultery, justice done, Beat refusal of capital letters in the title – and very '80s – *thirtysomething* without production values.”²¹³ That the film is able to meaningfully evoke 1950s American cinema at all is a crucial part of what allowed it to stand out during a period in which many independent films were deliberately attempting to evoke (and perhaps even on some level restore) the more visibly daring successes of the '60s and '70s. Certainly, *sex, lies and videotape* has also been compared to many of these films, especially those that fit into the aforementioned 'drifter-rebel' category: *Five Easy Pieces*, *Carnal Knowledge* (1971), *The Graduate*, etc. In Soderbergh's first feature, however, one can recognize already an attempt to reconcile or synthesize the two periods through character conflict.

Peter Biskind asserts in Down and Dirty Pictures that the film's success is directly attributable to its “diagrammatic, audience-flattering Manichaeism”, which clearly set a Reagan-era evil yuppie, John (Peter Gallagher) against a sensitive, creative soul, Graham (James Spader), clearly meant to represent Soderbergh.²¹⁴ To read the film as so directly autobiographical, however, is just as clearly problematic: one could more persuasively argue that both men represent sides of the director since he is simultaneously a gentle, artistic figure as well as a successful white male who possesses the power and influence to get a movie made. In this sense, the conflict between the two men is already evocative of the contrast between the idealized yet isolated world of independent film and that of a studio system interested in profit

²¹³ Marcus, 31.

²¹⁴ Biskind, 41.

above all else. Soderbergh has himself suggested in interviews that all of the film's characters cumulatively represent "himself cut into quarters"²¹⁵, and that his own habits in relationships evoked Gallagher's character before he chose a period of compensatory withdrawal that mirrors that of Spader's Graham (as well as prefigures the 'withdrawal' symbolized by making *Schizopolis*).

If the film's potential autobiography is bifurcated, then so too is its engagement with history about a conflict between periods; *sex, lies and videotape* here becomes a means to synthesize the '50s-era melodramas of repression with the urgency and controversy of their counterparts in the following decades. Consider: John's vanity, avarice and display of male entitlement as justification for an affair evokes Fred MacMurray's charming cad in *The Apartment* (1960); Andie McDowell's stifled housewife, Ann, struggles to express her sexuality as do so many women in such Douglas Sirk films as *All That Heaven Allows* (1955); even the Thoreau-quoting gardener played by Rock Hudson in that film anticipates Graham, with direct reference to Walden replaced by a monologue in which Spader's character extols the virtues of only possessing one key.

Both figures suggest a desire to 'drop out' of the rat race and return to a simpler (and therefore implicitly more noble) way of life; as Graham tells Ann at dinner, "I like having just the one key. It's clean." This complexity of references throughout *sex, lies and videotape*, however, is expressed in the fact that the only key Graham owns is for his car: when John and Ann suggest that he find an apartment in

²¹⁵ Kaufman, 9.

Baton Rouge, he bristles visibly at the idea. John charges that Graham has a desire to retain the option of driving away from somewhere as quickly as possible, and Graham's only response is the feebly optimistic "Or to somewhere." Here is the suggestion of Jack Nicholson's Bobby Dupea thawing himself after a self-imposed Alaskan exile at the climax of *Five Easy Pieces*. Ultimately, then, the success of *sex, lies and videotape* is largely ideological; here is a significant American film of the 1980s that, like *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Back to the Future* (or even, as Marcus noted, TV's *thirtysomething*) defines its own era through an ambiguous relationship to the cultural conservatism of the Eisenhower era as well as the perceived excesses of the 'Vietnam' years. Such allusive engagement with the past, and synthesis of disparate elements will later be seen in such post-*Schizopolis* Soderbergh films as *The Limey* and *Ocean's Eleven*, leading one to wonder how valid the prevalent 'two-act' depictions of his career truly are.

sex, lies and videotape is considered by many the quintessence of a 'zeitgeist' film, more notable for its relationship to a specific historical context than its innate aesthetic qualities. Soderbergh's sudden, intense celebrity status, combined with the hint at autobiographical context throughout his first feature, easily resulted in what might be called 'auteur pressure.' As his subsequent films failed to please audiences or critics, however, the label 'auteur' became increasingly difficult for many writers to use when referring to Soderbergh. For example, Geoff Andrew's *Stranger than Paradise: Maverick Filmmakers in Recent American Cinema*, first published in 1998, is forced to describe the director in this way: "with no discernibly consistent style or

thematic preoccupations, it is hard to make convincing claims that he is an *auteur* while his recent decision to withdraw from commercial filmmaking into more experimental, low-budget work has ensured, somewhat ironically, that he is no longer regarded as a significant player on the American independent scene.”²¹⁶

The speed with which Andrew’s words became outdated (recall that *Out of Sight* was also released in 1998) is perhaps the most potent indicator of the shift in attitudes towards film auteurs in publishing today. Compare the near-immediate obsolescence of Andrew’s assessment of Soderbergh to the original publication of Hitchcock/Truffaut in 1967. At this time, the book’s subject had been working in film for roughly forty-five years and had made fifty-six features; when it was revised in the early 1980s, after Hitchcock’s death, the final tallies had expanded to represent a career of fifty-nine features spanning six decades. Truffaut’s work was already seen as authoritative in the late 1960s, fifteen years before an update rendered it decisively comprehensive. What has happened between the release of Truffaut and Andrew’s books?

The answer lies in a combination of the Hollywood industry’s promotion of auteurs as texts, as well as the publishing industry’s attempts to capitalize, as quickly as possible, on this trend. Andrew’s chapter on Soderbergh seems not so much unable as unwilling to attempt an auteurist analysis of his immediate films after *sex, lies and videotape*; the suggestion seems to be that they are not of worth *because* they do not contribute to the master narrative of Soderbergh’s ascension as a

²¹⁶ Andrew, 257-258 (his emphasis).

‘significant player on the American independent scene.’ For Andrew, *Kafka* and *King of the Hill* are trees that fell soundlessly in forests; when he suggests that it is difficult to build a case for the director as an auteur, my response is to suggest that he is simply not interested in doing so, nor were his publishers inclined to encourage this.

One year after the publication of Stranger than Paradise, it was well-known that Soderbergh’s decision to renew himself with *Schizopolis* had led to the visible success of *Out of Sight*; indeed, 1999 saw the publication of Getting Away With It: Or The Further Adventures of the Luckiest Bastard You Ever Saw, in which the director’s journal entries of 1996-1997 are interspersed with a long-form interview between Soderbergh and his declared inspiration for this renewal, Richard Lester. It does not seem accidental that Getting Away With It itself represents an attempt to synthesize the two aforementioned approaches to publishing on auteurism. On the one hand, it might conceivably be subtitled “Lester/Soderbergh”: a substantial portion of the text is a career-spanning analysis in which Lester is encouraged by Soderbergh to discuss the influences upon and motifs recurrent throughout his filmography. On the other hand, the book is tellingly labeled “A Faber & Faber production, Starring Steven Soderbergh”; indeed, this ‘credit’ is literally ‘above the title’ on the book’s cover, followed by a large photograph of the director from his *Schizopolis* performance.²¹⁷ Though the book is in fact a reading of Lester’s career,

²¹⁷ Getting Away With It is also comedically self-deconstructive to a degree that deliberately echoes the style of humor to be found throughout *Schizopolis*, suggesting it is meant to satisfy those fans who cannot get enough of the director. An ‘introductory note from the author,’ for example, echoes scenes from Soderbergh’s film in which characters speak entirely in categorical labels without specific

there is nevertheless a persuasive sense that the reason it was published at all was out of a perceived interest in Soderbergh's renewed status as a viable contemporary director.

The lack of interest in early works such as *Kafka*, then, is not because they are lacking as auteurist works, but because they are lacking as films that propelled Soderbergh's career forward. Indeed, an irony to add to those already suggested by Geoff Andrew is that one can productively recognize Soderbergh's pre-*Schizopolis* films as meaningful auteur texts, as suggested earlier. One can fruitfully propose, for example, that Soderbergh is interested in the cultural and technological mediation of memory, a concern often articulated by a playful engagement with postmodern tendencies towards hyper-textual citations. *sex, lies and videotape*, for example, is not merely about historical conflicts between post-war and Vietnam era American films. It is also self-reflexive in its depiction of the camcorder as a technological barrier to human relationships; though it is meant as a tool of diaristic self-expression, here the device is ultimately a reminder of the film we are watching and, by extension, a reminder of the American filmmaking trends that preceded it.

Kafka itself is an underrated hybrid of artistic biography, fantasy and German Expressionist film noir that also skillfully raises questions of documentation: how best to portray the celebrated writer through a single film? Narrativize his life? Faithfully adapt one or more of his stories? Evoke the mood and atmosphere that

content: "Brief, desultory discussion of forthcoming manuscript's inception, purpose and potential audience. Self-deprecating remark. Amusing anecdote with slightly serious undertone. Awesome display of ego disguised as humility; joke about same." [Soderbergh, viii.]

characterized his work? By ambitiously attempting to combine all three approaches as one, the film was destined to court a certain amount of disappointment amongst purists (indeed, for many critics, this is all the film did accomplish). As with *sex, lies and videotape*, there is a concern with film and filmic technologies. For many, *Kafka*'s most memorable moment occurs at its climax, during which a startling shift to color from monochrome film stock itself suggests the whimsical innocence of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939); the sequence in question depicts the author's escape from an imposing castle by scrambling across a massive glass screen filled with the image of an enormous, panoptic eye. The attempt to simultaneously present an artist's biography while evoking his various styles of work can itself be read as something of a reference to the evolving sequences that comprise Vincente Minnelli's Van Gogh biography, *Lust for Life* (1956). Even at the level of Soderbergh's own autobiography, there is significance to be derived from *Kafka*: as Jeremy Irons suggested when interviewed about his role in the lead, "it's interesting that he was attracted to a picture about a man who doesn't really know where he is or what he should be doing."²¹⁸ *Kafka*'s life blurs with his art just as Soderbergh's film texts are potentially read as interchangeable with the ongoing Soderbergh-text presented on television, in books and popular magazines.

Not only is the lack of interest in Soderbergh's early work revealing, so too is the recurring emphasis on such work as substantially, meaningfully different from the films that have followed his creative rebirth. In many ways there are auteurist

²¹⁸ Hoberman, 51.

consistencies and similarities that seem to be deliberately ignored. The dilemma of Fletcher Munson, for example, the office drone played by Soderbergh in *Schizopolis*, seems profoundly Kafka-esque: he is an insignificant clerk in a larger corporation whose means and methods are baffling. When a fellow employee, ‘Lester Richards’ (a fairly direct invocation of the film’s inspiration), dies suddenly, Munson is asked to write a speech to which Richards had been previously assigned. The specifics of the request also suggest Kafka’s writing:

Here’s what I need: It should be lengthy enough to seem substantial, yet concise enough to feel breezy. It should be serious, but with a slight wink. It should lay out a new course of action, but one that can change direction at any moment. If you must mention facts and figures, don’t do so directly. The general thrust should remain embedded in one’s mind forever, but specific words should be forgotten the moment they are heard. It should contain nothing that can’t be confirmed or denied. It should be on my desk Friday morning.

Furthermore, when one considers that, according to interviews, much of this dialogue is derived from Soderbergh’s own meetings with studio executives, his autobiographical connections to *Kafka* are strengthened. Simultaneously, Munson’s actual life is increasingly difficult to distinguish from its fantastic parallels, in which Soderbergh also plays Munson’s doppelganger, a dentist whose trysts with Munson’s spouse lead him to exclaim: “My God! I’m having an affair with my own wife!”

Consistent throughout both ‘acts’ of Soderbergh’s career to date are an ongoing interest in film history and formally innovative expressions of subjectivity and media manipulation. Ultimately, the most meaningful and revealing

development in Soderbergh's career upon entering this second act is not so much an idealized reinvigoration of pure talent as it is instead a self-conscious awareness of the act of authorship, and by extension himself, as a primary subject. Following from this, one is led to conclude that this distinction is the essential bait-and-switch operating within the discourse of the American independent film: a suggestion of creative talent emerging from the purity of the landscape is offered as a marketable justification for the ever familiar celebration of postmodern, film-citing white male directors.

It is worth considering how Getting Away With It itself depicts Soderbergh as learning the lessons of Lester's own career; as the elder director tells him, "if you produce my career as two acts ... almost everything [in Act II] became either unrealistic fantasies like *Superman*, or films from the twelfth to the seventeenth ... century. No contemporary material ... By and large they were pieces of observation where current character and political thinking was not the engine that was forcing the film forward."²¹⁹ Here, Lester's career is presented as something of a cautionary tale for Soderbergh, in which a director is unable to come to terms with the external industry pressures that are brought to bear on his talent. The suggestion is that Lester has too passively remained merely an artist, leading to diminishing returns and decreased creative control throughout the second half of his career; if Soderbergh is to escape such a fate, he will have to establish himself as occupying a more active

²¹⁹ Soderbergh, 100.

role in relationship to the industry's demands. As their interview progresses, Lester effectively tells Soderbergh as much after viewing *Schizopolis*:

It would be interesting next to take the technique and apply it to something which has a more conventional thread. A story with a ticking clock, for example ... Then you've got your career going as long as people give you whatever you need to do ... if [making *Schizopolis*] was cathartic in terms of your work process, what you've got to do now is make something where you give the audience a little more help ... Because then you've produced a lifetime of independence.²²⁰

Here, independence is defined in terms not of romance but of practicality: though Lester is indeed implicitly identifying Soderbergh as a figure of synthesis, he is also, finally, advocating little more than the classic auteurist move of 'sneaking' personal ideas and flourishes into inevitably formulaic studio projects.

Upon recognizing the reappearance of this familiar trope from auteur theory, one is forced to ask if there is any meaningful difference between the career of Soderbergh and that of such 'definitive,' classic auteurs as Ford, Hawks or Hitchcock. The answer lies in the visibility of Soderbergh's acts of authorship: as Corrigan et al have stressed, the postmodern industry is a forum in which the auteur has supplanted the text. As a result, one can finally identify the shift between the two acts of Soderbergh's career as a move from making purely 'auteur films' (i.e. derived from their director's interests and formal strategies) towards making films that are now also (if not 'instead') able to foreground the gestures with which Soderbergh was able to get them made. There are auteurist consistencies across the two acts,

²²⁰ Soderbergh, 194.

certainly, but only in the second are we so inescapably presented with films that are ‘Allegories of Soderbergh.’ Now Soderbergh is himself one of his own thematic preoccupations, and within each film one is able to hear echoes of the aforementioned exchanges with Richard Lester. This ‘visibility’ of Soderbergh’s auteurism is meaningfully similar to the visibility of current debates around the role of academia – the debate is not simply whether to promote a canon of great works or read texts for the various politics of ‘otherness’ they speak, but also to what extent this debate should be *public*. Should public intellectuals and ratings-hungry, overtly biased commentators such as Bill O’Reilly have a say in this debate?

Out of Sight is an almost perfect embodiment of the synthesis to which Lester referred: elliptical editing, harsh contrasts of film stock, and a chronology that suggests the subjectivity of memory are used to enhance a violent crime film whose comic interruptions seem to consistently reinforce its own disposable nature. As with much of Quentin Tarantino’s work, to which *Out of Sight* was inevitably compared, the film’s self-reflexivity suggests a winking awareness of its own ‘fast food’ nature. Upon the release of this film, the synthesis was itself the story, as far as the mainstream media was concerned: the direction of Soderbergh elevated the material to the status of art, and a new set of markers for official cinematic quality had been firmly established.

By the time of *The Limey*, Soderbergh had begun publicly announcing his new films as attempts on his part to synthesize previous films or modes of filmmaking. ‘The best way I can describe this [film] ... is for you to imagine Alain

Resnais making *Get Carter*,”²²¹ Soderbergh declares on the last page of Getting Away With It, and similar comparisons have attended many of his subsequent releases. *Traffic*, for example, would represent a combination of *Nashville* (1975) and *The French Connection* (1971), whereas *Solaris* was intended to cross-pollinate *Last Tango in Paris* (1973) with *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). These repeated declarations are striking in a number of ways. First and most obvious is the sense in which they evoke what is commonly thought to be the worst creative instincts of the Hollywood industry, in which agents and studio executives express their artistic bankruptcy by conceiving of new projects solely in terms of hybridizing prior successes (‘It’s *Die Hard* meets *Pretty Woman!*’). Here, Soderbergh seems to directly embrace the Hollywood game; one is struck by the number of his films that are either direct remakes (*Traffic* from the British miniseries, *Underneath* from *Criss Cross*, *Ocean’s Eleven*, *Solaris*) or instead closely follow the models of specific predecessors (*Erin Brockovich* from *Norma Rae* or *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore*, *The Limey* from *Get Carter* or *Death Wish*). The primary difference now is that Soderbergh is typically remaking or revisiting films that are not likely to be thought of as models for box office success – few today would attempt a remake of either *Last Tango in Paris* or *2001*, let alone a film that somehow combines both.

This leads to the second way in which these declarations are revealing: they allow Soderbergh to publicly embrace his own pretensions as an artist. Consider his recent self-assessment regarding his original aspirations for *Underneath*: “there

²²¹ Soderbergh, 215-216.

ought to be a world-wide cultural taskforce that just stops you when you have ideas like combining *The Red Desert* (sic) with an armored car heist movie.”²²² Isn’t casting George Clooney as the lead in a James Cameron-produced remake of *Solaris* just as likely to place such a taskforce on high alert? What is the difference? Again, the answer relates to this shift in the stages of Soderbergh’s career: today, we are aware of *Solaris* as a high-profile attempt to adapt such elitist material into a popular product, and the film can additionally be marketed around the suspense as to whether Soderbergh will be able to pull it off.

Underneath, for example, is surprisingly similar to *The Limey*, especially so when one considers their status as appearing on opposite sides of the director’s conversion experience, *Schizopolis*. If the earlier film combined the ‘60s art cinema alienation of Michelangelo Antonioni with the Hollywood pleasures of a well-choreographed heist, then so too does the latter purport to mix the enigmas of *Last Year at Marienbad* with the monomaniacal certainty of a gangster revenge plot. Both *Underneath* and *The Limey* are formally distinguished by spare music scores, aggressive use of color filters, and a vaguely lethargic affectation to their central performances. *The Limey*, however, directly announces its engagement with American films of the 1960s as one of its central subjects; not only does the film feature such icons as Terence Stamp and Peter Fonda (as well as *Vanishing Point*’s Barry Newman and Warhol associate Joe Dallesandro in supporting roles), but it repeatedly calls attention to its own having done so, particularly in ways that can be

²²² Kaufman, 30.

publicized. Most obvious is the film's use of footage from *Poor Cow* (1967), a Ken Loach feature in which Stamp starred; similarly, *The Limey* includes a lengthy shot of a huge American Express billboard on which Fonda is featured, announcing that he has been a "member since 1964".

Though *Out of Sight* was the film that generated repeated comparisons to the films of Quentin Tarantino, *The Limey* nevertheless reinforces this sense of Soderbergh's artistic rebirth as essentially a 'waking up' to the reality of market forces, thus crucially depicting his 'character' as mature adult rather than solipsistic adolescent: specifically, the ultimate great subject for 'indie' filmmakers in 1990s Hollywood is the creative garden of American filmmaking in the '60s and '70s. At this point, it is all too easy to reconceive Soderbergh's moment of creative rebirth as simultaneously an awareness of a somewhat grim, self-imposed ultimatum: if he is to survive, Soderbergh must inevitably find a way to combine his personal interests (the subjectivity of memory, the crises of a creative figure, etc.) with a newfound embrace of and interest in a nostalgia for our shared cultural past. The dark irony in this development is that Soderbergh had been making works of actual individualism before *Schizopolis*; they were simply not being seen by mass audiences.

On the rare occasions when this earlier mode of American film is not an explicit subject in Soderbergh's films, this absence is filled with the auteur-text of Soderbergh's evolving talent. Both *Erin Brockovich* and *Ocean's Eleven*, for example, were repeatedly dismissed by critics as comparatively 'empty' films, especially so considering the director's talent and intelligence. If the films had value

beyond their surface pleasures as simple Hollywood entertainments, such value existed at the level of Soderbergh's own ability to adapt his career in order to make them. Consider Manohla Dargis' LA Weekly review of *Ocean's Eleven*: "One of the more fascinating things about this director is how uninhibited he is about his own learning curve – you can actually see Soderbergh teaching himself something different with each new film, and you never get the sense that he's embarrassed about you watching him learn."²²³ Both Dargis and Andrews' accounts of the director speak to a compelling phenomenon suggested by Polan's title 'Auteur Desire': the participatory desire of the critic to practice auteurism in progress, rather than at a career's twilight.

The crisis of attempting to do so in the case of Steven Soderbergh, however, is that his recent success is predicated on his ability to move away from fully personal projects and embrace films that are sufficiently diverse in size and subject matter to defy the auteur theory, leaving the critics instead to narrativize and mythologize his career movements in order to justify themselves, to provide themselves with a subject. Interview's Graham Fuller makes this explicit when he concludes that "critically speaking, Steven Soderbergh remains one of the toughest filmmakers to nail – he's a strong, persuasive director who unwittingly excels in confounding those who'd like to label him. 'Soderberghian' is an adjective never to be coined, judging from the tonal diversity of the films he's made since exploding on

²²³ Dargis, 59.

the indie scene.”²²⁴ Such a development can quickly progress, however, to a paradoxical state: if Soderbergh has resisted the authorial impulse throughout this second career act, and become defined by his resulting success in the Hollywood system, then what has become the meaning of his status as an icon for independent film? Is this any different from the inevitable criticism of a beloved artist ‘selling out’, and if it is different, how?

One answer is that, effectively, Andrew Sarris’ canon in The American Cinema has been replaced by Premiere magazine’s annual ranking of the 100 most powerful figures in Hollywood; aesthetic values now find themselves brushed aside in order to simply celebrate a director’s control over the extent to which he or she could hypothetically deploy such values. The success of Soderbergh thus lies finally in his ability to resist the word ‘Soderberghian’: though he is consistently able to operate within the present day studio system, he is not obliged to do so within the confines of specific genres or budgets. Instead, he has established a definition for ‘Soderberghian’ that means little more than ‘quality’; his success as a figure of independence has finally led to the redemption of the Hollywood industry. Again: the crux here is this issue of visibility – we seem more interested in the operations of cultural power than we are in culture itself. If Soderbergh redeems Hollywood quality films, does he also redeem the work of the older Americanists?

One potential cost of this redemption, however, is a lack of genuine engagement with said industry’s films themselves; in the case of both *Erin*

²²⁴ Fuller, 60.

Brockovich and *Ocean's Eleven*, their status as opportunities for the director to make 'big' films led to a perception that neither film could mean anything beyond that status. This is particularly surprising in the former case: the extent to which *Erin Brockovich*'s narrative of a lone figure sticking to her beliefs while standing up to major industries (here, both legal and utility power systems), only to be rewarded with a high-paying job within such an industry, seems very much to suggest an allegory of Soderbergh. Few critics referred to this; a rare exception was offered in the independent LA Weekly, which noted that "saving the underdog is far from Erin's only motivation. Her crusade is also a career starter ... No wonder Soderbergh was attracted to her story. In the shark-infested waters of movieland, he's done exactly the same thing."²²⁵

The comic remake of *Ocean's Eleven*, moreover, a film whose legends of 'rat pack' members casually sleeping through their performances in between Vegas performance resulted in an oxymoronic reputation of notorious inconsequence, particularly baffled critics. Elvis Mitchell's New York Times review called it "an odd choice for Mr. Soderbergh, who is perhaps the ne plus ultra director of films about people living on the margins."²²⁶ Though less overt an allegory than that to be found in *Erin Brockovich*, *Ocean's Eleven* is nevertheless easy to read as depicting a crisis around independent production; given the current media fascination with Soderbergh as subject, it is somewhat surprising that such a reading was not more

²²⁵ Taylor, 61.

²²⁶ Mitchell,

<http://movies2.nytimes.com/mem/movies/review.html?res=9F03E5D8123CF934A35751C1A9679C8B63>

visibly offered. Even Mitchell's suggestion that the film's protagonist is not 'on the margins' seems misguided: the film opens with the eponymous Danny Ocean being released from prison and assembling a team of similarly isolated con artists and heist specialists in order to attempt the seemingly impossible robbery of a vault containing the funds of three Vegas casinos. At every turn, the heroes' skill at creative, improvisatory showmanship is contrasted against the lugubrious corporate behemoth that is present-day Las Vegas. (Even here, then, can be recognized Soderbergh's ongoing fascination with cultural icons of the 1960s: though the original version of *Ocean's Eleven* may not be a film of value, it nevertheless signifies a rebellious spirit that is absent from contemporary entertainment products.)

The villainy of the film's antagonist, Terry Benedict, the casino owner in a relationship with Ocean's ex-wife, Tess, is correspondingly expressed through a brief scene in which he is revealed to be unable to appreciate art beyond its status as a monetary commodity. Tess, the curator of an elite art gallery within Benedict's casino, has just brokered the purchase of a new Picasso, "Woman with Guitar", and is gazing upon it in reverent awe of his latest acquisition. Benedict appears by her side. "Do you like it?" she asks him. "I like that you like it," is his only reply; the character's callousness is then underscored as he refuses to let Tess kiss him goodbye, preferring to preserve propriety for the benefit of his ubiquitous security cameras. Moreover Benedict has a notorious reputation for destroying the history of 'rat pack'-era Vegas monuments; Ocean is able to enlist the financial support of a former casino owner, Reuben Tishkoff (Elliott Gould, himself a signifier of New

Hollywood iconoclasm), because Benedict “torpedoed my casino – muscled me out. Now he’s going to blow it up next month to make way for some gaudy monstrosity!” An argument can be seen here for those academics who retain a desire to protect the work of canon formation: the villainous character is the one without interest in quality, in aesthetics. The ultimate suggestion is for a synthesis of appreciating good cultural texts *as* good, while also critically reading them as products of political contexts and representations of otherness.

Much of *Ocean’s Eleven* allegorizes a moment in Hollywood history that has already been endlessly invoked both in these pages as well as many other articles on this recent period of independence: namely, the shift within the film industry that occurred in the late ‘70s. It is easy to read the large casinos as equivalent to such conglomerate entities as the Transamerica corporation, which purchased United Artists in 1967, or the present owners of 20th Century Fox, News Corp.; indeed, one of the casinos that relies on Benedict’s vault is the MGM Grand, itself an indicator of the ongoing climate in which vague notions of ‘synergy’ have diluted formerly pure notions of film craft. Many historians have characterized this era as one in which incoming studio executives, ‘the young turks,’ dismissed notions of films as special products, instead preferring to treat them as any other potential source of revenue within their diversified empires. Though the studio heads of the classic studio era were savvy businessmen and promoters, they were also typically considered to be men who both possessed an innate understanding of films, as well as a sense of taste that gave value to their suggestions about how such films should be produced.

With the coming of conglomeration, however, the new owners often found themselves at a loss as to how to attract audiences, fueled in part by the radical shifts within those audiences caused by social protest movements, Vietnam disillusionment, and mistrust of government. Large-scale roadshow musicals such as *Hello, Dolly!* (1969) and *Lost Horizon* (1974), previously shown to be immensely profitable investments as recently as *The Sound of Music* (1965), consistently flopped. Instead, small-scale ‘youth’ pictures such as *Easy Rider* appeared to be ready to supplant such spectacles, leading to studio executives greenlighting ideas they didn’t understand and struggling to promote finished products they hated, such as *The Last Movie* (1971) and *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971). These films proudly displayed all the hallmarks that influenced the classic ‘indie’ films of the Sundance era, but were able to exist within the studio system. In short, much like Soderbergh’s Danny Ocean, the young creative types could get away with murder at the expense of the studio executives who were either too slow or too devoid of taste to know what was happening right under their noses.

Every step of the elaborate heist that comprises much of *Ocean’s Eleven* is thus depicted as an element of specialized, stylized performance: the precise nature of the security systems in place around the vault itself requires a team member of such cat-like agility that he is recruited at a gymnastic circus performance; access to the vault requires Carl Reiner’s character to, effectively, become himself a method actor, repeatedly practicing the accent and inhabiting the persona of Lyman Zerga, a German billionaire who needs to store valuables in it; and the robbery itself requires

the construction of an elaborate set, upon which the heroes both rehearse their moves as well as film a sustained scene to be played on the true vault's security monitors. At times, Ocean's team is even required to perform for one another: when a young pickpocket is called upon to play a nervous state inspector, Ocean and his partner/co-director Rusty (Brad Pitt) stage an apparently personal falling out for his unknowing benefit, becoming, in effect, savvy directors able to elicit the fidgety, unconfident characterization they seek. At the heist's conclusion, Soderbergh also is gracious enough to grant his characters a symbolic standing ovation: as all of the eponymous teammates assemble in a row, the fountains at the Bellagio repeatedly rise in a series of crescendos, as if to celebrate them. In return, our heroes gaze back at the display in a collective state of wordless wonder, a harsh contrast from their antagonist's previous aesthetic anhedonia.

Certainly, *Ocean's Eleven* falls into the 'con artist' sub-genre of crime films, in which the operative word is 'artist': there is always a self-reflexive, theatrical pleasure in witnessing talented actors playing talented actors, or enjoying the simulation of improvisatory play that appears whenever a job does not proceed exactly as planned. So much of Soderbergh's film, however, returns to thematic material around the appreciation of individual craft and disdain for the apersonal nature of the product offered by the Vegas/Studio conglomerates, that it remains a curiosity such allegorizing went largely unnoticed. The conclusion to be made here suggests that the auteur discourse is now supplanting engagement with content, or the actual reading of films; ultimately, Soderbergh himself remains the text, and the

story of *Ocean's Eleven* is thus merely a celebration of his chameleonlike ability to create disposable light entertainment as successfully as he does such meaningful political work as *Traffic*. We find ourselves, finally, in the face of a conflict that cannot be meaningfully resolved; instead, it is perhaps better that it be recognized as a defining condition of our present postmodernity. *Ocean's Eleven* depicts a celebration of performance – or that which is fake – as a signifier of the ‘real’, the ‘authentic’; we delight in the indexical impact of Clooney et al charming us through skills and talents we normally perceive as ‘unreal’ or ‘simulated’ in most entertainments produced by Hollywood conglomerates. If we do not interpret this film as an allegory of such a conflict, it is nevertheless a display of Soderbergh’s own indexicality. *Ocean's Eleven*, for many critics and (presumably) viewers, was itself little more than a Vegas casino visit – a pleurably noisy and colorful way to dispose of one’s money; even in this case, however, Soderbergh remains a marker of textuality that invests the film with an aura of reality simply through the virtue of his being the auteur who made it.

Is this an end or a beginning? Think of the recent ‘Dogma ‘95’ movement, begun when Danish filmmakers Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg drew up a manifesto that declared their adherence to filmic ‘purity’ in the face of so much ‘superficial’ content on display in Hollywood and elsewhere. The manifesto required its members to forsake a series of glossy production elements that, for its drafters, symbolized artifice and indulgence. Only available light and location shooting were permitted. No post-production sound effects were to be added. Even the somewhat

vaporous concept of ‘superficial actions’ such as car chases or shootouts were officially regarded as forbidden. Almost immediately upon inception, however, the movement was criticized as little more than a self-aggrandizing publicity stunt. Numerous examples were found in which the group’s films could be seen to break their own rules and, in particular, much attention was drawn to the paradoxical impossibility of their public demand that ‘the director must not be credited.’

The suggestion was similar to that mentioned earlier – that auteurism is a false methodology that displaces the content it claims to study – and yet the declaration itself immediately became one more means to publicize the very auteurs who proclaimed their modesty in drafting it. Again, this is fundamentally an impossible question to answer – is Lars von Trier a sincere artist, or a manipulative prankster? – in part because it relies on a fundamentally outdated set of terms. The drama of studying such moments of filmic independence (be they American or international), their very subject matter, is contained within their struggles to be born, to exist. One is effectively forced to adopt the methods of a prankster in order to get films made at all under such production circumstances. However one views the sincerity of the Dogma ‘95 movement, or the impish, trickster persona adopted by von Trier when promoting his films, one cannot deny the extent of the movement’s impact and influence.

For example, Soderbergh himself experimented with such self-imposed restrictions when following *Ocean’s Eleven* with *Full Frontal*, a film that received early publicity during production for the equivalent rules of purity the director

distributed to his cast: actors in the film would be responsible for their own costumes, hair, and makeup; would not enjoy the privacy of trailers on set; and would be subjected to unscripted interviews, in character, that could potentially make their way into the finished film. As one might expect at this point, reviews of the film heavily emphasized these atypical production circumstances. *Variety*'s Todd McCarthy in particular seemed to have cribbed from an earlier critique of *Schizopolis*: "It's as if Steven Soderbergh has willfully decided to bring his extraordinary winning streak to an end. [*Full Frontal* is] arid, self-consciously arty and emotionally uninvolving ... unfortunately, the artistic intent and production methods are far more interesting than what ends up on screen."²²⁷ Once again, the auteur-text obscures the film text; an auteurist reading of the film is not to be found here. McCarthy, however, does note that Soderbergh "mapped out his own set of dogma," suggesting this transnational connection as perhaps a more meaningful perspective from which the film might be productively viewed.

Unlike either Jim Jarmusch or Quentin Tarantino, Soderbergh has not been required to develop his career by establishing an auteurist public identity for himself; though his films are read through the heuristic offered by his celebrity status and can be promoted around such directorial flourishes as creating Dogma rules, using existing film footage of his stars' previous roles, or even allegorizing his own autobiography, Soderbergh's authorial signature could ultimately be said to be a consistent attempt to locate the meanings of his films in contexts that exclude

²²⁷ McCarthy, <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117918279.html?categoryid=31&cs=1&p=0>.

authorship. So too with the Dogma movement: here is an attempt not only to achieve publicity, or to make different films, but also to change the discourse around a group of films, to affect and influence the ways in which they are read. The films of von Trier and Vinterberg, for example, are rarely considered meaningful as ‘Danish’ cultural products; as much as the Dogma framers might deny the auteur theory, they are also rejecting the nationalistic foreign film paradigms that require such exports to, above all else, ‘speak’ or ‘perform’ their respective cultural identities.

If such Dogma productions as *The Celebration* (1998) and *The Idiots* (1998) resist their traditionally assigned roles as ‘foreign films’, then so too does Soderbergh’s output challenge the meaningfully ‘American’ nature of the ‘independent spirit’ that is said to consistently fuel them. As Dave Kehr noted in covering *Out of Sight* for Film Comment:

if there is any rebelliousness in [the film], it lies in some strange second degree: here is an independent filmmaker rebelling against independent filmmaking. At a time when artistic integrity is measured by how ‘personal’ – how confessional, how stylistically eccentric – a movie is, Soderbergh has chosen to take refuge in the impersonal formulas and passed-along fictions of Hollywood’s past ... here is something that seems of crucial benefit to an American film industry divided by the self-indulgence of the ‘indie’'s on the one hand and the willed emptiness of studio films on the other.²²⁸

What Soderbergh and the Dogma filmmakers have in common, then, is an essential interest in positioning their work in opposition to a dominant mode of filmmaking, be it literally Hollywood, or merely a ‘superficial’ attempt to imitate its

²²⁸ Kehr, 44.

styles and conventions (so often found in the successful foreign films released by Miramax, such as the sentimental comedy *Life is Beautiful*, 1997). When we read a Soderbergh film as a Soderbergh film, then, the act of doing so is no longer auteurism in the conventional sense, but instead a recognition of cultural markers of quality, innovation and experimentation that are largely absent from more traditional studio films. However, Soderbergh is also rejecting the label of independence, as Kehr's account suggests. Indeed, when interviewed for a separate Film Comment profile, the director provocatively remarked that "when a film like Chris Nolan's *Memento* cannot get picked up [it struggled to find a distributor for years after being made], to me independent film is over. It's dead."²²⁹ The success now lies in confounding the familiar terms of critical debate – independence is dead, long live textual analysis, Cultural Studies, and so on.

To accomplish all of this, Soderbergh has expanded upon the notions of the director as himself an active auteurist, rather than simply an auteur, that have been earlier identified as integral to Quentin Tarantino's success. Much as Tarantino has made part of the pleasure to be found in his work an engagement with auteurist readings of his own favorite filmmakers, so too was Soderbergh's career rebirth predicated upon an extended auteurist study of Richard Lester's career. Part of what is occurring in this shift is an apparent reclamation of the auteur theory by the auteurs themselves. Again – a public, visible *performance* of that which was formerly ivory tower academic work. It is important to recall, for example, that as

²²⁹ Smith, 31.

originally conceived the auteur theory was not proposed by an academic elite standing at a distant remove from film practice; rather, it was an expression of the New Wave directors who also wrote for Cahiers du Cinema. The study of cinema has always been defined by this uneasy co-existence with the ‘proper’ work of serious literary/historical academia – on the one hand, wanting to be seen as worthy, while on the other, able to productively energize its subject’s inherent hybridity to engage with a plethora of theoretical approaches.²³⁰

If the initial moment of the authorship discourse was one in which French filmmakers of the 1960s read their own modernist theoretical perspectives into the classical film texts of Hawks and Hitchcock, perhaps the present moment of authorship is one that encourages filmmakers to rail against the commodification of filmic meaning in a post-national, postmodern industry by reinscribing their work with the modernism utilized by the earlier era’s directors. This return to modes of auteurist thought on the part of present day auteurs is not necessarily a regressive move; instead, it is a useful way to negotiate the shifting cultural status of film texts over the past decades. In his survey of American avant-garde film movements of the 1960s, Allegories of Cinema, David James puts the matter in perspective by suggesting that “the most convenient point of entry into these alternative cinemas is through the concept of authorship.”²³¹ This reduction of the concept of authorship to

²³⁰ Jonathan Auerbach’s essay “American Studies and Film: Blindness and Insight” offers a useful depiction of the field’s deliberate ignorance of the medium during its formative years, citing film’s pop cultural status as counter-productive to its grasp for acknowledgment within the academy. Now, with film as a medium well-suited to New Americanist and Cultural Studies work, it threatens to undermine the field’s earlier traditions.

²³¹ James, 28.

merely a 'convenient point of entry' suggests the means by which filmmakers such as Tarantino and Soderbergh are able to utilize such a traditional theoretical framework in order to ensure that their films are read in ways that reject the traditional perspectives of their immediate context. For James, what is perhaps most characteristic of the films he calls alternative is their own resistance to such classifications; as he puts it, "the ideals of the sixties were always tempered by their opposites ... if the alternative cinemas were typically powered by obsessions with authenticity, they were as often stereotyped by the perspectives allowed by the rear-view mirror of irony."²³²

Such conflict between irony and authenticity, between the self-reflexive film reference and the desire for 'real' content, between the auteur as a mediated construct of marketing and a genuine source of creative work continues to inform the work of Jarmusch, Tarantino, and Soderbergh; clearly, however, the nineties are not the sixties. At the conclusion of Allegories of Cinema, James decisively underlines the "termination of film's social agency" by the end of the decade.²³³ At stake in the current moment, then, is the possibility of any meaning at all, as opposed to meanings that call for any specific political action. When Soderbergh calls for the death of 'independence' as a label, the gesture is simultaneously valid as well as a reminder of his own power as a participant in the inscription of that label with meaning, of his presence as one who is not merely a producer of texts, but also able to write film history from within. If the Hollywood industry is defined by the

²³² James, 28.

²³³ James, 348.

constant process of absorbing the opposition personified by independent directors into its fields of production, then the real work for what remains of 'independence' becomes a parallel, palimpsestic process of reinscription, in which the category's meaning is cast as a more fluid concept than simply a film's source of funding.

It has been stressed on numerous occasions throughout these pages that there is an increasing sense in which 'independent' now simply means 'good'; the term is taken to represent a collective expression of the current markers of 'quality' to be found in Hollywood films. Here, independence is always destined to exist as something that finally serves an 'other' against which it had previously been defined, much as Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* repeatedly depicts labor and social movements throughout American history as ultimately achieving little more than slight adjustments to an enduring two-party system of social control. From this perspective, one does not have to look far to find Hollywood products that display elements of recent Soderbergh films to achieve what might be called a new 'style of quality': the recent *Veronica Guerin* (2003), for example, in which Cate Blanchett plays an aggressive journalist who disarms a largely male establishment with her down-to-earth candor while investigating a drug story, is in many ways a hybrid of both *Erin Brockovich* and *Traffic*. In addition to its narrative similarity to the former, *Veronica Guerin*'s visual design is, much like the latter, aggressively color-coded: dour and gray to depict urban slums, yet with bursts of pure red, to characterize Guerin via her clothes and flashy sportscar.

By visibly setting such trends for others to follow, such directors as Soderbergh and Tarantino find that their agency within the film industry rests on their performativity as auteurs; their ability to then achieve a further function as auteurists, that is, figures who themselves participate in what remains the most visible mode of writing film history, suggests an attempt at independence from the industry at the level of discourse itself. Or, if Soderbergh and Tarantino are no longer meaningfully 'independent' artists in terms of their films' funding or content, then perhaps their independence is best measured in their use of studio power to support other directors and films of their own choice. For example, Soderbergh's Getting Away With It both promotes *Schizopolis* and shows us how to read it: through the career of Richard Lester, through *Monty Python*, through a period of creative activity that appeared in the late 1960s. I have earlier suggested that it is in many ways similar to Soderbergh's own earlier film *Kafka*; Soderbergh's agency, then, moves us away from interpreting the auteur's work and instead in the direction of following the director's own auteurist analysis. Similarly, Tarantino's 'Rolling Thunder' both releases obscure, forgotten exploitation films and reminds us to read the director's own films through the perspective of remembering such prior filmic artifacts. Though in each case the director is able to exert discursive influence over the reading of his films, it is notable that such acts are always simultaneously instances of self-marketing. The current climate is one in which the ostensibly pure act of critical auteurism and the inherently economic act of promotion are now hopelessly interdependent. Given the post-9/11 furor over Ward Churchill and the popularity of

books such as The ProFessors, one must ask: how different is the role of the contemporary academic? To what extent should we be more honest about our career path's requirement that we 'perform' ourselves? In a way, this is a question implicitly asked by Polan's 'Auteur Desire': if the work is about the academic's will, how much agency does an academic truly have?

Jonathan Rosenbaum remarks provocatively on this state of affairs in Movie Wars: "I'd like to suggest that the passive behavior of this country's critical community inside both academia and the mainstream press has paved the way for an unblocked proliferation of marketing schemes by an industry that only knows what it has to sell."²³⁴ Rosenbaum reminds us here that any auteurist position is on some level also an act of canon formation, in which certain figures are inevitably selected at the expense of others. If 'independent' has now come to signify nothing so much as quality, then those directors labeled as such by definition become part of a new cinematic canon. The significance of academic ambivalence over the act of canon formation, particularly as currently debated within the discipline of American Studies, will be the focus of the next chapter. What is the meaning of a formerly academic act now being publicly performed through the discourses of advertising, marketing and promotion? Can this be anything but regressive? Whose progress is potentially being made here? Equally a rich area for study as the figure of the auteur is the nature of independence as a contemporary discourse through which America engages with its own construction of taste values, struggling to reconcile its popular

²³⁴ Rosenbaum, 16.

mass culture and its highbrow, 'elitist' counterparts. The resolution of the dialectic offered in this pages, and thus the ultimate nature of Soderbergh's synthesis, combining as it does the auteur and the auteurist, academic canon formation and Hollywood film marketing, cannot fully be assessed without a direct consideration of this parallel discourse.

CHAPTER FIVE
**FILMIC INDEPENDENCE THROUGH THE LENS OF AMERICAN
STUDIES**

In his passionate and inspiring collection of essays, From Walden Pond to Jurassic Park: Activism, Culture and American Studies, Paul Lauter trenchantly proposes that,

where once from hour to hour the academy did ripe and ripe, now, as the squalor of most campuses signifies, it rots and rots ... [there are those] for whom universities meant little more than a stamp on one's life passport ... for whom the flickering screen, the boom box, the Boss and the Dead ... defined the shape of culture ... There arose, to be brief and academic, alternative sources of cultural authority from the entertainment industry and the media more generally. Their endorsement by the young found a significant echo *within* the academy particularly ... among those practicing what is now called 'Cultural Studies.'²³⁵

This relationship between sources of cultural authority suggests that the line between the academy and the entertainment industry has now been hopelessly blurred – indeed, this is now itself a visible debate, seen in numerous newspaper articles inquiring as to how the high-tech, internet generation should be kept engaged in the classroom.²³⁶ Given this blur between media systems and academia, what is the present stability of 'America' as a concept? Is this boundary blurring itself responsible for a decay in the meaning of the term? Or is the blur simply an inevitable result of globalism, interdependence, and multinational conglomerates?

²³⁵ Lauter, 186 (his emphasis).

²³⁶ For example, Scott Carlson's "The Net Generation Goes To College," The Chronicle of Higher Education. Volume 52, Issue 7, Page A34 <http://chronicle.com/free/v52/i07/07a03401.htm>. Issues of new technology and their relationship to academic discourses will be addressed at length in the next chapter.

Finally, does the loss of academic cultural authority itself lead to an ironic, cynical engagement with formerly pure, idealized concepts? Many independent films will use ironic modes of address to depict disempowered, ‘othered’ citizens, questioning their own authority – even ability – to do so: Native Americans, the disabled, those of little economic means, as we shall observe in such films as *Gummo* and *Tigrero: A Film That Was Never Made*. Does the crisis in academic authority extend to a crisis in the real? Such are the questions I will explore in this chapter.

Lauter’s assessment allows one to contextualize the primary distinction between the field of contemporary ‘indie’ cinema emphasized in these pages and those features made (semi-)independently of the Hollywood system during the ‘pre-Sundance’ decades. That is to say, the body of independent films collectively celebrated through the 1980s and 1990s represent a substantial effort to create and promote a canon of important and meaningfully American art works – indeed, a new cinematic American Renaissance – by an institutional body that is in no way connected to discourses of academic power. Concurrent with this act of canon formation by an alternative source of cultural authority appeared a still-raging debate within the traditional sources of such authority, the academy itself. In this chapter I will directly examine the evolving meaning of the discourse of American Independent Film as it relates to, is determined by, and at times proposes even to replace, the internecine conflicts within the field of American Studies during the post-Vietnam, postmodern, post-Sundance era.

I propose that the two events are closely related – as the academy’s cultural power fades, the esteem of the American independent film intensifies. As American studies struggles to reconcile its conservative and humanist trends, the ‘indie’ film increasingly promotes itself as a cultural forum that freely synthesizes both trends, at times showcasing simple pastoralism, while at others ironically deconstructing it, and prefacing its artifice. How does the question of an independent American cinema embody and complicate Lauter’s vision of the contemporary media landscape?

Any attempt to do so must first recognize, of course, that neither ‘Independent Film’ nor ‘American Studies’ is a stable, monolithic signifier; indeed, each is a hotly contested term, both by their observers as well as their practitioners. Just as the independent status of such films is variously determined by issues of funding, final cut, or vague notions of ‘quality’, so too is American Studies internally divided. At the most basic level it is a field that is split along a currently familiar and to some even tiresome ‘Red State-Blue State’ schism, the former represented by conservative thinkers who seek to preserve an essentially American body of literature, the latter by those struggling to define the precise parameters of the country’s exceptional nature while reconciling that nature with its role in an increasingly globalised, migratory and interdependent world. The result of such internal debate is a fascinating body of meta-critical academic work; as Lauter notes, “the central concerns of American studies promote a kind of intense self-scrutiny

among its practitioners, an effort to situate one's own practice and assumptions within American institutional life."²³⁷

A crucial example of this self-scrutiny, as well as a narrativizing of this schism's appearance, are deliberately visible throughout William Spanos' The Errant Art of *Moby Dick*: The Canon, The Cold War, and the Struggle for American Studies. Here, Spanos argues against the discipline's dominant interpretation of Melville's novel throughout its 'New Americanist'²³⁸ period, during and after the second World War. Spanos skillfully reveals the ease with which such New Americanists were able to transform a difficult, ambiguous novel into one that clearly, definitively embodied a timely conflict between youthful American Democracy (in the form of its narrator, Ishmael), and the Old World Totalitarianism of Hitler and Stalin (via an obsessively violent Ahab). Spanos' book is simultaneously a (counter-)reading of Moby Dick and an investigation of the role academia can play in supporting a nation's ideological goals while claiming for itself an idealistic, exempt status. Spanos opens himself up to potential criticism, however, when he asserts that his own interpretation of the novel reveals it to anticipate not World War II but Vietnam, as well as the effort during subsequent Republican administrations to overcome the nation's insecurity (i.e. the 'Vietnam Syndrome' that would go on to be 'cured' by two Gulf Wars): "it is Moby Dick, more clearly

²³⁷ Lauter, 15.

²³⁸ Debate rages within American Studies as to the very definition of this 'New Americanist' approach. Writers such as Spanos, Lauter and Guillory may vary in their precise use of terms, but each is ultimately interested in a dialectical synthesis of the best offered by opposing approaches within the discipline.

than any other text in the American literary tradition, that speaks the awful truth of the American intervention in Vietnam.”²³⁹

How is Spanos able to justify this, given his withering attacks on the New Americanists’ use of the novel to address their own historical contexts and political goals? His primary defense is the intensity of his own self-scrutiny: “The recent history of Melville criticism ... [is] a history reflecting, not, as it is assumed, impartial debate over the aesthetic greatness of Melville’s fiction, but a struggle to appropriate it for present ideological purposes. And my text is no exception, although what distinguishes [it] ... is its *interestedness*: my recognition that my reading *is* an imaginary.”²⁴⁰ The strength, and historical significance, of The Errant Art of *Moby Dick* lies, then, in its dual pull, textually: Spanos is equally engaged with proposing his own reading of the novel, as did F.O. Matthiessen and R.W.B. Lewis before him, as he is with historicizing and even defending his use of high theorists such as Heidegger, Nietzsche and Foucault in doing so. Indeed, one can easily be challenged by the book’s dense, allusive style and assumption of extensive prior awareness of multiple fields. By the time of Spanos’ work, however, theory itself is at stake; The Errant Art of *Moby Dick* represents an almost defiant defense of such approaches from attack by a “campaign that has culminated in the identification of theory at large with ‘political correctness’ by such politically conservative intellectuals as Roger Kimball and Dinesh D’Souza.”²⁴¹

²³⁹ Spanos, 183.

²⁴⁰ Spanos, 251.

²⁴¹ Spanos, 4.

Such writers as Spanos and Lauter, then, position themselves as counter to a reactionary trend²⁴² that seeks to reset the terms of American literary criticism to those which were dominant during the Cold War era – terms which first appeared after WWII and lost favor after the Vietnam War. I specify such seemingly self-evident parameters here to emphasize the distinguishing feature of American history during this ‘80s-‘90s era of both ‘indie’ Film Renaissance and internal American Studies debate – it is simultaneously a post-Vietnam period as well as a renewed Cold War. The fundamental fact of this context helps to differentiate the independent cinema of, for example, Jarmusch and Tarantino from that of Fuller and Ray. When the latter made their independent pictures, the film industry had not yet fully established itself as an alternative source of cultural authority. (Indeed, Lauter quotes a former professor of his who swiftly articulated the difference between kitsch and culture at a lecture in the early 1950s by referring to “the differences between Columbia Pictures and Columbia University.”²⁴³) By the time of Spanos’ passionate defense of theory, the Sundance festival had established itself as both a source of cultural authority and a source of movies that could primarily be promoted by that newfound cultural authority.

Let Spanos have his theory, the ‘indie’ producers and distributors implicitly posited: American culture shall still have its Myth-Image-Symbol school of textual analysis, and classes are regularly held at your local art house theatre. Or, to be more

²⁴² Spanos specifically cites in this regard a ‘recuperative initiative’ at Harvard in 1978 to emphasize tradition over theory, as well as the approach taken by such political forces as the National Endowment for the Humanities during the Reagan presidency (Spanos, 28).

²⁴³ Lauter, 100.

precise, this process is seen in the mainstream media reviews of those films, interviews with their filmmakers, and depiction of the Sundance festival. The films of the post-Vietnam, post-New Hollywood moment are pleasingly diverse; more importantly, the most engaging and significant of such texts reflect a playful postmodernity that evokes the crucial interestedness that Spanos uses to defend his reading of Melville. The importance of the 1980s as simultaneously a post-Vietnam and a renewed Cold War period can easily be seen, for example, in Jarmusch's first feature, *Permanent Vacation*; many of the film's narrative and visual signifiers seem calculated to reflect an irresolvable tension between such cultural and political perspectives. The 'protagonist', Parker, appears to have retreated into 1950s Beatnik culture to reflect rebelliousness, for example, but at the same time suffers from the trauma of repressed memories as he refers vaguely to losing his home in a past war "with the Chinese."

One can easily imagine *Permanent Vacation* being read as passionately, and as multiply, as Moby Dick has been; to some, the film might appear to satirize its apparent hero's rebellion against 'conformity', suggesting a conservative rejection of an ineffectual 60s counterculture. To others, Parker's faulty memory might be an incisive condemnation of the already visible forgetting of the nation's errancy in Vietnam. A third option, of course, is to suggest that the film is on some level acknowledging the complexity of such a cultural debate, perhaps even anticipating and urgently encouraging such a debate within visible culture. Again, Spanos' reading of Moby Dick is useful here:

[the novel] renders Ishmael's narrative neither a story that internalizes and reconciles oppositional forces (as in tragedy or romance) nor a story about individual salvation in the face of an utterly indifferent universe, but *a social text* that resonates, however unevenly actualized, all across the indissoluble continuum of being ... As a social text, it anticipates the difficult post-humanist search for a collective sociopolitical counter hegemonic project.²⁴⁴

Spanos' conception of the novel as 'social text' emphasizes the importance of viewing works of art as active participants in the work of culture, rather than objects that wait passively for empowered critics to invest them with official meaning. At the same time, it is a conveniently self-serving interpretation of a classic text to conform to the will of the critic, to support his theoretical, social, and academic goals. Nevertheless, one is able to recognize *Permanent Vacation* as both a useful example of one such social text, struggling to force systems of cultural authority beyond their present terms of debate, as well as a 'lost' film, one that was barely seen, released, or discussed by contemporaneous film critics. It is significant that both Moby Dick and *Permanent Vacation* are works that were almost completely ignored upon their initial appearance; the former was granted permission to 'mean' by the arbiters of cultural authority when it suited their ideological requirements, while the latter remains, effectively, lost today. The missing status of Jarmusch's first feature (a quality emphasized by his next film, *Stranger Than Paradise*, winning the Camera d'Or – the award for best first film – at the Cannes film festival) itself suggests that it was marginalized by a critical community not quite able to read it

²⁴⁴ Spanos, 148 (my emphasis)

according to its own interests: too self-satirizing of its own challenges to hegemony, too counter culturally nostalgic during the rise of a Yuppie era.

Though it is heretical to some, and admittedly extreme, to compare Melville's masterpiece to an early Jarmusch work, the relationship between the two texts reveals a great deal about the current operations of cultural power, both inside and outside the academy.²⁴⁵ *Moby Dick* and *Permanent Vacation* alike are at first potentially confusing works, and thus easy to dismiss; next, they are revealed to be works of complex binary oppositions, exploring and resolving fundamental American cultural conflicts; finally, they are works that are able to transcend such reductive binaries, expressing the plenitude of the paradoxical American character by finding a simultaneous truth within opposite values and concepts. In the case of *Moby Dick*, all these stages are well chronicled by Spanos; with that of *Permanent Vacation*, however, the second and third stages themselves occur presently, within the pages of this dissertation.

The explanation for such indifference toward the film lies in the relationship between the Hollywood film industry and the academic field of Cinema Studies, with their contemporary distinctions echoing those that currently define internal American Studies debates. As Cinema Studies increasingly finds itself drawn to methodologies that are traditionally considered humane, progressive and leftist, Hollywood's

²⁴⁵ For example, consider my use of the word 'one' throughout this text when I really mean 'I' ("one is able to recognize *Permanent Vacation* as..."). My thesis here requires me to produce work that is equally self-aware as Spanos'; it is in that spirit that I acknowledge the possibility that I am forcing *Permanent Vacation* here to conform to my ideas, as an extension of my critical will. If the reader would prefer the film speak for itself, he or she is of course always able to put down this dissertation and simply go watch it.

promotional machinery (including that which promotes American independent film) finds itself left to occupy the equivalent of a conservative American Studies, categorizing works as great artistic achievements, canonizing the auteurs that made them, and establishing official records of their value and meaning. This source of alternate cultural power reduces all textual value to the demands of the marketplace, evoking Jonathan Rosenbaum's incisive comment on the tautology of contemporary 'film critics': they are simply those who get paid to write film criticism, regardless of background or training.²⁴⁶

A revealing example of film marketing's disregard for the previous standards of distinction met by the academy's arbiters of cultural capital appeared in the Los Angeles Times on July 3, 1999. Sony Pictures Classics, a subsidiary of the Japanese technology conglomerate Sony Corporation, published a large advertisement in the Calendar section, designed to resemble a faded parchment scroll. A headline at the top of the scroll read, "The Declaration of Independent Film," and was followed by this brief text: "When in the course of motion picture history, it becomes necessary for all people to attend quality movies, we hold these truths to be self-evident, that Sony Pictures Classics films are endowed by their creators with certain inalienable ideas, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." Appearing on the 'parchment' below this preamble are separate ads for two contemporaneous Sony releases. One was David Mamet's adaptation of *The Winslow Boy* (1999); the other, German director Tom Tykwer's cult hit *Run Lola Run* (1999).

²⁴⁶ Rosenbaum, 57.

An immediately apparent irony presents itself in the latter case, given the film's obviously 'foreign' language and stars; however, even Mamet's film leaves the reader to question its inclusion on the parchment. Adapted from a play by the English dramatist Terence Rattigan, Mamet's film is also a remake of a prior British version, filmed in 1948. Moreover, much of the self-contained *Winslow Boy* ad seems to sell the picture around its familiar presence as an example of what is often called English 'Heritage' Cinema, a tradition of quality that relies on canonized literary sources, a setting of British class conflict, acclaimed actors such as Nigel Hawthorne and Jeremy Northam, and, of course, the previous successes of many Merchant Ivory productions. The result is an advertisement that seems designed primarily to incite American patriotism, playfully evoking Jefferson's words in the original Declaration of Independence, while simultaneously reducing films of complex national origin to expressions of an essentially American culture (Mamet is a hardboiled man of American letters, while *Run Lola Run* could easily be said to owe a heavy debt to 1980s and '90s U.S. Action cinema). At the same time, one may also laugh at the thought of such patriotism being yoked to three of the country's most notable historical foes: no one alive is likely to care about an 'English' film being promoted in an advertisement that evokes 'memories' of the Revolutionary War, but it is conceivable that some readers bristled at two former Axis powers, Germany and Japan, being substantially represented here on July 4th weekend.

What to make of all this? At the most optimistic level there is the possibility that one might read the ad as playful satire, emphasizing the lack of connection

between these two conceptions of American ‘independence’; from such a position, a reader might go on to take pleasure in the joke of representing as ‘meaningfully American’ two films that seem unlikely to fit the definition. On the other hand, it is also possible to read the ad as an expansion of an American cultural imperialism, one which raids the works of other nations and presents their acquired treasures as its own. This is the reading that would suggest *Run Lola Run* is indeed an ‘American’ film, given its emphasis upon youthful characters playing out a video-game-like action scenario²⁴⁷; here is the sort of international cinema that is acceptable within mainstream American culture. Rather than support films that convey the specificity of their local and historical national contexts, this Declaration of Independence instead protects those that confirm for Americans what they believe they already know and seemingly want to hear – that Western capitalism is a natural cultural end point and that other countries are simply engaged in a lengthy process of catching up. Finally, a fully pessimistic reading of the advertisement would note that American independence has itself now become a tool for a transnational network of global capital (the ad was run, after all, by a division of the Japanese conglomerate Sony); any attempt to explore culture according to categories of nationality here becomes a kind of naïve nostalgia.

Herein lies the American studies dilemma in the face of this present field of filmic independence: how to define its goals in a climate that has already moved past

²⁴⁷ Though even this is hotly contested: Henry Jenkins makes the point of Japanese videogame production as a political colonizer of US consciousness in “Ninetendo and New World Travel Writing: A Dialogue.”

them, and how to instruct its students to read culture when such alternate modes of cultural authority already present themselves as multiply determined, available for any number of potentially valid readings? How to realistically acknowledge the presence of a postmodernism that so destabilizes the work of academia, while also attempting to preserve a field of study that itself often seems to be an endangered national resource?

I presented this 'Declaration of Independent Film' as an indicator of the split between the Hollywood film industry and the academic field of cinema studies, itself roughly analogous to conservative and progressive trends within the field of American Studies: though there are certainly postmodern ironies to be read in the ad, it is also a simple expression of cultural authority, instructing its reader to accept its wares as 'good' because it has definitively placed them within the canon of American independent films. If there is some ambiguity as to the meaning of this category, the power remains in the hands of the studio's marketing department to manipulate this meaning as needed; similarly, the only apparent potential forum for an against-the-grain reading of the ad remains within such pages as this (obscure, marginalized) piece of academic analysis.

Indeed, one can easily imagine a practitioner of more recent humanist work in American Studies acknowledging a present debt to Cultural Studies when exploring the meanings within the ad: ultimately, despite my own list of possible positions from which to view it, the only way to get a true sense of how it was understood by Los Angeles Times readers would be to conduct a research study in

which as many of their responses as possible are quantified. Of course, there is a conflict to be found even here: much as I have presented my own list of straight and ironic responses to this 'Declaration' from the position of academic authority, so too does that authority speak for the hypothetical survey respondents, interpreting their reactions according to a methodology that, effectively, pre-screens their words.

Be they located within academic schools of Americanist thought or varying modes of film appreciation, there is a disparity between the two modes of cultural authority. In each case one can recognize both the top-down model, in which professors/marketers instruct the masses as to the cultural worth of texts, and the bottom-up model, in which Cultural Studies/ticket sales are hailed as neutral, democratic barometers of 'the people's will.' Furthermore, in all cases there is what Spanos would call an inescapable 'interestedness.' One can easily imagine, for example, the president of Sony Pictures Classics arguing that their approach leaves the final arbitration in the hands of consumers, who are free to attend any film they wish; it is their inherently democratic form of box office 'voting' that ultimately determines the worth of a motion picture, leaving the industry to merely react to the judgments of the marketplace, and then fund and advertise future product accordingly. Here is a system, quite simply, that works. Such statements are themselves echoed within reactionary works of American Studies (albeit with a notable inversion): it is the role of the academy to determine and disseminate the aesthetic value of its object of study, and it is the subsequent role of the student to

place their faith in the experience of their trained professors, read what they have been given, and thus achieve a standardized cultural literacy.

Though one system presents itself as motivated entirely by the freedom of consumer choice, and the other by the finality of academic authority, the end result is strikingly similar: a closed system of canon formation in which valuable objects that somehow elude the rigid terms of the system are easily excluded and dismissed as valueless. In the case of independent film promotion, such excluded texts are either those that are not currently making money at the box office or those that do not appear as if they will make money at the box office. Here we see a potential for what de Tocqueville called the ‘tyranny of the majority’, in which the tastes of the masses can result in a constricting conformity, all the more when applied to such a diffuse and intimidating field as the interpretation of complex works of art.

In the case of the academy, conversely, the potential is always present for the tyranny of the professors: the implication here being that the preservation of the system which maintains their power is a goal that always precedes any interest they have in the study of literature. To admit to their canon works which potentially challenge the parameters of that canon is to threaten the very apparatus that granted their power in the first place. If one were to assign, for example, Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness in an American Literature class, however much it might have to say about the sources and progenitors of United States imperialism or a novel by an obscure African-American novelist that itself bears the marks of that imperialism,

one would potentially present an over-riding challenge to the meaning of, perhaps even the possibility for a true existence of, a purely 'American' literature.

Again, one may be compelled to point out that the Sony 'Declaration of Independent Film' is enacting the opposite maneuver, destabilizing the terms of an American body of work, empowering readers to articulate their own definitions of the 'Americanness' of *Run Lola Run* or *The Winslow Boy*, or even to determine the relative worth of American Independent Film as an aesthetic category. One might further argue that the films offered here for consumption by Sony Pictures themselves represent an impressive step towards diversity, in which films that to some might appear foreign are presented as equally accessible to audiences as any crowd-pleasing Hollywood product. As with the ad's many potential ironies, however, so too with the variable means with which one approaches viewing the two films: ultimately, one's position taking in either case is rendered largely symbolic by the financial bottom line of the 'indie' film marketing. One may appreciate or ignore the irony of patriotically attending *Run Lola Run* on July 4th; the ticket price, in either case, remains the same.

A similar point can be found in John Guillory's essay "Canon, Syllabus, List: A Note on the Pedagogic Imaginary." Guillory, a figure often cited by Jonathan Rosenbaum when defending the need for film canons and authoritative film criticism, attempts a form of reconciliation between the goals of traditional American studies and the politics of its more humanist contemporary practitioners. "I am offering a criticism from the left," he writes,

of a liberal consensus whose name is ‘pluralism’ and whose pedagogic agenda has been exhausted in the gesture of opening the canon. We can indicate briefly what is at stake in the difference between a Left critique and a liberal critique by insisting upon the *incommensurability* of the terms race, class and gender ... It is by no means apparent that the representation of blacks in the literary canon has quite the same social effects as the representation of women, precisely because the representation of blacks *in the university* is not commensurable with the representation of women.²⁴⁸

Guillory succinctly articulates here the difficult ideological position of one who desires to simultaneously preserve his empowered position as an arbiter of cultural tastes while also reflecting the ideals of the political left, and his conclusion reflects a pragmatism that is all the more revealing for its rarity. Too often, his article suggests, we confuse the real social world with the symbolic cultural world, expecting, to mix political metaphors terribly, that shifts in the latter’s superstructure will somehow ‘trickle down’ to the former’s base.

Guillory’s argument thus comes to represent a leftist perspective that distances itself from an alarmist political correctness, unfairly and deliberately associated with the left, that attains media attention for a perceived hysteria but achieves few actual social gains. As he puts it, “What is excluded from the syllabus is not excluded in the *same way* that an individual is excluded as the member of a social minority, socially disenfranchised.”²⁴⁹ Moreover: “The ‘open’ canon can lay claim to representational validity in the experience not of ‘women’ or ‘blacks’ but of women or blacks in the university – which is not itself a *representative* place.”²⁵⁰

²⁴⁸ Guillory, 162 (his emphasis).

²⁴⁹ Guillory, 172 (his emphasis)

²⁵⁰ Guillory, 176 (his emphasis)

Throughout the essay, one can recognize a sense of exhaustion from the cultural misapplication of anger towards a symbolic realm at the expense of any interest in more obvious, tangible targets. Guillory concludes that it would be better to study not an abstract canon, or even a specific syllabus for a university class, but rather the admissions and hiring policies of the university itself.

As much as Guillory may find himself frustrated at a public discourse that seeks a gender- and ethnically-balanced canon without considering the potentially counter-productive effects of doing so (e.g. a misguided sense in which books ‘represent’ ethnic groups, a decline in the valuing of quality and art over a vague diversity), he is also concerned with the role of theory within the academy. Guillory refers to a similar tradition as that referred to by Spanos in The Errant Art of *Moby Dick*, in which European post-structural writers interrogate the value of the author as a perspective from which to study literature. Guillory specifically cites two men in particular:

The criticism of such notions [of the author as pure source of textual ‘greatness’] by Barthes, Foucault and others was in fact the theoretical requisite for rejecting the category of the ‘classics’ as obsolete. The author returns in the later critique of the canon, not as the genius but as the representative of a *social identity*, an identity that explains, *just as genius did*, why the texts the author produces are, or are not, canonical.²⁵¹

The differences between Spanos and Guillory, however, are clear: Guillory lays the blame for this state of affairs at theory’s doorstep, while Spanos seeks to redeem

²⁵¹ Guillory, 160-1 (his emphasis)

theory and integrate it within a humanist, politically progressive, and crucially, self-interrogating argument.

Thus, it is easy to predict that Guillory would reflexively attack the Sony 'Declaration of Independent Film' advertisement as itself encouraging a lazy acceptance of declining notions of tradition: if *Run Lola Run* and *The Winslow Boy* are read as American, his essay implies, then they are not only being misread but the very concept of American Independent cinema is being drained of meaning. Moreover, it is a lapse of academic interest in protecting the concept of the canon, and of inherent textual quality, that allows the media to assume the role of an alternate source of cultural authority in the first place, *appearing* to bring academic work to the masses (by flattering them with notions of high art and cultural respectability) without any interest in traditions or disciplines whatsoever. Or: the academic work it brings to the masses is hopelessly out-dated and over-simplified.

Spanos is just as aware as Guillory of the role theory has played in the delegitimization of canon formation; however, his work argues for an integration of the two so that a renewed sense of the canon's value is not lost to a conservative Americanist school that has recently come to power. Guillory seeks to dismiss notions of this debate as one of any immediate political significance, while Spanos' 'redemption' of theory is inextricable from his arguing for the social importance of the debate. Both writers would recognize the Sony 'Declaration' as part of an ongoing erosion of the academy's cultural authority; it is only Spanos, however, who provides a potential means to theorize the ad as simultaneously the historical result

of post-Vietnam cultural shifts and a postmodern signifier within our present media society.

Though the Sony spot is especially revealing in its many meanings and ironies, a more publicly visible instance of the blurred boundary between film promotion and 'real' political debate is perhaps more immediately useful: 2004's pointed election year contrast, throughout the mainstream media, between Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* and Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Through their repeated invocation by political columnists both in print and on major cable networks, each film was gradually reduced to an ideological touchstone, an almost synecdochic signifier of the red or blue state politics they were interpreted as representing. The narrative of each film's surprising box office success quickly became one in which the Hollywood industry had been unable to cater to audience tastes; instead, it was the field of independent American cinema that had enabled each filmmaker to speak directly to the populace.

Indeed, each film was notable for the extent to which it should have been able to attract the studios' interest: Gibson has long been one of the industry's most popular male actors²⁵² and was a previous Academy Award-winning director for *Braveheart* (1995). Similarly, Moore had won the Best Documentary Oscar for *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), thus apparently ensuring heightened bidding for his next film; however, *Fahrenheit 9/11* became entangled within a highly public dispute between the Weinstein brothers at Miramax (who had funded the film) and

²⁵² Or had been until his recent trouble with the law...

top Disney executives (who were then Miramax's financial backers). In both cases, the studio system was exposed as a location of disinterest in topicality or urgent American issues,²⁵³ instead allowing the independent arena to usurp this role. These stories were not only significant in terms of Mel Gibson's and Michael Moore's abilities to get their unlikely films made and then to see those films go on to achieve unprecedented financial success.

Crucially, they were political success stories as well. For months leading up to the 2004 U.S. election, pundits and op-ed writers frequently mused aloud as to whether or not Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* would be the first film to 'unseat a President', given its impassioned depiction of President Bush as an ineffective buffoon, caught in a conspiratorial relationship between the United States government and Arab oil concerns. Though Bush was, of course, re-elected, the result was an appearance of the American independent film movement as one that was able to respond to, perhaps even predict, the timely issues facing the nation: however one may have voted, this cine-narrative, at least, had a happy ending, one in which "indie" film is alive and well, more relevant than ever before.

But is this story accurate, and what is the level of truth behind it? The contrast between *The Passion of the Christ* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* was typically

²⁵³ This point of view was emphasized by the big studio summer release that year, of the *Manchurian Candidate* remake, which seemed designed to capitalize on the season's political conventions; one could go so far as to suggest that all three films in question are conspiracy narratives to some degree, and that it is notable that Hollywood's conspiracy remake was the one that least connected with the public at the box office. Fredric Jameson's *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* argues at length for the link between the conspiracy film and the postmodern relationship between cinema, global power and our ability to engage with each as a totalizing discourse.

represented as symptomatic of an extreme political and cultural divide across the nation, with the former appealing primarily to conservative Christians throughout the heartland, and the latter targeting an educated liberal elite that resides in large urban centers along the coasts. What if this divide did not exist? What would the success of these two films represent then? If it were indeed the case that no such divide existed, one could feasibly conclude that each film was instead granted meaning by a pervasive media discourse that placed them within a familiar narrative trope, and that ultimately, despite their apparent ‘radicalism’, they became disempowered texts. The familiar narrative trope of the independent auteur, simultaneously artist and entrepreneur, betting on a personal long shot against incredible odds, is in many ways the quintessence of the American Dream, and was consistently visible throughout the promotion of each film. Ultimately, in the absence of a genuine culture war, each film would thus become ‘about’ little more than their own phenomenal success.

To ask such a question, about the veracity of a current American culture war, is in some ways inherently to threaten sources of cultural power, both academic and media-based. This is due in part to the fact that, in order to effectively answer such a question, one is forced to embrace the sorts of long-range statistical studies that are so common to practitioners of Cultural Studies and so threatening to those who instead engage in more traditional forms of reactionary scholarship. Also, to attempt to consider the question of the culture war’s status is to itself engage in the current trend within an increasingly interdisciplinary American Studies to investigate the

political meanings of United States cultures from simultaneously textual and sociological positions. The implication of such work is that the existing power structures of cultural authority have previously informed the public of the cultural 'truths' they have chosen to disseminate (based on little more than the tautology of their proclamations' self-worth), rather than actually listening to the democracy at their door and responding to the actuality of its citizens' cultural choices. Finally, one must acknowledge the extent to which, in its attempts to investigate the relationship between mass culture and its political contexts, the culture war has attained a genuine, 'real' status within the academy, but is consistently misrepresented, dumbed-down, and rendered in hysterical, 'fantastic' fashion by public media accounts of it.

Morris P. Fiorina, in his study Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America, combines extensive statistical research with insightful media analysis to suggest that the apparent divide which gives meaning to the successes of *The Passion of the Christ* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* is indeed largely illusory. Though he is not directly interested in the role of academia in this state of affairs, Fiorina speaks passionately about the lapsed responsibilities of the mainstream press in representing such political material to the American public:

Despite pious pronouncements about the role of the media as the guardian of democracy, the media consist largely of profit-sector enterprises that will continue to behave as such. That means an emphasis on differences among Americans rather than commonalities. The commercial success of the newspapers and news shows depends on good story lines, and conflict is a good story line. 'Americans agree on core values' is not a good lead for the evening news. A red and blue battleground over which the Democrats and Republicans

wage war is a news frame that fits the selection principles of the news industry.²⁵⁴

In many ways, the value of Spanos' and Guillory's work lies in their desire to expose similar operations within the academic world and, in the process, resolve them; each offers a productively centrist attempt to reconcile progressive humanist academic work (often reductively identified with 'the left') with the concept of cultural value (evoking the moral certainty typically invoked by 'the right'). Earlier, I drew a parallel between the elite academic work of American Studies and the more public discourse of auteur celebration by comparing the words of Thoreau to those of Jarmusch, respectively. The similarity between the two sets of quotations reminds one of what is currently at stake – not merely the meaning of the American Independent film(maker) but the role of academia itself in having power to shape that meaning.

Similarly, it is ironic that both *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *The Passion of the Christ* were both reduced to elements within a familiar political narrative, given that each is in many ways more directly a conspiracy film about the evil machinations of hidden power networks. Though Gibson's film seems in many ways meant to appeal to those seeking out timeless Biblical values, and thus was not likely read by many as directly commenting on contemporary politics (beyond, perhaps, a potential threat of increased anti-Semitism), Moore's is quite often an explicit conspiracy narrative, worth considering in ways that extend beyond red state vs. blue state paradigms. For example, a lengthy passage of *Fahrenheit 9/11* is devoted to mocking the media's

²⁵⁴ Fiorina, 105.

own craven encouragement of public fear, even hysteria, in order to keep viewers' eyes glued to the cable news networks for advice on how to cope: the montage in question includes footage of citizens stocking up on duct tape, to protect homes from biological attack, and trying on personal parachutes, the better to survive future plane crashes into office towers.

More powerful is the film's invocation of George Orwell at its conclusion, suggesting that the current state of affairs transcends the easy answer of George W. Bush as a political scapegoat, but instead is the end result of unacknowledged power relations contained within a Western capitalist class system:

It is not a matter of whether the war is not real or if it is. Victory is not possible. The war is not meant to be won. It is meant to be continuous. A hierarchical society is only possible on the basis of poverty and ignorance. This new version is the past and no different past can ever have existed. In principle, the war effort is always planned to keep society on the brink of starvation. The war is waged by the ruling group against its own subjects. And its object is not the victory over Eurasia or East Asia, but to keep the very structure of society intact.²⁵⁵

Despite being made to speak their immediate historical contexts, each of these films makes striking gestures towards transcending them: Moore's by giving the ultimate word to an indictment of broader economic and political structures, and Gibson's by emphasizing the violent persecution of Christ to the point of non-narrative, almost avant-garde abstraction. (In many ways, the canniest box office strategy of *The Passion of the Christ* was its unwillingness to have a point, the better to enable it to be co-opted by a variety of other speakers.)

²⁵⁵ George Orwell, 1984, as quoted in *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

Though the ultimate conclusion to be drawn from Orwell's words is extreme, it is worth considering here: the present United States culture war serves an essentially similar purpose to that of both the contemporary war on terror and a more general history of American imperial violence. Fiorina's statistical survey of recent election returns and voter responses itself goes so far as to conclude that the present cultural polarization is essentially an Orwellian fiction, constructed by the media: "The simple truth is that there is no culture war in the United States."²⁵⁶ Instead, by carefully analyzing data and voting patterns from a cross-section of citizens, Fiorina's researchers were forced to conclude that no statistically significant difference could be found between most Democratic and Republican supporters on such apparently vital election issues as abortion, gay marriage and the relationship between church and state. What is going on here? The narrative through which American culture attempted to make sense of the 2004 election itself appears to be false, a construction of the media. Moreover, the narrative of the success of two small American independent films, in which the mainstream media is depicted as out of touch with the general public and an alternative, grass-roots sphere of independence is shown conversely to be vital, is itself but another fiction, created by the same media sources that the narrative seems designed to fundamentally challenge.

The most obvious immediate answer to this is to remember that, of course, 'the media' is not itself a monolith, occupying a fixed political position and directly

²⁵⁶ Fiorina, 5.

disseminating approved opinions to a willing public. In many ways, it shares with American democracy an important ongoing sense of itself as a fluid, present-tense experiment, ever adapting and shifting to external historical and cultural factors. If the successes of *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *The Passion of the Christ* implicate a mainstream corporate media that has effectively disenfranchised vast sections of the American public by making vacuous films that entertain at the expense of content, then the narrative of those successes will in turn fuel a reciprocal windfall for another branch of the very same media system: namely, talk radio, newspaper editorial columns, and cable news networks' current events debate panels. Just as there is an immediately obvious quality to such a conclusion, so too is it natural to recall that such a state of affairs is nothing new, though it may be in the interest of the contemporary media oligopoly to suggest otherwise.

There are many practitioners of what I have been calling a reactionary, conservative trend within American Studies, who argue for the contemporary state of affairs as an 'end of history,' to use Francis Fukuyama's phrase. Similarly, it is too easy to resort to Baudrillard-esque proclamations about 'The Gulf War Not Taking Place', or announcing a similarly inescapable 'end of meaning.' Indeed, Spanos locates such a school of thought as one of his primary targets, emphasizing this by ending his book with the line "I offer Moby Dick not as alternative but contribution to a New Americanist mode that will counter this insidious 'end of history' discourse."²⁵⁷ Such work is in part a response to the recognition that post-structural

²⁵⁷ Spanos, 278.

modes of thought and postmodern operations of cultural power have rendered academia sufficiently public, visible, politicized, and subject to the polarities of the media's culture wars, that the image of attempting to 'unmake' an omelet comes to mind. Is such a blurring of boundaries now inescapable?

Spanos and Guillory are at least thinking dialectically: each is attempting to progress past the deadlock of seemingly irreconcilable arguments (hence the former's ambivalence over New Americanist approaches). The implications of the paradigms to which they respond are indeed dire: to suggest that present historical circumstances are somehow inherently exceptional is also on some level to ignore history in attempting to account for them and, instead, blindly invest one's faith in the apocalyptic fervor with which they are invoked by reigning arbiters of cultural power. The almost inevitable hysteria reflected within such a discourse makes it particularly easy to recognize the ways in which both academic and media-based systems of contemporary cultural power are able to presently sustain an almost synergistic system of interdependent symbiosis.

At the most fundamental level, one can simply remark that the very notion of an immediate end of history in sight is in itself a 'good news story': if American culture is presently engaged within the gravest possible struggle for the survival of its ideals, its nation and its citizens, then an increased number of those citizens will display an intensified interest in the ongoing progress of that struggle. Such a state of affairs, however accurate, is good for business; for example, though there are many perspectives from which the events of September 11th, 2001 might be viewed as a

decisive end point (a climactic reaction to years of politically motivated and selective intervention, aid and violence committed by the United States), throughout the mainstream media 9/11 is typically depicted to be a date of new birth, of awakening to a changed world and an unfamiliar conflict, devoid of meaningful roots or a valid past. Sadly, this is merely the most recent instance of a postmodern collusion between academic and populist systems of cultural power.

One may choose to embrace the tempting sanity of Morris Fiorina's level-headed, statistical research, and thus announce that, as with Baudrillard's first Gulf War, the Culture War did not take place; however, such a conclusion may be premature and, finally, not fully accurate. The Culture War does indeed wage on, and it cannot be reduced to a pure fiction invented by media sources interested only in the revenue generated by higher ratings. Instead, it is crucial to recognize that it wages on within both the halls of academe and throughout the many acquired networks, newspapers, publishing houses and movie studios that now comprise contemporary entertainment conglomerates. The question is not one of whether the war is taking place, but for whom? What roles does this war play in the lives of a general public; does it exist for any function beyond a sense of urgently important news-entertainment?

In attempting to propose a way to extricate ourselves from the current media culture war, Fiorina suggests a greater sobriety on the part of the systems representing that war: "the media could ... cease its unconsidered use of the neutral

term ‘activist’ and use terms that are often more accurate – exhibitionist, crackpot, blowhard.”²⁵⁸ He is responding here to a system which conveniently forgets that:

because purists hold their views more intensely than ordinary people do, their operating style differs from that of most people. They are completely certain of their views: they are right and their opponents are wrong. Moreover, their opponents are not just misguided or misinformed, but corrupt, stupid, evil, or all three. There can be no compromise because truth does not compromise with error. Their issues are too serious to permit any levity to enter the discussion. Angry attacks substitute for reasoned discussion.²⁵⁹

Most striking about Fiorina’s conclusions is the way they evoke the George Orwell quotation that Michael Moore reads at the close of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, suggesting that the Culture War is itself not meant ever to be won, but is instead simply meant to be continuous; from this perspective, the implication that systems of media might willingly choose to end it are ludicrous, given that they are the ones most directly profiting from it. Indeed, one might be inclined to suggest that it is conversely the responsibility of academia to respond with a measured, less alarmist corrective, in which actual debate replaces the spectacular simulations of same that are most commonly represented on TV.

Unfortunately, however, many of the very same ‘crackpots’ and ‘exhibitionists’ to whom Fiorina is referring in his study are themselves representatives of academic power; the debates which currently grip American Studies are all too easily reduced to a battle over the value and meaning of political correctness. This state of affairs can be traced back to the late 1970s and the

²⁵⁸ Fiorina, 105.

²⁵⁹ Fiorina, 102.

emergence of an American culture struggling to reconcile the simultaneous status of its place within a post-Vietnam and re-energized Cold War climate. It is worth recalling that, despite the approaches of many in American Studies who devalued the study of film, by the time of the New Hollywood, one could already begin to see this blur between academia and the work of the culture industry take hold. The college-educated movie brat directors were inevitably exposed to new theoretical ideas, while the academy would use their films, featuring repeated challenges to classical modes of filmmaking, to further their own support for those theoretical approaches. Moreover, Donald Pease, in his article “New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon,” makes a case for this boundary blurring as a primary legacy of the countercultural era:

[S]tudents ... voiced their refusal to acknowledge the difference between the cultural and the public realm ... a political realm that had become for them indistinguishable from a utopian romance ... When students demanded from their public world what American characters had demanded in romance, they denied the imaginary separation, predicated by the Liberal Imagination, between the cultural and the political. Consequently, their politics literalized, in the public world, the imaginary of the American Romance.²⁶⁰

And, as suggested earlier, these are the roots of the present moment of American Independent film that serve to distinguish it from the modes of independence visible during the post-war crisis of the studio system. First, it is a period of aggressive conglomeration throughout the culture industries, both on the level of the film industry’s connection to global financial networks, as well as a renewed system of studio monopolies. The post-war mode of independence could

²⁶⁰ Pease, 26.

not have been possible without the successful conclusion of the U.S. government's set of anti-trust lawsuits which allowed theatre owners a greater flexibility in booking product for their screens. By the 1980s, the industry had solidified a new system of ancillary horizontal integration that has become a de facto vertical integration, with the previous product of 'film' now replaced by the post-Fordist, postmodern conception of an 'entertainment property' or 'concept' fueling the system. During this period, the Reagan administration also overturned the ruling of the earlier anti-trust decision, allowing studios to return to owning theatre chains; the thinking behind this decision itself seeming to reflect a way to maintain the appearance of rejecting monopolies, while ultimately enabling a new era of corporate dominance.

That is to say, because the studios were no longer functioning as they did in the classic studio era – a perfect vertical system of production, distribution and exhibition – they could no longer achieve a monopolistic hold over film product and thus should be free to return to the business of exhibiting film. The effect, however, was to allow movie studios to redefine themselves as entertainment conglomerates, sole entities with total, unrestrained access to any potential medium for conveying any given entertainment product-commodity-text. Witness here a shift from the concrete operation of producing film to the invisible machinations of enabling package concepts to adapt to various media molds: a novel, a television show, a film, a theme park ride, a videogame, a series of action figures.

Secondly, concurrent with these media industry developments, one can witness an equivalent shift in terms of cultural debate, again consistently away from the real and instead towards the symbolic. I am thinking here primarily of the sense of palpable exasperation throughout John Guillory's essay on current debates around expanding the canon, in which he repeatedly stresses the distinction between the exclusion of blacks and other minorities from white social privilege, and the exclusion of black-authored novels from a predominantly white-authored canon. Again, such debates are exacerbated during the 1980s and 1990s by the type of hysterical, alarmist media representation attacked by Fiorina – a renewed interest in tabloid journalism on television represented by the almost parodic excesses of *Hard Copy* and *A Current Affair* (themselves now arguably morphed into the minimally more respectable Fox News Network), as well as the always potentially violent discussions on talk shows hosted by Geraldo Rivera and Jerry Springer. Again, particularly with *The Jerry Springer Show*, there is the sense of a satiric mode at work which allows viewers to engage with the program at the level of parody; indeed, there continues to be a sufficiently wide array of subjects and guests on the program that would easily support arguments for the show's Bakhtinian, Carnavalesque, even subversive status.

Perhaps as a response to such vaguely coded expressions of news-entertainment as an inherently self-parodying concept, in recent years many have identified a trend in which many young people get their news from explicitly parodic sources: the Weekend Update segment of *Saturday Night Live*, the on-line weekly

The Onion, and, most notably, Comedy Central's award-winning²⁶¹ *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. This latter program has increasingly found itself directly engaged with contemporary debates about the value and reliability of mainstream news reporting in the media, most notably during a heated exchange between former stand-up comedian Stewart and the hosts of CNN's ostensibly more serious and respectable *Crossfire*, October 15, 2004, in which it was suggested that the official news source ultimately delivers only content-free entertainment, while the acknowledged news report committed to irony and satire offered consistently more thoughtful and open-minded exchanges with guests representing a greater degree of the contemporary political spectrum.

There is a sense in which the present-day atmosphere, in which such a program as *The Daily Show* can become a consistently award-winning source of genuine news and current events information, could only have arisen as a response to the perceived 'absurdities' and excesses of the 1980s, developments themselves linked to a more general conservative backlash against perceived liberal, countercultural 'damage' during the Vietnam era. This is not to suggest that issues of identity politics or attempts to achieve equality and social justice through greater attention to politically correct language are themselves inherently flawed or even misguided; on the contrary, it is my suggestion that they were instead systematically misrepresented as such by media systems that sought simultaneously to, first, generate profit, by allowing 'crackpots' and 'extremists' to represent what should

²⁶¹ The show has won both Emmys (for its status as quality television) and Peabody Awards (for excellence *as journalism*).

have been a sober-minded academic discourse, thus attracting a viewership interested in the sensationalism of their viewpoints, and, second, to support a conservative agenda during a time of media deregulation, consolidation and ‘vertical’ horizontal integration. To accomplish this was also to defeat the perceived Vietnam syndrome affecting American culture throughout the 1980s (only after the first Gulf War in the early 1990s is this syndrome thought to have been ‘cured’ by the first President Bush); political correctness thus became a means to valorize weakness and attack national traditions, in the form of challenges to established canons of officially acceptable, ‘classic’ art works.

From this perspective, one can recognize the trend away from the auteur-driven works that fueled Hollywood throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and towards a more producer-driven product in the Spielberg-Lucas era, as meaningfully related to the controversies and cutbacks that beset the National Endowment for the Arts during the Reagan era. In a harsh and revealing contrast from the modes and sources of public art supported by Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration – the socialist murals of Diego Rivera, the attacks on capitalism throughout the musical *The Cradle Will Rock* – the treatment of the Endowment during the Reagan era seemed unfortunately ignorant of the implications of supporting art that would not be produced otherwise. That is to say, the uplifting populism of *E.T.* and the *Star Wars* trilogy are self-sustaining; their optimistic entertainment value allowed them to receive studio funding, extensive marketing, and an almost built-in sense of inevitable public support.

By way of contrast, government subsidizing of art thus bears a responsibility to support materials, topics, and artists whose value is not immediately commercial; it is notable, for example, that the WPA did not see fit to fund the production of Hollywood films during the Depression²⁶², though many have credited the studios for helping ‘get the country through those years.’ By the time of Robert Mapplethorpe’s graphically homoerotic photography, pointedly explicit during a time of public silence, ambivalence and embarrassment around the AIDS epidemic, the perception of the NEA had now shifted to reflect a perceived desire for a cultural, as well as political, response to the national Vietnam syndrome. The NEA was thus left to fund modes of art sufficiently comforting to not require NEA funding.

The ideological, political uncertainties of the era, then, suggesting a divided nation, seeking on the one hand to ‘progress’ beyond an extended period of leftist dissent, while at the same time struggling to continue to hold its government accountable for extreme social disparities of wealth and power, are at this time particularly aligned with debates over the meaning and value of art; struggles to attain political consensus are now especially analogous to struggles over the status of popular mass entertainment. To this end, it is especially enlightening to recall the work of Pierre Bourdieu, relying as it does on concepts of power both explicitly economic and culturally symbolic. Bourdieu, for example, presents a means to recall that the operations of academic power at this time are easily deployed in support of

²⁶² There were many films during the depression, such as the Marx. Bros’ *Duck Soup* (1933), that displayed the National Recovery Administration’s ‘Blue Eagle’ logo to announce their support of New Deal policies.

the Reagan administration's political goals, while agents of economic power that oppose such goals are themselves just as easily manipulated, or 'spun.'

As David Swartz notes in his work on Bourdieu, "[he] sees intellectual pursuits as all fundamentally interested pursuits despite their symbolic character – [to this end, he deploys] a conceptual strategy designed to expose what [he] perceives to be one of the most vital but unacknowledged interests of intellectuals: their 'interest in disinterestedness.'"²⁶³ If Swartz is revealing here that all academic work is fundamentally tied to the dominant economic and political interests of the state, then why is it worth considering the operations of the academy during the era of the Vietnam Syndrome to be meaningfully different? I would suggest that the answer to this question can be found in the very exposure at this time of academia as itself an interested discourse, a stratagem handily pre-disempowering unpopular viewpoints as dismissible for their 'obvious' bias. Again, such pitfalls present themselves as pitiable coefficients of the postmodern equation, given its ostensibly optimistic reactions to an ossifying divide between an uncritical low culture and an intellectual high culture represented by modernism. Now, instead of enabling criticism of modernism to reach mass audiences, postmodern culture instead threatens to negate such criticism by reducing it to the same commodity status as all other entertainment texts. Thus, the crackpots and extremists Fiorina bemoans observing on *Crossfire* and their ilk ultimately convey little more than a sense of the academy as a location in which the remaining liberal loonies of the Vietnam era do cultural battle with

²⁶³ Swartz, 72-73.

those who would protect the important traditions of an American canon, whilst deploying the latter to assuage a nation caught in the feverish grip of the dreaded Vietnam syndrome.

Swartz' reading of Pierre Bourdieu is again enlightening here; his article identifies three operations performed by symbolic systems of capital – cognition, communication, and social differentiation. The conflicts expressed during the 1980s between academic and media-based systems of cultural authority emphasize the latter process in action. Swartz notes that Bourdieu's emphasis is on this concept of differentiation when he writes:

symbolic systems not only provide cognitive and integrative functions but also serve as *instruments of domination*. Dominant symbolic systems provide integration for dominant groups, distinction and hierarchies for ranking groups, and legitimation of social ranking by encouraging the dominated to accept the existing hierarchies of social distinction. They therefore fulfill a political function.²⁶⁴

In considering such concepts of Bourdieu's, Swartz utilizes a particularly apt example for present purposes: explaining the process by which cultural capital can be used to support the ongoing relations of economic capital, Swartz suggests wealthy individuals or corporations can easily attain 'symbolic legitimation' through their philanthropic support of American Public Broadcasting networks. There is much to suggest that this is the ultimate reason for Hollywood studios' investment in independent films and, now, independent divisions of their own companies; by developing this talent and then integrating it into their own, more commercial work,

²⁶⁴ Swartz, 83 (his emphasis)

that work is on some level made culturally legitimate, valuable beyond mere entertainment status.

To consider the processes of this integration, one must return to a direct engagement with the style and content of the American independent film during this historical moment; often, when referring to the early years of the Sundance film festival, a number of critics, particularly when it was still ‘the United States Film Festival’, typically referred to its product as a kind of earnest ‘granola’ cinema. As discussed in previous chapters, many such films tended to suggest an inherent conservatism in their rural, low-budget responses to the perceived excesses, be they of violence, sexuality, or language, throughout Hollywood cinema. Films such as *1918* (1985), *On Valentine’s Day* (1986) and *Desert Bloom* (1986), would easily be championed by the National Endowment for the Arts as a more respectable, legitimate, canon-worthy form of American art; indeed, given the low-budget, non-Hollywood status of such works, they would even seem worthy of government funding, the better to give them an opportunity to be made. By the time of the festival’s takeover by Robert Redford’s Sundance institute, an intriguing potential for a tragic emplotment occurs: the authenticity of the ‘United States’ label is replaced with the character name closely linked to a famous Hollywood celebrity; the increased presence of Hollywood producers and agents means the talent at the festival will now be absorbed into the very system they are meant to oppose; and, with the emergence of Quentin Tarantino in the early 1990s, the sincere regionalism of the American Independent film is quickly replaced by an easily marketable, hip

urban irony. Authenticity is replaced by defiant artifice, and the filmmakers who embrace this shift are the ones who receive publicity and financial support.

There has been an intriguing parallel trend, however, of films that seek to address this very emplotment of 'indie' regionalism threatened by self-reflexive formal play, fundamentally questioning the meaning of this discourse around the American independent cinema. What is its obligation to address American traditions, to react against a dominant Hollywood cinema, to display a documentary influence in depicting neglected settings and social classes, to acknowledge a postmodern cultural mode that rightly mistrusts any claims to absolute authenticity as suspect for their hidden 'interestedness' (to use both Bourdieu's and Spanos' term)? I am thinking here of a series of films, from Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* follow-up, *The Last Movie* (1971), Wim Wenders' *Paris, Texas* (1984) and Mika Kaurismaki's *Tigero: A Film That Was Never Made* to such more recent examples as *Gummo*, *Dead Man*, *Box of Moonlight* (1996) and *Gerry* (2002), that consistently engage with, and at times even directly hybridize these two apparently opposed filmic modes. This is not simply an opposition of crowd-pleasing Hollywood elements and more esoteric high-brow appeal (through many of them also do this); instead, each of these films combines an interest in what Leo Marx would call, in *The Machine in the Garden*, a 'simple pastoralism' with a simultaneous engagement in self-mocking, perhaps even deconstructive play.

In this mode of independent American cinema, the category itself is questioned (especially given that Wenders and Kaurismaki's films are coded by their

backgrounds in European Art cinema), as well as the ability of that category to convey any degree of cultural meaning. If the pre-Tarantino, pre-Sundance output at the United States Film Festival suggested a conservative American heartland responding to Hollywood's cultural elitism and decadence and the post-Tarantino Sundance film wallowed in the absence of moral value that, we are told, has now finally led to a second term in office for George W. Bush, then this subset of films will take precisely these contrasts as their primary subject, to the point of proposing that such a narrative is itself an interested fiction and that cultural truths lie elsewhere. Like Guillory and Spanos, such trends of filmmaking will attempt to move past simple cultural binaries; as with Pease's formulation, they will suggest a refusal to acknowledge a difference between cultural work and academic inquiry.

The depiction of the American landscape, be it the representation of breathtaking, natural vistas or a hard-working middle class heartland, has notably and meaningfully evolved over the quarter-century since the appearance of this post-Sundance movement of independent cinema. What began as an iconography of sincerity and authenticity has been replaced with discourses of simulacra and irony; indeed, the American independent film now displays a chronic, tenuous synthesis of previously disparate modes represented by the aforementioned 'granola' tradition and postmodern, post-Tarantino self-reflexivity and violence. The 'granola' tendencies of the movement's early years represented an attempt to define what might be called an official national cinema, defined as much by a film's intrinsic characteristics as it was by the modes of art it starkly opposed: on the one hand, such

films were *not* Hollywood productions, given their lack of star power and production polish, while, on the other, they were also *not* controversial, as perhaps most strikingly represented by the infamous photography of Robert Mapplethorpe.

Mapplethorpe's explicit, black and white depictions of boundary-pushing homosexual acts, often featuring genitalia in decontextualized close-up, helped to ignite an outcry over the context of work supported by the National Endowment for the Arts (indeed, such skirmishes in the Culture Wars can still be seen today, as in the recent case of Andres Serrano's 'Piss Christ' photograph in New York City). The independent cinema that was originally featured at the United States Film Festival, before it received the notoriety generated by Robert Redford's Sundance branding and Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies and videotape*, was often funded by American public television and applauded more for its politically correct status as an indication of a healthy and diverse culture, than for any inherent aesthetic merit. These were films more likely to please Republican commentators bemoaning the state of the national character than they would any critical establishment likely to cover them.

Indeed, the circumstances could be productively compared to the 'quota quickie' phenomenon that appeared throughout Europe after the second World War, in which American producers enabled indigenous filmmaking talent to create movies that ostensibly reflected their own cultures so that Hollywood could export product to them without extinguishing the possibility of indigenous national cinemas. Now, however, it is American national culture itself under perceived threat from Hollywood; nevertheless, the metaphor of cultural colonization is both fruitful and

entirely apt. Many national cinemas seek simultaneously to record and preserve their own cultures while also making product on low budgets that is meaningfully different from their opposition in Hollywood: the result is often an initial trend toward documentary approaches, perhaps most obviously recognizable in the post-war Italian Neo-Realist movement. Only by the time Italian cinema had successfully sustained itself could it enter into a lengthy period of baroque modernism, ranging from the grotesques populating Fellini's circuses to the minimalism of Antonioni's urban alienation.

So too with the American independent film's embrace of America as its own subject: in response to the countercultural warfare at home during the 1960s and 1970s, an 'official' American national cinema arises, notably reactionary in tone. As the American Independent film establishes its own self-sufficiency in the 1990s, such documentary preservation itself is free to become stylized. The narrative of this development within the discourse of the 'indie' – from PBS Playhouse production to the surrealism of *Gummo*, *Gerry*, *Dead Man* and their kin – is largely one of a movement away from simple definitions of 'the real', as expressed filmically, and towards an examination of the nation's landscape that cannot avoid acknowledging the role of simulation and irony as influences upon both its reception and construction. Indeed, if the function of the films produced at the outset of this independent movement is largely one of reassurance – to offer comfort, to represent tradition, to guard against change – then this more recent tendency within such films depicting the landscape is to exoticize and to make unfamiliar. Extending the

metaphor of cultural colonization a step further, it becomes necessary to ask: to what extent is the American Independent film engaged at this time in a project of Orientalizing both itself and the American landscape? To what end?

Edward W. Said is of course most immediately associated with concepts of Orientalism both in the eponymous work of literary criticism, and its successor, Culture and Imperialism. A primary thesis recurrent throughout both works is the fundamental understanding that works of art – primarily, in Spanos’ view, the novel – are far more effective at enabling and enacting the subjugation of a colonized force through their very naturalism, than explicit exertion of physical violence or restraint. Because they are read primarily in terms of narrative satisfaction, novels are able to more subtly naturalize their depiction of foreign people and places as lesser, ‘other’, primitive, or purely emotive through elements of description and tone. Obviously, given his choice of title, Said’s primary interest is the interaction of Western and Eastern cultures: by depicting the inhabitants of Africa, the Middle East and others as fundamentally strange, mysterious exotics, the novels of civilized Europe (and, later, the United States) are able to, effectively, condition those at home to accept their rulers’ colonization and enslavement of distant peoples.

It thus becomes instructive to examine the nature of the American Independent film’s project of ‘Orientalizing the West’ through the recent trend of cinema that self-consciously exoticizes, defamiliarizes, and generally makes foreign that which has been previously viewed as the source of a familiar, easily recognized national soul. Perhaps Said’s most basic point in Orientalism is his portrayal of the

concept as fundamentally an economic discourse, while acknowledging the pre-existence of purely ‘academic’ and more generalized ‘imaginative’ forms of the process. “Orientalism,” he writes, “can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient.”²⁶⁵ It is notable that Said’s Orientalism is itself a development out of earlier, more benign modes with which to view and to know the East. As with the recent American ‘indie,’ a narrative is presented: one of objective means of knowing a landscape giving way to those that are decidedly subjective, as a direct result of the potential for profit.

The narrative described by Said is one in which Western culture is employed by the peoples of Europe to facilitate and even perform the work of colonialism as required. In order for the West to justify and perpetuate its control over its interests throughout Asia and Africa, it must utilize its poets and novelists to perpetuate stereotypes of the conquered lands and their peoples as less rational, less prone to self-governing, less intelligent, less articulate, less civilized, and finally, less than human. Instead of this potential for equivalency, the ‘Orientals’ are instead inherently exotic, mysterious, unknowable, ‘othered,’ and are thus in desperate need of Western control, for their own good.

²⁶⁵ Said, 3.

There are striking parallels between this now-familiar narrative of Said's, and the less overt narrative of the recent American independent film's trend towards exoticizing the American landscape. As with Said, for example, the ostensibly objective-realist mode of the PBS-funded (or at least 'PBS-style') American independent cinema quickly gives way to irony and otherness when the potential for substantial profit is made manifest in the late 1980s. From this perspective, such 'indie-ism' becomes an industry-derived mode of self-Orientalism in which the non-Hollywood films, funded by an increasingly studio-based apparatus of talent agents, cross-over stars, and conglomerate-owned 'classics' divisions such as Fox Searchlight or Warner Independent Pictures, become increasingly reliant on depictions of the American landscapes as an 'other', a mysterious, surreal zone of colorful eccentrics and inexpressible knowledge. Perhaps the most significant example of this mode of independence is Jim Jarmusch's western, *Dead Man*, notable for its simultaneous depiction of this trend in comic lunacy (a traditional genre made unfamiliar with cannibalistic, cross-dressing bounty hunters) and, more importantly, its engagement with the figure of the American Indian as himself a genuinely, historically Orientalized figure. Jarmusch's film has a special significance for its dual position as a film that both embodies this trend and comments upon its historicity by directly depicting an American legacy of Orientalism during its years of genocide towards the continent's natives.

Before examining this progression in close detail by first considering works of attempted sincerity regarding such American signifiers, such as *Box of Moonlight*,

and then moving to subsequent examples of Orientalizing those same signifiers, in films such as *Gummo*, *Gerry*, *Slacker*, *Paris, Texas*, *Tigrero* and *Dead Man*, it is worth recalling Said's own evaluation of the American role in the ongoing Western project of Orientalism, the better to understand the nation's fundamental paradoxes and contradictions in engaging with it. One cannot escape the fact, for example, that the American character has its roots in a self-definition that defiantly contrasts itself with the Old World of Europe; the fundamentally European legacy of Orientalism thus would naturally be included in the characteristics to be avoided in the new social experiment undertaken by the founding fathers. Said even notes, provocatively, that "there was no deeply invested tradition of Orientalism [throughout the early United States] ... the American Transcendentalists saw affinities between Indian thought and their own."²⁶⁶ America is thus always already caught within the double bind of seeing itself as a defining Western power and itself an 'other' to be defined in conscious opposition to prior oppressive traditions. The nation's genius of expressing ideology through cultural means is handily summarized by this seemingly impossible duality: on the one hand, America is a nation of powerful White Men, depicting the 'Indian-infested' Western frontier as an Orient of its own to be tamed and controlled, while on the other, the nation remains a stirring example of the colony that rejected its European rule and was able to achieve meaningful self-definition. This paradox will be explored as a key structuring device throughout such films as *Dead Man*, with its ability to simultaneously valorize and

²⁶⁶ Said, 290.

satirize the West through images of beauty and violence juxtaposed. For the moment, it is worth considering the circumstances surrounding America's eventual assumption of its status as primary global Orientalizer, concurrent with its emergence as the defining superpower of the West.

As Said notes, this process does not occur fully until the aftermath of World War II, which saw a series of former European empires crumbling economically while the United States was able to enjoy a financial boom from its own industrial war machine, a machine used decisively to end the war with a horrific exertion of power over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In order to preserve such a global position, argues Said, it became necessary for the United States to pick up where Europe left off, assuming the project of Orientalism by studying the East, culturally and academically, in order to establish and protect its military and material interests throughout the region. The project of American Orientalism, then, is inextricably linked to the legacy of both the Cold War and Vietnam.

Such a legacy, however, fundamentally links the political, economic and academic components of American self-definition: just as the Cold War era represents the country's assumption of the dominant role in global affairs and commerce, so too does it mark the moment at which American universities begin to contribute to and interrogate such affairs in earnest. This is the moment at which the practitioners of American Studies can demonstrate that Melville's whale anticipated the climate of the Cold War; in so doing, they are able to suggest that the United

States was thus predestined both to face such a conflict and to be defined by the side it would inevitably take in that conflict.

The inescapable paradox of this American assumption of an Orientalist position, given the nation's explicit rejection of Old World tropes and internal ambivalence towards potentially imperialist projects, is well chronicled throughout Christina Klein's Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961. Klein is adept at enumerating and interrogating the numerous complexities inherent in an American extension of the European legacy depicted throughout Said's work: as she explains at the outset of her study, for example, "This [post-war] expansion of U.S. power did not occur in a smooth and uncontested fashion ... It coincided – and existed in tension with – the revolutionary process of decolonization."²⁶⁷ Much as Paul Lauter championed the self-scrutiny of most work in American Studies, or as Spanos emphasized his own interestedness as a defense against repeating the mistakes of his predecessors, so too does Klein reiterate the unique, even 'exceptional' American engagement with Orientalism after World War II. Not only did this process occur during a time of decolonization, itself necessitating the superpower that would assume Britain's role of influence to concoct an 'Orientalism-that-was-not-Orientalism', but it also took place during a time of public desire for isolationism, a return of sorts to the pre-war context.

Klein cites the scholarship of several peers who, as a result of these conditions, have suggested that, for example "post-World War II American culture is

²⁶⁷ Klein, 5.

better understood via a model of ... post-Orientalism. In scholar Melani McAlister's analysis of the relationship between expanding U.S. interests in the Middle East and popular media representations, she discovered that the meanings the Middle East has carried for Americans over the past fifty years have been 'far more mobile, flexible, and rich than the Orientalism binary would allow.'"²⁶⁸ Klein is herself more directly interested in the Far East and its depictions throughout mainstream culture – in such magazines as Reader's Digest and the Saturday Evening Post, as well as Hollywood spectacles *The King and I* (1956), *South Pacific* (1958), *Sayonara* (1957) and the like. Her historical placement of such texts crucially emphasizes a public awareness of America's potential hypocrisy in such international diplomacy during a time of intense racial unrest at home, as well as a growing body of post-war scholarship that "explored how the geographical extension of American power was enabled by the myth of the frontier, by popular narratives of savage war and Indian hating, and by domestic narratives that imagined expansion as a process of expelling racial Otherness from an ever-expanding nation figured as home."²⁶⁹

Just as the 'post-Sundance' mode of American independent cinema is a meaningful evolution from the post-war independent productions facilitated by the anti-trust suit resolution, so too does the contemporary "indie" discourse of 'Orientalizing the West' bear traces of a similar historical equivalent. The civil rights legacy, combined with a new scholarly awareness of America's own legacies of Orientalism, suggests that this American imperialism will inevitably be defined, at

²⁶⁸ Klein, 15.

²⁶⁹ Klein, 10.

least in part, by an acknowledgment of its own internal segregations, subjugations and conquests. And, as with the distinction between the independence of Fuller and Ray and that of Soderbergh and Jarmusch, the crucial question for our present purposes becomes: What is the difference between this American Orientalism as discovered throughout the 1950s and that which I call 'Orientalizing the West', visible throughout a postmodern, heavily ironic post-Sundance era?

The question of irony appears to relate fundamentally to such issues, working in tandem with the collective "post"-ness of recent American independent film. The mode of cinema under consideration here is inescapably postmodern: it will frequently be seen to combine the intelligence of elitist modernism with the mainstream pleasures that are anything but high art. It is also a post-structural cinema: one rarely encounters independent films that easily allow themselves to be reduced to binary oppositions. Given that Orientalism at its most basic concept is predicated on assumed differences between East and West, it will be necessary to acknowledge the slippery signifiers and fluid positions of spectatorship offered throughout the films in question. Indeed, a large part of the appeal of the American 'indie' is based on assumptions of education and sophistication on the part of audience members; thus, a film so schematic as to rely on such simple binaries would likely not arouse much interest. Were a film to do so, it would inevitably be read through an ironic framework, regardless of its sincerity, given the dominant spectator position frequently adopted throughout the Independent cinema of the 1990s.

An immediate example of this was seen with the release of David Lynch's *The Straight Story* (1999), a charming and, to all evidence, sincere film about an elderly man whose poor eyesight forces him to ride a tractor across state lines to visit an estranged brother. The film was released by the Disney studio, and no element of its content sets it apart from the earnest family fare the company released during the 1950s and 60s, such as *Old Yeller* (1957), *Polyanna* (1960), etc. Given Lynch's strong associations with surreal, hallucinatory filmmaking, and the prevalence of dead-pan irony throughout his television series *Twin Peaks* – a program devoted to celebrating, and even exaggerating, the eccentricities of mundane small-town Americans – the publicity around the release of *The Straight Story* was inevitably complicated. Simply put: the marketing department was placed in the awkward position of appealing simultaneously to the director's devoted audiences, likely to expect a joke, as well as to those in search of simple family entertainment.²⁷⁰ Though based on the true story of a man named Alvin Straight, even the film's title was seen as a sly suggestion of ironic self-knowingness: here, the joke is that there is no joke, and thus is to be appreciated on a 'meta' level.

Such is the post-Sundance conundrum of irony as no longer a literary device, in which an author comments on the vagaries of fate or renders a character's poetic justice, but instead as a viewing strategy, a position of spectatorship. The mode became so common throughout both independent and, subsequently, Hollywood

²⁷⁰ As Jeffrey Sconce put it, "where does one place a film like *The Straight Story*, a profoundly sincere story made 'ironic' solely by the inter- and extratextual reputation of its director?" in his article "Irony, Nihilism and the New American 'Smart' Film." (Sconce, 351.)

modes of filmmaking in the decades since the 'New American Cinema' that Bourdieu would likely have called it a habitus. One could feasibly propose that the narrative of independent film's growing public visibility throughout the 1980s, and explosion in the mid 1990s, is largely a story of the public's increasing acceptance of the sense of humor visible in early Jim Jarmusch pictures, culminating in the academy's embrace of *Fargo* in 1996. It is indeed an acquired taste, and one could devote an entire study to the evolution of its mainstream embrace; for the moment, however, it is worth likening to Tzvetan Todorov's conceptions of the Fantastic. If the reader of a fantastic tale derives pleasure from not knowing whether its story events are transpiring in a recognizably real or clearly supernatural content, then the viewer of an ironic independent film from this era will enjoy the not dissimilar discomfort of laughing without the comforts of comedic signifiers. (Is *Fargo* a drama? A comedy? Or a third type of film whose pleasure lies in its unstable relationship between the two?) Even as of this writing, TV continues to struggle with the aging mode of situation comedy: its conventions and clichés are inescapably growing stale, while the audience embrace of shows that lack a laugh track remains largely limited to cable networks.

It is significant that this mode of irony has shifted from its literary origins to a status that is at once audience-oriented and commodity-based, given the call to arms raised by Paul Lauter I invoked at the outset of this chapter. Irony has now become a challenge to forms of cultural authority, and it is all the more potent as such for having previously been held by those same authoritative sources. Given the now

largely extra-textual manifestation of irony as a viewing position from which to engage independent film, a primary effect is to destabilize the position of the author, or auteur, as primary source of textual meaning. (It is no accident that academics who are concerned about the status of their institutional authority tend also to reclaim the figure of the author as a viable means of textual engagement.) The fact of audiences poaching irony from its textual status and adopting it as a viewership position to be identified through the prism of Cultural Studies serves as a reminder of contemporary independent cinema's other forms of "post"-ness: it is a post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, post-countercultural, post-conspiracy mode. As such it is inherently defined by its rejection of cultural authority while simultaneously complicated by its political fluidity: is this a left-wing rejection of a conservative 1980s Hollywood? A right-wing expression of derision towards the disempowered misfits being laughed at? Or a nihilist rejection of the binary itself as having any remaining relevance whatsoever?²⁷¹

Though this ironic mode is necessarily contested and porous, at worst always ready to be appropriated by advertising (think of how many television commercials derive humor from mocking the conventions of television commercials), at best it is a public, cultural equivalent to the interestedness that Spanos uses as a defense, or

²⁷¹ To once again refer to the realm of TV comedy, it seems significant that the most durable comic text throughout this era is *The Simpsons*. Over its nearly two decades on the air, the show has been variously attacked for its status as a crude, reactionary Fox network comedy a la *Married With Children*, as well as its evidence of the dreaded Hollywood 'liberal media bias'. The show's most fundamental point of view, however, has been expressed by Matt Groening as a belief simply that "your moral authorities don't always have your best interests in mind." <http://www.motherjones.com/arts/qa/1999/03/groening.html> Sep 17, 2006

the intense self-scrutiny that Lauter champions in the best American Studies work. As such, it serves to contextualize this post-Sundance moment of *Orientalizing the West*: a mode of cultural imperialism has now been turned in on itself, subject to precisely this kind of scrutiny. At the same time, it helps to explain the gradual erosion of the simple pastoral binaries that initially marked the American independent film in the early 1980s; now, the simplicity – and segregation – offered by such binaries is seen as inherently suspect, and if viewers are apparently presented with them, as seemed to be the case with *The Straight Story*, then they will be extra-textually deconstructed as a result of this ironic mode.

In the case of Lynch's film, such binary oppositions are largely implicit. The film is set almost entirely in Iowa; there are, for example, no contrasting big city scenes or characters to emphasize the fundamental decency and goodness of such heartland figures as Straight. Indeed, the fact of these absences – and by extension the film's utter simplicity – starts to become a focal point for ironic pleasures: is this an 'art' film? Is this a celebration of Iowa as Antonioni would depict it? Are the characters so simple that they have become 'blank' pop art canvases for canny viewers to fill in? The best example of the outdated nature of such pastoral binaries is probably Tom DiCillo's *Box of Moonlight*, in which John Turturro plays Al Fountain, a reserved, officious engineer overseeing the construction of a windshield wiper factory. The factory in question is shown, via an opening montage of traveling helicopter shots, to be a jarring encroachment of modernity and civilization upon a beautiful expanse of lakes, grassy hills and forest. Al is himself repeatedly

characterized as the literal embodiment of that orderly, constricting modernity: he regularly phones his family (back in ‘the city’) to make sure his son is studying massive flash cards of multiplication tables; he breaks up his workers’ attempts to enjoy an impromptu game of baseball (that most pastoral and nostalgic of American sports), literally tapping a large clock to remind them it is not yet quitting time; and he is later described by one of those workers as one who “goes through life like a robot, like a damn machine on automatic pilot.”

Embodying modernity has taken its toll on Al, however: he is distraught to notice his first grey hairs; he is unnerved to look out his hotel window, while unbuttoning his white-collar shirt, and notice an elderly man across from him precisely mirroring the same gesture in the same shirt; and, most troublingly, he has begun to notice brief hallucinations of time traveling in reverse, such as coffee pouring back up into the pot, or a boy riding his bike backwards. When the construction job is abruptly cancelled, Al is initially excited that he will be able to return home to be with his family for the imminent July 4th holiday (though he tells his son, “No fireworks – they’re illegal”). Instead of returning directly home, however, Al follows an odd impulse – to find a waterslide park he’d visited in the area while passing through as a child. By now it should not be difficult to predict how the rest of the film will unfold (though it is surprising to see just how schematic and literal-minded it will be in resolving these binaries). Al proceeds to be loosened up, renewed and reinvigorated by his encounters with the common folk he meets during his sentimental journey, the most compelling of whom is a young man (Sam

Rockwell), barely out of his teens, who sports a deerskin outfit, wears a Davy Crockett coonskin cap, and asks to be called “Bucky, The Kid, or just Kid.”

If Al embodies the constraints of civilization, then The Kid is precisely the opposite: a walking signifier for the freedoms that derive from a direct communion with nature. The Kid describes himself as living “off the grid” – he dwells in a small trailer, one wall open to the air, adorned with strings of Christmas lights, second-hand furniture, and kitschy lawn ornaments. Though he is currently stealing power for his lights and telephone, The Kid plans to go “totally self-sufficient – windmill, generate my own electricity.” It does not take long for Al to recognize The Kid as the best approximation of the childhood theme park for which he had been searching (indeed, upon finding the waterslide park in an earlier scene, he is told by locals that the pond is now far too polluted to allow any swimming). The two men soon embark on a series of Tom-and-Huck pranks that enable Al to rediscover some measure of his youth: The Kid’s version of breakfast consists of milk poured over a bowl of Hydrox cookies; Al is introduced to the pleasures of eating fresh tomatoes directly from a farmer’s vine, as well as the exhilaration of escaping from the dim-witted policemen who catch them doing so; and finally, on Independence Day, Al is not in fact back with his family but instead enjoying a double-date with The Kid, two local women, and several illegal M-80 firecrackers.

While Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn exposed the hypocrisies and racism of the adult world, The Kid is consistently shown to have little of this wisdom, even inadvertently; one can be forgiven for dismissing him as a character

who exists, as with so many ‘Oriental’ characters in literature, solely as a device for the purposes of enlightening the stuffy civilized man. Indeed, a representative review of *Box of Moonlight* found it “more than a little bit condescending towards its sub-white-collar workers, who, free from the burdens of education and responsibility, are able to enjoy the simple life and all those predictable, unrealistic clichés, et cetera.”²⁷² Al is able to return to his family a wiser man, stronger and more considerate in his roles as father and husband, but The Kid remains an infantilized cartoon, spouting empty platitudes about the joys of living off the land but doomed by his innocence and ignorance of reality. His passions blur all too quickly into paranoid conspiracy ravings, cementing The Kid’s status as one who might be able to be of some use to the civilized man, but is in no way capable of taking care of himself. “This country’s being taken over by smart people with no common sense! That’s why I’m out here – just me, my instincts and nature. That’s all you need. Look at that moon! In the city, you’d never be able to see that!” Stumbling across Al’s aborted windshield wiper factory, The Kid is certain of it as a CIA installation: “They’re making nerve gas to use in the war against their own people!”

Such ramblings drain *Box of Moonlight* of suspense, or indeed of any dramatic conflict – Al is not going to renounce his family, his job, or his society. Instead, he will return home the better for his travels, while the film’s depiction of The Kid leaves the viewer not with the sense of a noble way of life tragically lost by our own hand, but instead a pleasant fantasy, a vacation we might like to take one

²⁷² The Onion: <http://www.avclub.com/content/node/745>, April 11, 2002.

day for ourselves. Again, the resolution of this binary is far from difficult, and it evokes a variety of Orientalist narratives in which enlightened Western men travel to exotic Eastern nations, finding both that they might profit from their exotic novelties, goods and traditions, while also feeling justified, even obliged, by their imperial inclinations: repeatedly, these heroes encounter those who are shown to be unable to take care of themselves and thus would profit from Western guidance. Complicating this formulation in *Box of Moonlight*, however, is the film's extensive depiction of Christianity itself as one more indicator of the backwards nature that typifies its uncivilized characters. It is here that one is forced to come to terms with the paradoxical nature of independent film's tendency to 'Orientalize the West.' The film offers a running subplot in which the observance of Christianity is shown to be, at best, absurd and at worst, corrupt and even murderous: a long line of people is shown to gaze reverently at a faded burger-stand billboard, its proprietor having recently 'noticed' the appearance of Christ's image in it; the middle-aged couple who inform Al that his beloved childhood pond is toxic offend him when they next ask if he has yet 'found Jesus'; and a local news report later reveals that a pastor who snapped and embarked upon a triple homicide spree was in fact part of the same kindly couple Al had just met.

Just as Al is put off by the couple's inquiry as to his relationship with Christ, so too is The Kid outraged by the violent news report. The Kid's spiritual life is, predictably, founded instead in his awareness of 'Indian' traditions, which he happily quotes at length to Al whenever they might seem appropriate: while exploring, he

tells Al that the “Crow’s Feet Indians lived in this valley ... They were the first to tame the wild dog, I’ve been studying all about that”; the moon gazed upon by The Kid is clarified with “The Indians call it a ‘creamy corn moon’”; and The Kid comforts Al about his temporal hallucinations by claiming that “The Indians saw shit all the time – they had visions twenty-four hours a day!”

Al’s presence as a figure for audience identification means that his experiences throughout the narrative of *Box of Moonlight* are compellingly similar to an audience member’s typical experience of going to see such a film as *Box of Moonlight*: because it is a small, art-house, American independent film, its likely viewers, given that such films rarely receive theatrical releases outside of major urban centers, will be those in circumstances equivalent to those of Al – busy, urban, professional, in need of a short break and a temporary visit to a laid-back, rural milieu. Often, the experience of attending an “indie” film will offer pleasures of this sort: a brief trip away from the city, towards a picturesque natural setting peopled by quirky characters whose primary concerns are the antithesis of traditional yuppie status symbols. In addition to *Box of Moonlight*, films such as *Garden State* (2004), *The Station Agent* (2003), *The Spitfire Grill* (1996), *Transamerica* (2005) and *Junebug* (2005) come to mind.

Both modes of irony previously invoked here are in operation during the viewing of films in the *Box of Moonlight* mold; on the one hand, there is an authorial irony, predicated upon the depiction of Al as an Adamic American bewildered by his foray into the New (to him) World. In this formulation, the unfamiliar rituals and

beliefs of the indigenous peoples have been replaced, in more ways than one, with the absurd, fervent devotion of practicing Christians. On the other hand, *Box of Moonlight* can easily be read according to an ironic viewing perspective that pre-deconstructs the film's binaries and recognizes the entire enterprise as a trite fantasy of yuppie wish-fulfillment.

If such films as *Box of Moonlight* are too overtly schematic, too easy to dismiss through an ironic perspective that identifies the essentially hollow nature of the binaries being constructed, then the arena of American independent film will also be shown to sustain a new mode of cinema whose goal seems to challenge viewers to retain the comfort of ironic distance from the images being viewed. Almost inevitably, such cinema will be accused of courting controversy for controversy's sake, for wallowing in the depths of exploitation cinema, or for abusing the fundamental morality that one typically associates with documentary filmmaking traditions (if not all three at once). Much of this cinema relies heavily on acts of provocation, ideally to force a viewer to consider their own responses to the films. Much of Danish director Lars von Trier's work uses such methods, including his recent American-set tales, *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), *Dogville* (2003) and *Manderlay* (2005); such experimentation can also be seen in the collaborations between Larry Clark and Harmony Korine, such as *Kids* (1995), *Gummo* (1997), *Bully* (2001), *Ken Park* (2002) and *Julien Donkey-Boy* (1999), with their ongoing debt to the experimentative documentary approaches found throughout Werner Herzog's films.

Korine's *Gummo* is perhaps the most relevant of the group, provocative and intriguing, all the more so for its notorious reputation as repellent and misanthropic. (Janet Maslin's New York Times review echoed the feelings of many when she called it both "pretentious" and "the worst film of the year."²⁷³) Indeed, if the pleasant *Box of Moonlight* represents what might be called the 'indie genre', then *Gummo* is a film that might easily be labeled displeasurable for its status as one such film that refuses viewers the genre's most comforting pleasures. As with *Box of Moonlight*, the viewer of *Gummo* will explore a rural American environment, meeting characters who differ in terms of race, class, age, gender, physical development, mental growth, and, yes, ironic self-awareness. Unlike *Box of Moonlight*, however, *Gummo* will resist the familiarity of a linear narrative framework; perhaps even more off-putting will be the absence of an easily designated audience identification figure to contextualize viewer responses.

Korine himself, a celebrity of sorts due to his appearance on David Letterman's talk show in the wake of *Kids*' infamous release, notably makes a cameo appearance in *Gummo* that seems designed to reject this status. Effectively, the impact of Korine's performance in *Gummo* is to suggest an auteur that has "gone native" on some level and is no longer an objective observer of documentary events. The sequence in question is an uncomfortably long encounter on a sofa shared by Korine and an encephalitic African-American dwarf. We do not learn the characters'

²⁷³ Maslin,
http://movies2.nytimes.com/mem/movies/review.html?_r=1&title1=&title2=Gummo%20%28Movie%29%20%20&reviewer=Janet%20Maslin&pdate=19971017&v_id=158664&oref=slogin.

names, and no context is given for their meeting; in their place, Korine's character improvises dialogue in an attempt to receive some sort of contact, physical or emotional, from the other man. While guzzling from a can of beer, Korine's character becomes increasingly depressed and desperate for empathy: he speaks of having been born to a "lesbian midwife", tells of "being beaten, being abused," and, finally, pours the beer over his own head. Failing to interest the other man in a sexual encounter, Korine is left to plead, "just hug me," to which the dwarf complies.

The sense of provocation, the disquieting indeterminacy of the scene's documentary nature, and the matter-of-fact presentation of the little person as character within the scene all contribute to an evocation of the cinema of Werner Herzog, in which the drama featured on screen is often inseparable from the extra-textual drama of Herzog's trials in capturing those images. One is reminded here not simply of *Even Dwarfs Started Small* (1970) but such collaborations between Herzog and Klaus Kinski as *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) and *Aguirre: the Wrath of God* (1972). *Fitzcarraldo*, for example, relies very much on the tension between the ethics of Kinski's character and those of Herzog himself: the film depicts the Herculean attempts of a cultured European man to bring the transcendence of live Opera to the jungles of South America. The mythic absurdity of the attempt is indelibly expressed through a terrifying sequence in which Kinski's character commands a group of the region's indigenous people to haul his steamboat over a mountain in order to expedite the mission. As with *Fitzcarraldo*, so too with Herzog: the suspense and spectacle of the resulting sequence are entirely reliant on the obvious absence of

special effects: a German director did indeed travel to South America, and, for the purposes of High Culture (here, art cinema in place of Opera), orchestrated a local crew's near-Sisyphian toil in hoisting the boat over the mountain.

There are many for whom the politics of such an aesthetic act are inherently cruel, manipulative and even Orientalist, reminiscent, perhaps, of the Chinese labor that worked on the American railways that were eventually to close the frontier during the 19th century. As with Lauter and Spanos, however, Herzog's defense is his inherent self-interestedness, and the viewers of *Fitzcarraldo* cannot help but recognize the same through the director's engagement of irony: namely, that the filmic endeavor may be every bit as maniacal and wrongheaded as the fictional equivalent it seeks to depict.²⁷⁴ Herzog has himself become a champion of Korine's work in the wake of *Gummo*, appearing as an actor in Korine's next film as director, *Julien Donkey-Boy*, and it is this connection to the celebrated German filmmaker's oeuvre that goes a long way to understanding a film that was so widely dismissed at the time of its release.

Both *Gummo* and *Box of Moonlight* present varying degrees of this American tendency towards self-Orientalism; moreover, both films encourage ironic viewing positions on the part of audiences. The many differences between the two films, however, speak volumes as to the fluidity and potency of these Orientalist signifiers and practices throughout the contemporary American independent film. In DiCillo's film, for example, the structures and processes of Orientalism are so apparent as to

²⁷⁴ Indeed, the documentary *Burden of Dreams* (1982), which chronicles the making of *Fitzcarraldo*, hinges on this very absurdity.

become pre-disempowered; the film's clichés and schematic binary conflicts render the power relationships between the characters transparent. Indeed, if one is to have any emotional reaction at all to *Box of Moonlight*, it is likely to be a sadness for the impossibility of such simple myth-making or a nostalgia for a concept of the past that never truthfully existed. As with *The Wizard of Oz*, one is ultimately given comfort by the formalist pleasures of cinema fantasies, with their artifices that seductively appear to be so much better than the crushing monotony of our real lives outside the theatre. By the time of DiCillo's film, no longer a classical but a postmodern text, not a children's film but geared for a savvy adult audience, the effect is to lay bare the structural operations that enable the political process of Orientalism in the first place. As Said writes:

The Orient that appears in Orientalism, then, is a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire. If this definition of Orientalism seems more political than not, that is simply because I think Orientalism was itself a product of certain political forces and activities. Orientalism is a school of interpretation *whose material happens to be the Orient*, its civilizations, peoples and localities. Its objective discourses ... are and always have been conditioned by the fact that its truths, like any truths delivered by language, are embodied in language.²⁷⁵

Quoting Nietzsche, Said then reminds us that "truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are."²⁷⁶ Thus the suggestion is made that, through this misremembering, we can now effectively perform the operations of Orientalism without the Orient itself. Through the paradox of postmodern irony, it is the utter

²⁷⁵ Said, 203 (my emphasis).

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

simplicity of *Box of Moonlight* that reveals truths to be illusions; the film's sincerity is so dead-pan that it becomes a joke about itself and, by extension, the antiquated, politically incorrect system of Orientalism. Crucially, Said recognizes the process as one that is not singular to a given historical period, but instead fluid and readily transferable to receptive contexts; as a result, it is easy to recognize Turturro's Al Fountain as an Orientalist. The quirky characters and colorful incidents do not exist until Fountain is there to see them; they are fantastic surfaces not granted true lives of their own. One can recognize here Said's interest in the manipulation of language on the part of he who has the power to speak it:

my concern with authority does not entail analysis of what lies hidden in the Orientalist text, but analysis rather of the text's surface, its exteriority to what it describes. I do not think that this idea can be overemphasized. Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the west. *He is never concerned with the Orient except as the first cause of what he says.*²⁷⁷

Al, similarly, is only interested in the rural America he discovers insofar as it is a potential cure for his psychic unease; he is there only to exploit it for personal gain. Even a brief affair with a local woman (Catherine Keener) is depicted not as any kind of human connection but instead as a means to thaw Fountain out so that he might return with more warmth to offer his patient wife back home. The experience of watching *Box of Moonlight*, then, places the viewer in a position of ironic awareness towards their own potential status as Orientalists; the act of attending the

²⁷⁷ Said, 20-21 (my emphasis).

film is akin to Fountain's journey within the film, and it is only the sheer obviousness of its signifiers (July 4th, Davy Crockett cap, swimming holes, and the like) that accentuates the illusions, rather than any truths, that are being spoken.

Here, irony becomes the means to a carnivalesque celebration over that which might otherwise incur feelings of guilt.²⁷⁸ Educated, upper-middle class viewers can easily identify with Al's ennui and, through attending *Box of Moonlight* (or *Fargo*, *The Station Agent*, *The Spitfire Grill*, etc.), exorcise their discomfort over submitting and even contributing to a modernized America that displaces indigenous peoples and economically marginalizes the salt-of-the-earth characters its elitist art cinema romanticizes. In *Box of Moonlight*, a combination of irony and nostalgia – the incongruity of the character wearing the Davy Crockett gear that suggests the kitsch of 1950s television just as much as it does any 'actual' American history – transform one's attendance of the film into a Mardi Gras visit. One acknowledges one's role in an America that has over-developed its own frontier and rendered invisible its indigenous peoples, but is left with the odd perception that the ironic awareness of this is sufficient, that the film is devoid of contemporary relevance, and that, like Al Fountain, we should simply get back to our traditional white-collar roles in the global economy.

By way of sharp contrast, *Gummo* defiantly denies its viewers the comfort of such a familiar figure of identification, with the closest example the director's own

²⁷⁸ As a schoolteacher tells her class at the start of summer break in Richard Linklater's *Dazed and Confused* (1993), "when you're being inundated with all this American bicentennial Fourth of July brouhaha, don't forget what you're celebrating, and that's the fact that a bunch of slave-owning, aristocratic white males didn't want to pay their taxes!"

cameo as himself a fellow victim. Once again, Hollywood's quintessential transcendent fantasy, *The Wizard of Oz*, is notably evoked; though nearly plotless, the many vignettes that comprise *Gummo* are shown to occur in the aftermath of a devastating tornado that virtually destroyed the town of Xenia, Ohio.²⁷⁹ As *Gummo* unfolds, one gradually becomes aware that they are observing a world that seems devoid of adults – or at least, adult authority figures in the sense that Al Fountain represents. Instead, there is the haunting suggestion that the disaster has either killed only the town's parents or somehow physically displaced the remainder of its populace into a lower-class purgatory drained of recognizable contexts. *Gummo* will consistently toy with viewers' preconceived notions of film narrative, realism, and documentary: though much of its shooting style could be described as hand-held *verite* (and indeed features a great deal of camcorder footage), it denies us the anchor of an educated narrator from whom we might receive clear insights. On the contrary, when the film does utilize voice-over, it is that of a whispering child, enveloping the proceedings with the quality of a fable, or dream. Crucially, it is not the voice of an external, adult narrator, telling audiences how to feel about the film's characters by placing them in some sort of social or economic context. In short, *Gummo*'s *raison d'être* seems to be to place its viewers in the damning position of being made to watch the traditional subjects of their prior Orientalism represent themselves. With the conventional structure of language, or knowledge, turned on its head, the effect

²⁷⁹ One could also make the case that the inclusion of a little person amongst *Gummo*'s cast of characters is to evoke the original classic's "munchkins".

on the viewer is the antithesis of the carnivalesque comforts offered by an easy identification with Al Fountain.

Is *Gummo* to be taken seriously? Is it an ironic joke, mocking those who might read it as 'real', as a sincere ethnography of economically marginalized American lives? And crucially: what are the ethics of doing so without explicitly announcing itself as such, while allowing viewers the potential to receive its gallery of 'freaks' as just so many shocking, aestheticized tableaux? Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington shed some light on this conundrum in their essay "We Think, Therefore They Are? On Occidentalizing the World." Though the authors are primarily anthropologists, interested here in examining the theoretical blind spots to be found in the assumptions of figures such as Margaret Mead, their conclusions are nevertheless illuminating in the present context. The eponymous Occidentalization to which they refer, for example, is derived from James Carrier's observations that anthropological conclusions about 'othered' figures of the East are inescapably linked to the observer's own pre-existing definitions of what it means to be a subject of the West. Citing his work, Gewertz and Errington point out that an inevitable byproduct of such perspectives is that "both the West and the other become 'understood in reified, essentialist terms, and each is defined by its difference from the other element of the opposed pair.'"²⁸⁰

The authors' research suggests that the contemporary legacy of Orientalism as it continues to be deployed in our conceptions of primitive cultures is to contribute

²⁸⁰ Gewertz and Errington, 637.

to the ever-slippery task of stably defining the Occident in a postmodern world. The figures represented in the recent studies of New Guinea, for example, lead lives that are limited, univalent and pre-determined according to stratified social worlds; by contrast, those of us lucky enough to live in the modernized First World are almost embarrassed by a hyper-abundance of choices and options. We may consume from amongst a seemingly infinite array of goods, services, and entertainment media; we may develop and improve ourselves through access to abundant quality schools and universities; and we even have the privilege of 'redefining' ourselves in the workplace due to economic trends that suggest few will face the 'monotony' of a single, stable career for the majority of their lives.

The facetiousness of this last point is deliberate, and is deliberately chosen to evoke the conclusions drawn by Gewertz and Errington in rationalizing the durability of Orient-Occident discursive binarizing. The purpose of the binary is now to emphasize the incommensurability of the two terms, rather than the interdependent forces of global power that enable them to 'mean' in the first place. The aforementioned hypothetical enlightened citizen of the Western world has the 'freedom' to redefine him or herself during a lifetime of multiple careers precisely because he/she is increasingly likely to be downsized at some point in their lives, their jobs exported to those very same 'primitives' who are thought not to know any better than to suggest they may be underpaid. A key word used throughout "We Think, Therefore They Are?" is *denial*: "we structure ourselves in opposition to a primitive, non-Western, frequently ubiquitous 'other' primarily in order to deny the

realities of our contingency in a postmodern world – a world we no longer experience as ordered by the imposition of clearly defined, largely patriarchal, moral and scientific principles.”²⁸¹ Again, there is the suggestion of this sub-set of “indie” cinema as a genre, devoted to giving comfort through the satisfactory resolution of binaries: Al Fountain is able to recognize The Kid’s illusion of freedom as a doomed, infantile fantasy, returning to his responsibilities with the wisdom of their inherent value. “We Think, Therefore They Are?”, however, would criticize *Box of Moonlight* for portraying Al and The Kid so sharply as opposites, rather than both as characters whose “agency is sharply circumscribed by a world system in which power is unequally distributed and the economic interests of some sharply constrain, at least in broad outline, the destinies of others.”²⁸² The allegorical options of *Box of Moonlight* are clear: the film’s narrative is one in which a wealthy First World yuppie enjoys a brief vacation in the presence of a liberating, free-spirited primitive of the Third World, returning to his proper place with a greater sense of how best to appreciate and fully utilize the many opportunities his life affords him.²⁸³ Gewertz and Errington note at their conclusion that “the irony, of course, is that our world is one in which our political and economic interests have increasingly constrained those from whom we now wish to learn to be free.”²⁸⁴

²⁸¹ Gewertz and Errington, 636.

²⁸² Gewertz and Errington, 648.

²⁸³ One might even go so far as to consider here the extent to which so many of the James Bond films are essentially filmic “dream vacations” in which a western patriarchal figure is variously assisted in scuba diving, downhill skiing, and generous amounts of sexual tourism by exoticized locals of color or ‘othered’ ethnicity.

²⁸⁴ Gewertz and Errington, 651.

It is entirely appropriate that the essay ends on a note of increased awareness of the ironies that inevitably result from the global media economy; upon attempting to legitimately reconcile the binaries offered by this genre, we currently find ourselves in a morass of ironies upon ironies. The most apparent is the one that I have been trying to stress through this concept of Orientalizing the West: by the time of *Box of Moonlight*, the Third World primitive character device who exists for the Westerner's benefit is now not only ostensibly American but a parody of American-ness. Now it is this very mythology of independence, thought so much to be the element worth nurturing and celebrating throughout this mode of meaningfully American art cinema, against which an enlightened West must now increasingly learn to (be forced to) define itself. The resultant cognitive dissonance that inevitably accompanies attempts to process such ironies while remaining an ethical thinker is well chronicled in Jeffrey Sconce's essay "Irony, Nihilism and the New American 'Smart' Film."

The pseudo-genre chronicled by Sconce in this paper has much in common with Steven Johnson's 'mindbender', discussed later in this dissertation – a cinema in which the apparent futility of political position taking is either expressed or elided (or both) through each film's complexities and ambiguities of narrative structure and tone. Sconce attentively details the extent to which irony came to be equated with a postmodern moral vacuousness in such recent semi-independent films as *Fight Club* (1999), *Ghost World* (2001) and *Being John Malkovich* (1999). As he points out, for example, when "the code word 'irony' took shape in the 1990s (describing much

more than these films, obviously), it came to be defined in opposition to ‘honesty’ and as synonymous with ‘apathy.’”²⁸⁵ Rejecting the notion of irony as a concept so easily reducible to such polarized thinking, Sconce instead defends it, and by extension its recent cinematic application, as “politics conducted on a new terrain ... a transition rather than an abnegation of political cinema ... From within the prism of irony ... many of these films suggest the futility of pure politics or absolute morality concentrating instead on the prison-house of [Bourdieu’s] habitus and the politics of postmodern paralysis.”²⁸⁶

Sconce’s passionate argument is framed by conservative cultural attacks on such apparently empty or even nihilist fare as *Happiness* (1998), *Very Bad Things* (1998) and the ‘cruel’ cinema of Neil LaBute. Given his interest in such texts, then, it is surprising that the essay does not consider *Gummo*. This is not entirely correct: the film is in fact briefly evoked in passing reference to the “radically *unironic* work of Lars von Trier or the Werner Herzog-inspired films of Harmony Korine.”²⁸⁷ For our present purposes, it is worth attempting to unpack just what is meant by “radically unironic”, and the extent to which texts that belong in this category may nevertheless be productively added to the present discourse. As already suggested by my citations of Sconce’s article, he is profoundly influenced by the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, specifically the cultural process of position-taking that is intrinsic to the establishment of habitus. As he puts it, “for ‘smart’ cinema to exist, after all,

²⁸⁵ Sconce, 366-367.

²⁸⁶ Sconce, 367-368.

²⁸⁷ Sconce, 351 (his emphasis).

someone or something must be perceived and portrayed as ‘stupid’, a demarcation that can understandably lead to conflict.”²⁸⁸ Sconce is referring here, of course, to the explosion-driven blockbuster aesthetic of Hollywood producers such as Jerry Bruckheimer and Joel Silver, whose populist dumbness enables the independent sphere to develop, by way of counter-programming, intelligent films that ask viewers to negotiate both textual and extra-textual ironies. But he might just as well be referring to the ‘stupid’ characters that populate the “radically unironic” cinema to which he refers: von Trier, for example, repeatedly depicts seemingly ‘simple’ women at the heart of *Breaking the Waves*, *Dancer in the Dark* and *Dogville*; his film *The Idiots* depicts the attempted therapeutic excesses of a cult devoted to public imitations of the mentally challenged; and Korine’s *Gummo* and *Julien Donkey-Boy* prominently feature characters with, respectively, Down syndrome and schizophrenia. Does the mode of radical unirony represented by such films suggest an attempt to transcend the political and orientalist binary traps into which so many other films cannot help but fall?

First it must be said that the category distinction is not as precise as one might like it to be: the ‘radical unirony’ of these films can easily become so radical that some viewers are bound to view them as ironic commentary on our current embrace of, for example, irony itself. Moreover, though I have been using *Box of Moonlight* and Korine’s *Gummo* to suggest diametrically opposed filmic modes, there are nevertheless formal and thematic consistencies between them. A prime

²⁸⁸ Sconce, 353.

example of this can be found through the representation of professional wrestling, a 'sport' whose very status as sport while simultaneously a recognizably professional performance, makes it a convenient crystallization of the inescapable ironies of our present (no matter how radically unironic one's film may wish to be). *Box of Moonlight's* Kid, for example, delivers his most impassioned rant about the flaws of American culture while excitedly watching a caricature of televised professional wrestling featuring the cartoonish characters "Uncle Samson" and "Saddam Insane." (Despite the latter's attempts to cut his hair during the match, Samson is predictably victorious.) Any value one might find in the Kid's suggestions that Fountain (and, by extension the film's average viewer) has "too much common sense" is thus undercut by his inability to perceive the artifice of the contest being performed. The Kid's function may be to enable the progress of the white-collar Fountain, but his purity as an Adamic symbol of American innocence is tainted by his status as one who is easily duped by infantilizing television.

The spectre of wrestling is used with more depth and provocation throughout both Korine's *Gummo* and *Julien Donkey-Boy*. In the latter, for example, a lengthy scene pointedly pits the two forms of the sport against one another: Julien, sporting only briefs, his sister's bra, and a samurai headband, has decided to challenge his brother Chris to a wrestling match. By way of contrast, Chris, a promising athlete who wrestles competitively at school, is clad in the sport's appropriate, official gear. The mentally ill Julien excitedly dances about the family living room, proclaiming himself repeatedly to be "Julien the Jammin' Jabber!" Acting as a makeshift

announcer/referee, Julien's sister (Chloe Sevigny) asks Chris to join in: "Chris, what's your name, what's your wrestling name?"

"Chris."

"No, we have to have a name, you know, like a costume and a name."

"My name's Chris – it's real wrestling."

Over before it can really begin, the match is promptly vetoed by Julien's father (Werner Herzog) observing from the couch: "Disqualified for bad behavior ... Get serious ... I want him to wrestle for real." Asked for his opinion of the match afterwards, he can only say, "I found it – I found it to be very shitty."

Again, the distinction between irony and radical unirony is shown to be very porous: is Herzog, the director known for a legendary obsession with authenticity, as well as the blurring of boundaries between fiction and documentary, simply playing a part within Korine's narrative? Is he also passing judgment on the lazy irony of American professional wrestling, with its open secret of absolute artifice the diametric opposition to his own artistic goals? Or is he aesthetically critiquing Korine's own pastiche of his elder's filmmaking methods; that is to say, does Herzog feel that Korine has done a 'shitty' job of enabling an authentic moment to unroll in front of his cameras? No easy answer is forthcoming, from either the film itself or the dissertation in your hands; however, the fact of the sustained potentiality of these various options speaks to the current significance of a cinema that is able to sustain such a balance between documentary truth and disaffected ironic distance.

Gummo's engagement with wrestling, for example, seems in many ways much simpler than the aforementioned sequence from *Julien Donkey-Boy*. Here, the filmmaker seems content to allow non-actors to attack either each other or the furniture in their homes. An early sequence depicts two skinheaded brothers at home in their kitchen as the child's whispered voice-over suggests that they may have murdered their parents. The teens then proceed to playfully slap and hit one another until the violence escalates into a prolonged fist fight, with substantial damage done to the kitchen itself. Later, a group of drunken adults amuse themselves in another home by watching one engage in a bizarre 'wrestling match' with a kitchen chair, ultimately ripping it apart after slamming it against the floor. Such moments offer themselves as the antithesis to professional wrestling: here are 'real' people engaging in 'real' fights in their actual homes. The effect is deeply unsettling: is the suggestion that the staged violence of TV wrestling has spilled over into the realities of these lower-class lives? As with *Julien Donkey-Boy*, one is left with the sense that the film's ability to provoke questions is perhaps more valuable than the facile, even patronizing answers suggested by so many *Box(es) of Moonlight*. In a special review for the Chicago Reader, proclaiming the film to be "a masterpiece," Lisa Alspector asserts that "*Gummo* makes viewers ask hard questions about what exploitation is, about why it might be intriguing, disturbing or ethically questionable to display or to look at people who seem more vulnerable than professional actors ... The movie doesn't answer these questions; they're unanswerable."²⁸⁹

²⁸⁹ Alspector, <http://www.chicagoreader.com/movies/archives/1998/0498/04108a.html>.

Indeed, the many negative reviews of *Gummo* should come as no surprise given how little of the film is conventionally pleasurable; instead, the experience of watching the film is one of being made to interrogate the pleasures one has derived in the past from watching other, self-Orientalizing “indie” movies deemed critically acceptable by contemporary forces of cultural authority. As suggested earlier, *Gummo* seems to deliberately evoke the sense of ‘freaks’ taking over the asylum familiar to viewers of Herzog’s *Even Dwarfs Started Small*; now, however, the question is raised of the possibility for the filmic self-regulation. The adults of *Gummo* are few and far between: many act just as recklessly as the film’s children, as in the drunken man wrestling a chair in the kitchen; one character’s mother bathes her son in filthy grey water while watching him eat a soap-smothered chocolate bar; and the film’s most familiarly middle-class white-male authority figure makes a show of helping girls drive around in search of a missing pet cat only to attempt their sexual molestation in an abandoned parking lot.

In a sense, then, *Gummo*’s characters seem deliberately calculated to defy the formulations of Gewertz and Errington in “We Think, Therefore They Are?”: they are at once the children of the West *and* rendered ‘other’ by their dismal surroundings. In an interview on the film’s DVD release, Korine refers to shooting the film in Nashville, despite its ostensible Ohio setting, and refers to his French cinematographer Jean-Yves Escoffier’s lack of experience with the place: “He’d never seen anything like Nashville ... it was like a third-world country to him.”²⁹⁰

²⁹⁰ *Gummo* DVD release, New Line Cinema.

Watching the film, one feels grateful for a life of comparative privilege, observing the characters' few options (killing stray cats and selling them to cheap restaurants only to get money for momentary highs sniffing glue); at the same time, however, the film will appear to 'break' these parameters and grant its characters the opportunity, and ability, to make complex moral choices. For example, as the two main characters, two boys of sixteen and thirteen, roughly, visit a local prostitute, the younger boy's encounter with her is oddly tender, at odds with the inherently exploitative nature of the scenario. The woman is heavy-set, heavily made-up, and mentally disabled; rather than engaging in sex or physical contact, the boy is instead gentle and flattering in his treatment of her, assuring her of her beauty.

Later, the boys will sneak into the basement of a rival cat-killer to discover his elderly, comatose grandmother left on unattended life support. Tumbler, the older of the two, is haunted by her specter in the room with them, telling the younger Solly, "Her life is over. Go over and shoot her in the foot. Try and wake her up." The young boy takes aim with his BB gun, complies, and the camera subsequently lingers on the small, silver pellet wedged under her toe. Convinced of his assessment, Tumbler continues, "She's always been dead. She's been gone a long time," before turning off the life support equipment and allowing the woman to pass into death. Again, regardless of one's own political position on euthanasia, the scene cannot be described as a joke, a prank, or ironic; Sconce's phrase 'radically unironic' seems completely apt here. The boys have made their decision thoughtfully, conscious of the possibility for dignity within their world, for better or for worse.

I began this chapter by evoking Paul Lauter's complaint that the academy continues its route of gradual decline in terms of visible cultural authority; his was a voice echoed by others who feared for the loss of traditional technical analysis and seemed to decry the limitations and potential degradations of academic work offered by forms of Cultural Studies. At the other end of the debate is the work of such anthropologists as Gewertz and Errington: "we are worried that the *textual focus* [of so many] has the *political implication* of rendering virtually irrelevant to us the lives that *actual* – non-generic – others *in fact* lead ... we fear that a textual Orientalizing, like Orientalizing itself, may curtail our understanding of more fundamental processes."²⁹¹ They propose instead a model that seeks "to explore sufficiently the relationship – the *connection* – between them and us that this process of constructing the other not only establishes, but masks."²⁹²

Despite Sconce's thorough defense of irony as a means to political position-taking, it nevertheless constantly threatens to be made over into a conceptual blind spot, if not an utter dead end. Irony thrives not on connection but on incongruity, on the ever-widening gulf between subjects. If there is a way to resolve this tension between Lauter's camp and that of "We Think, Therefore They Are?" – that is to say, a desire for interpretive textual analysis and a demand for legitimate, real-world contextual awareness – then I would suggest that such a resolution must be found in the unstable fluctuation between positions of irony and those of Sconce's radical lack

²⁹¹ Gewertz and Errington, 636-637 (their emphasis).

²⁹² Gewertz and Errington, 637 (their emphasis).

of irony; in short, the destabilization of the comfort offered by Bourdieu's position-taking itself.

Certainly, I am neither the first nor alone in attempting to theorize new conceptions of film analysis that are equal to the aesthetic and political tasks currently demanded: in their recent study Global Hollywood, authors Toby Miller et al express doubt as to "whether the contemporary state of screen studies equips us to address such issues ... [given that] mainstream screen studies is a blend of textual analysis, the psy-complexes and bourgeois business history. These tendencies have not enabled us to contribute significantly to public cultural debate."²⁹³ By way of response, the authors go on to suggest that

the most significant innovation that we need ... comes from critical political economy and Cultural Studies. These areas have witnessed a radical historicization of context, such that the analysis of textual properties and spectatorial processes must now be supplemented by an account of *occasionality* that details the conditions under which a text is made, circulated, received, interpreted and criticized.²⁹⁴

Such arguments are admirable, but hardly seem likely to satisfy the likes of Spanos and Lauter, or academics who have devoted their lives to conceptions of aesthetic excellence in textuality, or even lovers of great literature. Ideally, then, this mode of cinema that embraces the contradictions of irony and radical unirony, that utilizes American mythologies while simultaneously dissecting the power such mythologies continue to hold over us, would act as a potential bridge between those who call for a return to absolutes of textual, academic authority, and those who stress matters of

²⁹³ Miller et al, 9.

²⁹⁴ Miller et al, 13 (their emphasis).

relativism: Cultural Studies, specific audiences, historical contexts. If there is the potential for films that themselves engage with these very issues, it may be possible for this last crucial binary to be resolved.

Emphasis on context reminds us that cinema, like literature, can be profoundly dialogic: not merely determined by the When and the Where of its making, but placed as itself in a meaningful conversation with the films that surround it. Though one may find *Gummo* indefensibly off-putting, a film devoid of pleasure, it nevertheless forces one to re-view and re-interpret in a new way such comfortingly familiar independent fables as *Box of Moonlight*, *The Station Agent*, *Garden State* et al in a new light – we are made aware of our basic desire to retreat into such fantasies *as a retreat*. Finally, if *Gummo* is indeed too pretentious, too slippery in its gestures towards meaning, then one's tastes may turn instead to the comparatively prosaic *Tigrero: A Film That Was Never Made*, for its more explicit and literal-minded exploration of the boundaries between independent filmmaking and anthropology.

Tigrero is the depiction of an intersecting network of legends, some purely filmic, others more traditionally adventurous and exploratory. On one level, the film is a documentary, detailing Sam Fuller's return, accompanied by Jim Jarmusch, to the remote Brazilian village where he researched and shot footage for a proposed 20th Century Fox adventure film to star John Wayne, Ava Gardner and Tyrone Power. Though the insurance company's trepidation meant the film would not go on to be produced, the discarded footage would be redeemed somewhat by its inclusion in the

two filmmakers' decades-later journey to the location of its shooting. Rather than exist as part of an expensive studio production,²⁹⁵ the footage is instead re-presented to the descendants of the Karaja tribe originally featured in it. *Tigrero: A Film That Was Never Made*, then, depicts two emblematically independent directors, themselves members of a group that struggles to survive, to pass on its traditions from one generation to the next, in the act of returning footage shot for a proposed studio picture to the Indians who might presumably have been exploited in its production. The parallels were felt both by critics reviewing the film and by its director, Mika Kaurismaki, during its making. As *Tigrero*'s production notes state: "Today the cinema struggles for its existence as one small part of a gigantic field of audiovisual communication. Similarly, the Indians [as the Karaja are referred to throughout the film] are struggling for their life and for their ever decreasing territory."²⁹⁶ Manohla Dargis, in her LA Weekly review, felt the film "becomes heart-breakingly symbolic, a case of a member of one nearly extinct tribe exchanging memories with members of another tribe almost lost."²⁹⁷ Here we see the productive combination of irony and documentary: the independent feature reflects its tenuous grip on the real by equating the cultural status of filmmaking with the real displacement of the Karaja natives.

If the suggestion is made that the originally conceived *Tigrero* somehow evokes the pathos of the Karaja by being too precious and fragile to exist at all, then

²⁹⁵ It is one of the film's many ironies that, given the cast, had Fuller's original *Tigrero* actually been made, it would have severely challenged his reputation as a defiant outsider of the Hollywood studio system.

²⁹⁶ *Tigrero* production notes.

²⁹⁷ Dargis, CITE

it is inspiring to consider that its potential excesses of sentiment are balanced by Jarmusch's dead-pan irony (itself arguably the very element that ignited this post-Sundance independent movement in the first place) throughout. Kaurismaki's *Tigrero* casually attempts to structure itself as an adventure narrative, with Fuller 'spontaneously' inspiring his fellow director to join him on a mad journey while enjoying the beaches of Rio de Janeiro. "We've got to take a crack at it!", he barks at Jarmusch, who can only respond with the laconic drawl, "Sam, I think you're *on* crack, man."

To compete the structure of self-puncturing documentary, Fuller is unable to get Jarmusch to return with him to civilization at the climax of *Tigrero*. While receiving the Karaja's traditional face paint, Jarmusch says, "This time I've got a surprise for you. I'm not leaving. I'm gonna stay here for a while. Come back and pick me up in about forty years." If the comparison between the indigenous peoples and the moment of Fuller's independent American cinema is so didactic as to be potentially offensive, then *Tigrero* is able to acknowledge this with what can only be termed a generous, gentle use of irony: Fuller and Jarmusch make time to mock the Orientalist conventions of their 'White-Men-In-Jungle' narrative, thus enhancing truths through the very obviousness of their artifice. The casual manner with which Jarmusch accepts Fuller's challenge, and the equally passive way in which he throws off the shackles of civilization as an effortless afterthought, devoid of anything that could conceivably be called 'drama', is a truly productive engagement of irony. It squarely places *Tigrero* in a context of colonial narratives and leaves the viewers to

perform the work of ‘occasionality’ that is championed by Global Hollywood – while doing so completely within the realm of textual analysis.

On that note, let us give the last words to the displaced auteur, Fuller himself, calling for an engagement with the real in his autobiography A Third Face:

No need to make any sweeping statements comparing our society to theirs. Except how could the Karaja’s simple well-being not make you think about the excesses of our world, our government’s wrong-headed, aggressive policies, not to mention the general decline in decency and good will as Judeo-Christian-Muslim civilizations have accrued military might and economic power? ... As much as I’ve been obsessed with my own country’s history and development, I better understand America from having seen how other people live in faraway lands, feasting on their charms and plunging into their cultures ... You young people sitting around watching the goddamned television! Get off your asses and go see the world! Throw yourselves into different cultures! You will always be wealthy if you count your riches as I do, in adventures, full of life- changing experiences.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁸ Fuller, 554-555.

CHAPTER SIX
THE MORPHING TEXT AND THE VIRTUAL FRONTIER:
INDEPENDENCE AND THE MYTHOLOGIES OF NEW MEDIA
TECHNOLOGIES

An obstacle in concluding any work of historical writing that ends at a contemporary moment is that the present is inherently difficult to historicize. Given that much of my perspective on the recent American independent film has explored a cultural engagement with narrative as it pertains to the mythologizing of this discourse, I shall propose, by way of conclusion, to consider the possibilities of closure that have been made manifest in the past few years, as well as the potential for new narratives to replace those that are now too familiar, out of date, or simply inappropriate.

In many ways, the counter-narratives that now present themselves consistently engage with issues of technology: if the human film directors behind independent cinema are inevitably corrupted by money, then true innovation will be on some level defined by an evolution in the medium itself. More and more, for example, one is met with a barrage of press clippings about filmmakers using digital video cameras to create personal features for miniscule budgets.²⁹⁹ The Sundance film festival turns hundreds of these films away every year while simultaneously adding to their expanding mythology by celebrating such examples as Jonathan

²⁹⁹ In many ways, this shift is encapsulated by Francis Coppola's prediction that "some little fat girl in Ohio is going to make a beautiful movie with her Father's camcorder." Given that Coppola's quote was uttered in *Hearts of Darkness*, the documentary devoted to the making of *Apocalypse Now*, the reference is loaded with significance – when such a camcorder film is made, it will be a marked contrast to such bloated Hollywood spectacles as his. Given Coppola's own daughter's successes as a director more than two decades later, the reference is doubly significant: the accessible, low-budget work of the 'little girl' perhaps redeeming the modernist elitism of her father's own excesses.

Caouette's autobiographical *Tarnation* (2003), in which his own video diaries over nearly three decades were edited into an acclaimed compilation. The pages of such magazines as Filmmaker: A Journal of Independent Film and such websites as youtube.com also attest to the faddish embrace of digital video as a new idol suddenly to be worshipped; in its recurrent references to absurdly low budgets and high profits, the discourse repeatedly resembles get-rich-quick schemes and fantasies of winning the lottery.

The race is also on to get books published on the subject, as best displayed by Shari Roman's collection of interviews and articles, Digital Babylon: Hollywood, Indiewood and Dogme 95. Roman's credentials attest to the relative rigor of her insights: she writes for such popular magazines as Entertainment Weekly, The Face, and Flaunt, suggesting a desire to perpetuate a fad for the sake of inflating a niche market about which she can be amongst the first to get published. The hyperbolic (yet vague) style of her introduction to Digital Babylon contains a number of notable excesses to support this conclusion. She begins, for example, by proclaiming:

We live in a Digital Babylon, in a world saturated by hard data and new technologies, insatiable for the pleasure of fresh images of our universe and of ourselves. ... A persuasive image can be perceived as truth, and therefore a reality, but even pre-cinematic visionaries as varied as Buddha, Scheherezade, the Marquis de Sade, Neitzsche (sic) and Shakespeare would all undoubtedly agree, that absolute truth is a concept with uncountable human variables ... For the people who love film, it is still all about that ineffable something. Storytellers wielding the camera, even in this gizmo-delirious Age of Technopia, stand as part of an age-old, mythological inheritance.³⁰⁰

³⁰⁰ Roman, vi-vii.

Roman's writing here casts such a wide net that the impression is left that one could feasibly say anything about anything (without, of course, actually saying anything); one is reminded of desperate public speakers or undergraduate writers who nervously avoid their subject matter by turning to their bookshelves in search of filler ("The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'independent' as...").

Though Roman's book may seem an unfairly easy target, its slapdash nature is worth noting here, both for the aforementioned issues of historicizing the present, as well as the inherent limitations of celebrating new technologies for their own sake. Does this fetishistic embrace of new technology paradoxically serve to obscure the fact that film is itself always already a technology, thus suggesting a calculated avoidance of history? How have auteur-based narratives of independent film morphed into a technology-based equivalent, and where do such narratives overlap? Furthermore, what are the potential pitfalls of emphasizing technology in the independent arena when so much of Hollywood cinema is dismissed as little more than elaborate displays of expensive special effects technologies?

Many have suggested, as we have seen, that the present moment is one in which the distinction between the Hollywood and independent modes of filmmaking is inescapably vague. I would suggest that this distinction meaningfully extends to the discourse around new technologies: the democratic and emancipatory qualities of personal, autobiographical films can quickly be absorbed by Hollywood films in search of 'authenticity' and, conversely, the sense of blockbuster movies resembling spectacular video games encourages us to view the narrative complexity of art-house

fare such as *Memento* as itself a kind of intelligent game play. Now, dominant and oppositional forms of cinema can morph into one another just as easily as the new technologies around which they are promoted can transcend classification. Just as a studio film may choose to resemble the authentic grit of the 'indie' world, so too can the independent arena produce *Far From Heaven* (2002), whose gloss deliberately resembles expensive studio product, and whose intertextual references to earlier Douglas Sirk films encourage audience participation as a form of game play. Even conceptions of categories that 'morph' into one another suggest an engagement with technology as a meaningful expression of the present, postmodern condition.

To conclude, then, I shall examine the contemporary status of the independent film as a site for the examination of how such forces interact and interconnect. Today, debates around 'indie' cinema facilitate discussion not only of how Hollywood reacts to parallel modes of filmmaking, but of how a simple, humanist mode of art can coexist with rapid, complex technological advancement. I shall consider the varying ways with which Hollywood and independent cinema engage with technologies of morphing, of video game play, and of digital filmmaking, while acknowledging that they do so during a moment of profound overlap between the two modes of film. As with my chapters on the figure of the independent auteur, I will proceed dialectically: first, we shall consider an example of empty Hollywood interactivity; then, notable instances of more intelligent applications of interactivity within the independent arena; and finally, we shall

optimistically note the existence of cinema that meaningfully synthesizes each approach.

“Fasten your seatbelt for an interactive DVD experience like no other!” So boasts a press release for the home video version of *Final Destination 3* (2006), the latest in the popular horror series detailing the attempts of young people to change their fate after avoiding death in such accidents as a plane crash, a freeway pile-up, or, in the third installment, a roller-coaster disaster. Though the ‘message’ of the films appears to involve powerlessness in the face of mortality, the latest sequel teases fans with a compelling DVD alternative: “CHOOSE THEIR FATE! You’re in Control – cheat death by changing the destiny of the characters. WOULD YOU save innocent strangers from their *Final Destination*?”

Reading this, it is no accident that one is reminded of a carnival barker encouraging fools to part with their money by ‘playing’ rigged games that offer no real choice but to lose. The hyperbolic prose simultaneously evokes the film’s carnival setting as well as huckster advertising copy that promises much and delivers little. Such exaggeration is particularly common to horror films; one is reminded of producer William Castle’s declaration that *House on Haunted Hill* (1959) was made in the new process of ‘Emergo’ – a ‘technology’ that was nothing more than a plastic skeleton dangling from a rope, laughably cranked out from behind the screen during the film’s climax.

For one interested in the evolving relationship of cinema to the new technologies of videogames, it comes as a disappointment, if not a surprise, to learn

that *Final Destination 3*'s "Choose Their Fate" viewing option suggests little has changed in the half-century separating it from Castle's output. The trumpeted DVD interactivity, celebrated as a 'first' for a major studio release, reveals itself to be little more than a collection of alternate death scenes, offering varying amounts of blood and gore but precious little opportunity to meaningfully alter the text.³⁰¹

Though the studio's ad copy might be accused of shamelessly exploiting new media technology, such a practice in itself is nothing new. If *Final Destination 3* is likely to offend, then, it is more likely to do so through its jarring reference to 9/11, in which an unpleasant reminder of the real interrupts the largely artificial pleasures of the series. Wendy (Mary Elizabeth Winstead) has discovered that photographs of the roller coaster crash contain clues that foreshadow the survivors' subsequent deaths. In attempting to convince a fellow survivor that such foreshadowing is possible, Wendy uses the last photograph taken of President Lincoln; a crack in the plate drawing a line through his head "right where he was shot." Her next photo needs no explanation, and is held on the screen without dialogue: the World Trade Center with a plane's shadow falling on one of the towers.³⁰²

I begin with this anecdote to highlight the vast gulf that persists between the discourses of film and interactive new media – not only does the mainstream Hollywood text described here offer an illusory interactivity (only one life to actually 'save'), but the 'interactivity' on offer occurs during a film that seems to flaunt its

³⁰¹ Of the seven spectacular death sequences that appear in the film, only one can be altered on DVD to spare a character's life.

³⁰² As enough of a horror fan to be present at a packed screening of the film on its opening weekend, I can personally attest to the image causing the otherwise noisily verbal audience to be stunned into momentary silence.

own insensitivity to disaster and tragedy, at a time when debates continue to rage, in public and academic spheres, about the connections between videogame and real-world violence. On DVD, *Final Destination 3* proves itself to be an exploitation film in more ways than one – both our desire to interact with the text and to understand historic tragedy are reduced simply to a means by which media conglomerates may profit.

Though debates over the value of videogames and related technologies have been visible within academic spheres for more than a decade, notably so in the work of Henry Jenkins and Scott Bukatman, it has taken considerably longer for the public intellectual sphere to catch up. In this chapter, I consider the extent to which this discussion has been productively expanded as a result of the American independent sphere, specifically using Gus Van Sant's *Gerry* (2002) and *Elephant* (2003). These texts engage substantially with issues of interactivity, in ways both explicit and implicit; moreover, in its direct engagement with the violence at Columbine high school, the latter raises the question of such interactivity's ability to engage with play for more than its own sake. To what extent does the discourse around film and videogames raise ethical questions, and what are *Elephant's* preliminary answers?

In his recent book, Everything Bad is Good for You: How Today's Pop Culture is Actually Making Us Smarter, Steven Johnson identifies an increasingly popular pseudo-genre:

Films built around fiendishly complex plots, demanding intense audience focus and analysis just to figure out what's happening on the screen. ... The mind-bender ... designed specifically to disorient you, to mess with your head. The list includes *Being John Malkovich*, *Pulp Fiction*, *L.A.*

*Confidential, The Usual Suspects, Memento, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, Run Lola Run, Twelve Monkeys, Adaptation, Magnolia and Big Fish.*³⁰³

Johnson presents a preliminary, often playful rebuke to media narratives about the dumbing-down of popular culture. Instead, the author suggests “even the crap has improved”³⁰⁴; pop culture is consistently getting smarter. Johnson also considers videogames, citing the monotony of ‘Pac-Man’ and ‘Pong’ in contrast to the popularity of such contemporary problem-solving networks as ‘Myst’, ‘Sim City’ and the infamous ‘Grand Theft Auto.’

In a post-9/11, post-Columbine era of media alarmism and hysteria, texts such as ‘Grand Theft Auto’ are easily made into sites for the politicizing of aesthetics; a process by which the intensity of popular opinion, and popular (read: increasingly Christian fundamentalist) morality can all too easily trump the rational conclusions of scientific research. Nevertheless, Everything Bad is Good For You makes a purely biological claim for the value of the media it investigates: we use only a small percentage of our brains; when we ‘zone out’ in front of a videogame or TV show, we feel guilty for allowing those brains to atrophy in a vacuum; however, we are, surprisingly, engaged with the cognitive demands made by our pop culture; therefore, we should admire said culture for making us ‘smarter.’ Here then, are the terms of the popular debate: are those who celebrate technologies for their own sake

³⁰³ Johnson, 129.

³⁰⁴ Johnson, 91.

in danger of being labeled ‘Dr. Frankenstein’ by the conservative right, uninterested in the ethical implications of their pure scientific research?

Johnson also offers a narrative in which our current understanding of postmodernism is refined and perhaps even redeemed. Consider his description of techniques deployed throughout the *Mindbender*:

Some of these films challenge the mind by creating a thick network of intersecting plot lines; some challenge by withholding crucial information from the audience; some by inventing new temporal schemes that invert traditional relationships of cause and effect; some by deliberately blurring the line between fact and fiction. (*All of these are classic techniques of the old cinematic avant-garde, by the way.*)³⁰⁵

So much is said through his casual ‘by the way’; it is as if Johnson is conscious that this new ‘genre’ does have meaning, but is not willing to interpret it. Nevertheless, the point is made that popular cultural texts are now embracing the challenging techniques of modernism within mainstream production – for many, an optimistic sign of postmodernism responding to modernist elitism.

The mainstream acceptance of avant-garde techniques and the blurring of previously solid conceptual boundaries are heady stuff indeed for a videogame culture so commonly and easily dismissed as symbolizing everything that is wrong with postmodernism. But is there a thematics, an ethics here? Johnson seems to ignore such a possibility: his final verdict amounts to ‘everything in moderation’, balancing cognitive, problem-solving lessons learnt while gaming with moral, philosophical lessons absorbed while engaging works of high art, literary and otherwise. Does the newfound complexity of our contemporary popular narratives

³⁰⁵ Johnson, 129-130 (my emphasis).

signify any meaning in and of itself? How might this complexity challenge the loss of meaning so common to the Postmodern 'Blockbuster' era?

To answer these questions, one must recall the extent to which the pleasures of Johnson's *Mindbenders* are derived from the advances of the American independent movement. In its self-representation as a vibrant American art cinema, the 'indie' discourse positions itself as a site that preserves the intellectual demands and sophistication of European post-war Modernism³⁰⁶: the cryptic mystery of *Blow-Up*; the enigmatic recollections of *Last Year at Marienbad*; the collapsing layers of dream, cinema and reality in *8½*. In the same way that the ability to engage with such texts revealed an artistic fluency that could easily be translated into forms of cultural capital, so too does the contemporary independent film learn to assume, reward and at times simply imply intelligence on the part of its viewers.³⁰⁷

One might conclude that such narrative play is perhaps best suited to those films which employ a self-reflexivity to their storytelling 'purely' for the purposes of postmodern irony – to call attention to their status as product, to remind viewers of their artifice. In short: to exist as little more than 'play.' Many have suggested that such approaches to narrative are a way to encourage either repeated trips to theatres, or even an investment in the DVD, the better to spend time unlocking hidden mysteries. Here, cognitive development becomes a human desire potentially exploitable by independent producers who lack budgets for Hollywood-level

³⁰⁶ For a thorough consideration of how the films position themselves, see Geoff King's "Following in the Footsteps: Gus Van Sant's *Gerry* and *Elephant* in the American independent field of cultural production." *New Review of Film and Television Studies* Vol. 4, No. 2, August 2006, pp. 75-92.

³⁰⁷ Dana Polan's study of *Pulp Fiction*, for example, refers to his epiphany-like "Aha!" moment upon figuring out precisely when and how the film's narrative chronology had doubled back on itself (32).

spectacle. Johnson himself makes this point, suggesting that conglomerates produce such films because dedicated fans will buy the DVDs, even in multiple versions, in order to master them through repetition, thus justifying initial outlay on box office underperformers.³⁰⁸

This trend of narrative density combines the populism of contemporary videogames with the aesthetic/thematic potential offered by independent film, leading to an enhanced model of spectatorship in which one no longer passively receives a linear narrative, nor simply engages in a cognitive workout. Rather, one ‘plays’ such films as a pseudo-gamer, by exploring them spatially, investigating which elements can be interacted with productively, and taking turns ‘entering’ the subjectivity of multiple characters in order to play from varied perspectives.

Johnson cites such attributes as fundamental to the appeal of the average video game today: importantly, such pleasures are consistent across a broad spectrum of popular games, from the elegant problems in the fantasy world of ‘Myst’, to the pragmatic, crude encounters within the grim cityscape of ‘Grand Theft Auto.’ This series is often invoked as self-evident proof of the (still unproved) link between excessive gaming and adolescent violence. Given that one plays a character with the ability to steal cars, run over pedestrians and murder prostitutes, it is understandable that one may feel no amount of cognitive development could justify the textual-thematic experience of identifying with such a rogue.

³⁰⁸ Johnson, 163.

This outrage is derived, however, from a misapplication of traditional forms of narrative film spectatorship within the profoundly more interactive, blank and ambivalent arena of modern game-playing. Though ‘Grand Theft Auto’ appeals more to the player inclined to derive vicarious thrills from dangerous high-speed driving, while ‘Myst’ is more for a player who appreciates allusions to fantasy writers such as Carroll and Tolkein, each offers fundamentally similar pleasures that are all the more resonant for their sustained appearance in such divergent genres. We might call these the pleasures of sutured interactivity: the player is presented in both cases with a detailed, elaborate world. To maximize their knowledge of these worlds, players must combine an attempt to pursue the goals explicitly offered (acquire assigned objects, talk to characters, reach ‘the end’) as well as non-narrative goals that are on some level set by the player him or herself (to test the limits of the game’s world, to learn which rules are enforced flexibly, to seek out that which is hidden purely for the joy of discovery). In a moment I will show that *Gerry*, a film whose plot could be summarized as ‘two men go on a hike and get lost,’ offers the latter pleasures in place of the former.

Despite their differences of surface textuality, both ‘Myst’ and ‘Grand Theft Auto’ imply a fundamental appeal within the medium that activates a dormant engagement with that which has been lost. As Henry Jenkins and Mary Fuller note in their essay “Nintendo and New World Travel Writing: A Dialogue,” such game-play positions the user as a virtual explorer, taming a digital frontier no longer present in

the real.³⁰⁹ The joys of such games are closely linked to a basic desire to explore one's space, to learn, to make choices and mistakes, to build, to accomplish. To link such experience to the textuality of the narrative feature film represents a potential whose significance is only beginning to be known.

If the legacy of the postmodern blockbuster is the demonizing of videogames, then that of the American independent film presently lies in its redemption of game-based spectatorship. The sense of play offered by summer spectacles reduces gaming to a sensory, kinetic appeal; cognitive development, however, is able to attain a moral and thematic complexity that suggests a renewed 'indie' engagement with the exploration narratives of American Studies discourses. Jenkins has repeatedly referred to videogames' capacity for narratives of spatial exploration³¹⁰; however, it is only in dialogue with American Studies' interdisciplinary combination of literary and historical analysis that a moral context is substantially addressed. It is Fuller who claims "the drive behind the rhetoric of virtual reality as a New World or new frontier is the desire to recreate the Renaissance encounter with America without guilt ... [one must consider] the ethics and consequences of such a historical revision."³¹¹

Many pleasures of pure gamesmanship are to be found throughout *Gerry*: each character bears the eponymous name, for example, potentially leading viewers

³⁰⁹ Jenkins and Fuller, 58-59: "Virtual reality opens new spaces for exploration, colonization, and exploitation, returning to a mythic time when there were worlds without limits and resources beyond imagining."

³¹⁰ See his "Game Design as Narrative Architecture" and "'Complete Freedom of Movement': Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces."

³¹¹ Jenkins and Fuller, 59.

to hypothesize that they are in fact somehow the same person.³¹² The identity of the film's location is also presented as a potential mystery to solve. As the two Gerries (Matt Damon and Casey Affleck) begin to hike, the location shooting would appear to evoke California deserts; however, as the film progresses, the hikers are shown to cross the salt flats of Utah, and eventually, increasingly unfamiliar landscapes.³¹³ The film's games are thus inseparable from thematic issues of frontier exploration. While sitting by a campfire, Gerry-Affleck tells Gerry-Damon a lengthy videogame narrative (though even this detail is itself, tellingly, never made explicit):

I had all the sanctuaries built ... I already had all these docks ... I was trading with twelve cities ... I had a really good army. [But] I couldn't grow the wheat to feed the horses ... I couldn't trade because the river had flooded ... I couldn't train any horses because I didn't have the wheat ... You can only send [the army] out if you have twelve trained horses, and I only had eleven. I was one horse shy of almost saving my city.

From this brief excerpt, it is clear that Gerry's report is strikingly similar to the intricate networks of problems present in so many popular videogames. One might interpret the film, then, as making a judgment about the effect of gaming on contemporary youth: for all of Gerry's virtual accomplishments in building simulated civilizations he in no way demonstrates the skills required to find his way back to real civilization (indeed, of the two, it is this Gerry who does not survive the adventure). Such a position allows one to interpret *Gerry* as condemning videogames, and, by extension, to attack Johnson's optimism from a Culture

³¹² This 'split self' is itself now a common motif of contemporary postmodern cinema, appearing in such films as *Fight Club* and *Adaptation* (2002).

³¹³ *Gerry*'s end credits reveal that these were in fact shot in South America.

Industry perspective: the only value *of* proficiency at video games *is* proficiency at video games. The only result of a culture of increasingly complex narratives is a facility with, and increased profit for, complex narratives.

A more productive reading of the fireside scene accepts and interrogates its fundamental duality – thus exploring a potential union of interactive formal qualities and modernist thematic confrontation. Certainly, the foolhardy, albeit computer-savvy duo are being mocked; at the same time, however, the moment resonates as equivalent to a monologue from any number of classic Westerns. During this speech, Gerry not only refrains from naming the game, he refrains from acknowledging that he'd been playing one at all. The result is that his recounting of crippling floods, starving horses and trading difficulties fleetingly evokes American mythologies of settling the West, in a meaningful instance of independent films aligning themselves with elements of national mythology.

It is worth noting that, in order to reach such a point – to physically inhabit the space of Western expansion while celebrating one's own achievements in virtual expansion – the Gerries have been required to choose against reliance upon passive linearity, deciding instead to forge a trail of their own. After noticing too many tourists with them on the marked trail, they first follow their own route to the end point, and then finally dispense with the concept of an end point altogether. "Fuck the thing! It's just going to be a fucking thing at the end of the trail," Gerry-Damon declares. The goal at the end of the trail is never identified, suggesting a decisive break from conventional approaches to narrative.

The divergence from the path is equivalent to the digressions *Gerry* makes from classical narrative storytelling; and so, when the film allows the playing of a video game to ‘morph’ into the pathos of a suffering rancher, it seems that a larger point is being made about the relationship between games and movies, between interactivity and narrative, between cognitive strength and emotive wisdom. The categories are typically kept separate by what amounts to another form of cultural canon formation³¹⁴; such films as *Gerry* are able to both blur the boundaries between these categories as well as to implicitly challenge the cultural operations by which such boundaries are maintained.

The experience of watching *Gerry*, formally, is strikingly similar to the experience of playing such exploratory mystery games as ‘Myst’: each is a relatively quiet text, with little music or dialogue; each is physically minimalist, depicting apparently simple surfaces that yield meaning only upon closer inspection; and each offers the simple, yet considerable pleasures of virtual movement through a vivid, seemingly non-narrated environment. The viewers of *Gerry*, however, are placed in a dual position of spectatorship, both interpreting the text as a conventionally thematic narrative film as well as acquiring new skills and language in order to adjust to an enigmatic interpretive space.

Such dualism is particularly intense during a lengthy sequence in which Gerry-Damon convinces Gerry-Affleck to jump from a perilously high rock when it

³¹⁴ Such academic ‘turf wars’ appear frequently throughout writings on videogames. Jenkins begins “Game Design and Narrative Architecture” by referring to a “blood feud [that] threatened to erupt between the self-proclaimed Luddologists, who wanted to see the focus shift onto the mechanics of game play, and the Narratologists, who were interested in studying games alongside other storytelling media”(1).

appears there is no other way down. Though their lives are apparently at stake, especially given that Gerry-Affleck's jump could cause a fatally progress-impeding injury, the men render the dilemma comically abstract through their casual nature, consistently laughing at each other and themselves as they attempt to puzzle out a solution. Seemingly untroubled by the danger, the Gerries instead delight in devising names, not just for elements of the world around them, but for their creative experiments upon that world as well: by manipulating this dirt, I can make a "dirt-mattress"; by holding my shirt just so, it becomes a "shirt-basket."

In addition to actions and dialogue, even costume design marks the characters as gamers. Gerry-Damon's blue shirt, for example, 'morphs' from turban, to tool, and back to clothing, suggesting its status as 'playable' object to be manipulated. Gerry-Affleck, on the other hand, wears a black T-shirt with an iconic gold star; the simplicity of the design helps mark him as an avatar onto which a viewer-player can project himself. This trope is developed exponentially throughout *Elephant*, as various high school students are similarly 'marked' for easy differentiation: a black bull on bright yellow, a white cross on a red field. None becomes a full character in dramatic terms; instead, they are empty vessels to be occupied, just as one hops into whatever vehicle is handy in many videogames.

The contemporary culture of videogames emphasizes an increased ability to play as a variety of selves, to assume different roles within the game's narrative universe. Often, a game will exploit this technological promise for the means of blurring the Manichean lines that separate the good and evil characters on display;

one might, for example, enjoy a military simulation that grants one the perspective of both potential sides of a famous historical battle, or to brandish a lightsaber while dueling as either Darth Vader or Luke Skywalker. But the ability to do this is typically contained and explained away by Culture Industry models of interpretation: what one might theorize to be an idealistic manifestation of democratic choice in a virtual sphere becomes precisely that – virtual, or merely one more novelty by which media conglomerates can add to their profits. Moreover, academics often hypothesize optimistically about the possibilities contained within such technologies while bemoaning their regressive, even reactionary deployment in popular media.

In “Taking Shape: Morphing and the Performance of Self,” for example, Scott Bukatman considers the mutability of digital images. Though morphing offers a potential to transcend bodily limits and traditional chronology, he ultimately finds cause for pessimism:

There is something symptomatic in my simultaneous desire to embrace and reject morphing ... in *its most familiar versions*, in countless sci-fi movies and TV commercials, the hollowness of morphing ... offers surprisingly scant room for fantasy. Morphing is an inadequate, *overly literal* gesture towards change without pain, without consequence, without meaning. There is something comforting, perhaps, about the stability of unstable identity, but morphing holds out empty arms.³¹⁵

Just as movie critics use videogames as common short-hand for belittling summer movies, so too does Bukatman take Hollywood to task for squandering a vast digital opportunity.

³¹⁵ Bukatman, 156 (my emphasis).

I propose a narrative in which one looks to such American independent films as *Gerry* and *Elephant* for the moral energizing of such ill-used Hollywood toys. By emphasizing Bukatman's description of morphing as a device only seen in its 'most familiar versions' and used in an 'overly literal way,' I mean to effectively make manifest his implicit criticism of the dominant media industries that are inevitably the ones with the capital to first engage in such technological experimentation. By contrast, it is the work of a cinema that opposes such industrial modes to both defamiliarize such increasingly common spectacular tropes, and to present them in metaphorical, rather than literal ways. Bukatman would likely refer to *Final Destination 3* as an example of familiar interactivity, hollowed of meaning by Hollywood; the value of Van Sant's films lies precisely in their ability to energize interactivity through distancing, unfamiliar means.

If *Gerry* suggests an embryonic attempt to integrate narrative and game-based filmic modes, then *Elephant* represents progress in explicitly connecting such experimentation to an urgent, visible subject. A documentary-style depiction of an average high school's collective day before a Columbine-like tragedy, *Elephant* has a greater claim to topicality and importance than its predecessor. Such expectations appear to be part of the film's design, in that they are consistently raised only to be thoroughly challenged, subverted, or answered with a deafening silence.

Elephant is ultimately more an interrogation of (our desire for) narrative as a means to make sense of or deal with tragic events than it is any one such narrative that might provide answers or comfort. Instead, *Elephant* places its viewer within a

compelling, enigmatic space that recalls the gamesmanship of *Gerry*. As with the prior film, *Elephant* relies heavily on a passive mode of narration: much of the film consists of extremely long takes in which a steadicam floats behind a character as he or she roams cavernous, gleaming high school halls. This passive narrativity engages with interactivity, however, through the gradual revelation of *Elephant*'s achronology. Though we are denied access to the students' subjectivity, the film nevertheless repeats a scene in which three of them cross paths, once from each perspective. Rather than confront viewers with a specific cause for the tragedy of high school gun violence, *Elephant* instead challenges the viewer to consider the means with which it is depicted. Though the film is a discrete textual event, unfolding the same way on each viewing, the suggestion is made that it would be productive to 'play' out the day as several different students, the better to approach an omniscient perspective.

If *Gerry* evokes such haunting, enigmatic videogames as 'Myst', then *Elephant* forces one to confront the excessive violence in such controversial games as 'Grand Theft Auto', or the first-person shooters³¹⁶ 'Doom' and 'Resident Evil.' This connection is made visually explicit through camerawork which echoes slasher films³¹⁷, where viewers assume the perspective of a psychopath stalking sexually active teenagers. Such references are not merely to be 'caught' by a savvy viewer, but read as clues for a participatory player who comes to the film seeking an answer

³¹⁶ The first shot after *Elephant*'s credits is a 'first person driver' angle, echoing the 'Grand Theft Auto' series, on a car wildly, recklessly smashing into parked cars and sending their mirrors flying.

³¹⁷ Many reviews of *Elephant* evoked *The Shining* (1980) in this regard.

to the enigma of Columbine's cause: have children been numbed by the violence they see in movies?³¹⁸

As the two killers relax in their bedrooms, one grabs a laptop and idly plays a first-person shooter. The game seems bland, even abstract, in comparison to its real-world equivalents.³¹⁹ A point-of-view shot of a flat, grey wasteland is shown, in which the player calmly walks up behind virtual people, points a gun at their heads, and pulls the trigger. Thus, another 'answer': the boys have become violent because they spend too much time playing video games! This interpretation is encouraged by the use of this first-person perspective during *Elephant's* climactic murders, with faceless digital people replaced with the specific, real students the viewer has literally followed over the course of the film.

Reading the film as a game, however, suggests interaction with a virtual space in which all possible explanations for Columbine exist to be uncovered, with only the player left to choose when the puzzle has indeed been 'solved.' Alongside the horror film and the violent videogame hypotheses, *Elephant* includes such familiar rationales for the killers' motivations as: their closeted homosexuality

³¹⁸ The debate, for example, around the effects of the so-called "video nasty" in the United Kingdom has raised the direct possibility that such exploitative horror fare has led to horrific acts of violence perpetrated by unthinkably young children, as well as the withdrawal of another provocatively violent Kubrick film, *A Clockwork Orange* (1971).

³¹⁹ The game in question is named 'Gerry Count', and its victims are digitized Gerries, a connection made clear by Van Sant's iconic use of costume design. Here we see another moment of provocatively blurred boundaries: a moment of modernist intertextuality is also a reference to the use of hidden 'Warp Zones' in videogames. Only the eagle-eyed viewer will notice the reference (it took me several viewings of *Elephant* to spot it) and, upon doing so, will be able to access/read *Gerry* as now having increased status as a film engaging with interactive media, as well as the weightier subject matter of the later film. As Jenkins notes, "knowledge about warp zones, passwords, and other game secrets are key items of social exchange between game players." ("Nintendo", 67) Here, the act of reading a modernist text is encouraged to merit a group-networking status.

(before heading off to the massacre, they kiss in the shower); their obsession with Nazis (the boys watch *Triumph of the Will*); absent and/or inattentive parents (the weaving car is driven by an alcoholic Father, the killers are often in homes devoid of adults); bullying at school (Alex is pelted with spit balls during a science class); the ease with which new technologies can be irresponsibly manipulated (the killers purchase assault weapons from the website 'Guns USA'); and, finally, the meaningless banality of high school existence (the film's blank affect and passive following of students as they move through space).

None of these possible answers is given authority by a subjective narrator; whereas a more traditional form of narration might be expected to conclude with a dramatic summation of its various answers (for example, the comforting morals at the end of television *After School Specials*), *Elephant* ends on a notably contrary note. Having arbitrarily killed his partner a moment earlier, Alex now finds he has trapped two schoolmates in the cafeteria. As the couple pleads for their lives, Alex points his gun calmly, alternating between them while reciting "Eeny, Meeny, Miney, Moe." The film ends here, its teenage killer suspended at a moment of choice.

Is this simply a modernist rejection of the cinema's ability to provide answers? Or is it an interrogation of filmic narrative's presumption to provide social answers? My inclination is to argue for the latter possibility; I believe doing so underlines the significance of the American independent film alongside a Hollywood

industry commonly defined by its empty postmodernism, absorbing videogame technologies into horizontally-integrated profit engines.

To watch *Elephant* is to enjoy the virtual sensation of self-narration; it is as if one browses, or channel-surfs amongst the students on display, without any concern for the spatial and thematic limitations of conventional narrative. Just as *Elephant*'s viewers may designate their own hero or main character, so too are they free to select their own 'moral' at the end of the text, from the many on display. It is important to be clear, however: *Elephant*'s meaning is inseparable from the fact that such sensations *are* virtual. The film's value is not its ability to leave one feeling as if they 'actually were there', having enjoyed a simulation-ride through Columbine. *Elephant* cannot avoid subjectivity: at best, it can only offer a hybrid of cinema and video game experiences. The hybridity, however, is itself the meaning: in *Elephant* we are witness to a true synthesis of the seemingly antithetical experiences of playing interactive games and watching narrative films.

Elephant not only engages us to 'play' the film as if it were a videogame, it enables us to consider the porous nature of boundaries between media, between academic disciplines. Though much ink has been spilled in debates around the merits and/or pitfalls of comparing videogames to narratives³²⁰; film, with its vast history of synthesizing available technologies³²¹, is inherently resistant to such essentialism. As a single text, *Elephant* is able to: briefly 'morph' into the experience of viewing

³²⁰ In addition to Jenkins, see Gonzalo Frasca's "Ludology Meets Narratology: Similitude and Difference between Videogames and Narrative." www.ludology.org.

³²¹ We can add morphing, DVD branching and 'Emergo' to a list that includes 3-D, Vitaphone, CGI, Technicolor, Cinerama, ad infinitum.

Gerry; integrate familiar modes of interpretation with interactive play; activate its status as American independent film, fulfilling what Bukatman would call the ‘empty’ promises of *Final Destination 3* and the like; and, in so doing, locate the new frontier of spatial narratives within a centuries-old drama of human exploration. The events of *Columbine* remind us that real lives are at stake in the discourse of this exciting virtual realm; as with the fluid chronology of *Elephant*, so too must we avoid merely looking forward. The only way to know our subject is to play from all possible directions.

The specters of new technology have also impacted upon film industry narratives of ‘70s-era auteurs themselves morphing into today’s independent directors. Bukatman would likely remind us to read this figure of the contemporary auteur, able to fluidly morph from studio director to independent artist, with as much historical self-awareness and specificity as possible. As a result, it seems prudent to return to the case of self-proclaimed ‘independent filmmaker’ George Lucas. A compelling historical irony developed in May of 2005, with the release of Lucas’ final installment in his legendary *Star Wars* series, *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*. The film was the concluding episode of both his “prequel trilogy”, a set of summer blockbusters utilizing the latest in computer generated imagery and digital special effects, as well as the last, as of this writing, of any feature films Lucas intends to make as part of this franchise he began in 1977. As a result, *Revenge of the Sith* is automatically a film that leads its audience to approach it with a greater complexity of reading strategies than is commonly expected from Hollywood’s summer movies:

at the most literal level, one must make sense of it as a serial element within an ongoing narrative that has been deliberately told out of chronological order; on a personal level, one may reflect nostalgically upon one's own maturation since viewing the original trilogy; and, finally, as a part of film history, one is inevitably led to muse about the various degrees of progress or regression within global cinema culture that are a direct result of Lucas' creation. That is to say, the film is simultaneously an installment within a specific set of film narratives as well as an element of a larger popular narrative about cinema, and perhaps more meaningful as the latter.

By way of review, it is worth recalling for our purposes the position of the original trilogy within American film history: that is, as a defining shift between the mature, critical, auteur-driven cinema of the late 1960s and early 70s, and the infantilized, reactionary, producer-driven blockbusters of the 1980s and beyond. For many, the 'childish' appeal of *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and *Return of the Jedi* – the toys, breakfast cereals and comic books developed out of the franchise; the formal embrace and even exaggeration of 1930s-era serial cliffhangers; the basic narrative of an innocent youth redeeming a fallen, corrupt father – represented a direct assault upon the strengths and idealism of a period often referred to as Hollywood's 'second golden age.' As already outlined in my analysis of the auteur figure, Lucas, alongside Steven Spielberg, came to personify the shift from the auteur film director to the producer- auteur figure so prevalent during an era of postmodern blockbusters, all too often substituting a synthetic childlike wonder at

fantastic special effects in place of an intelligent, realistic engagement with the contemporary world. Several critics and commentators have gone on to compare Lucas not with the original trilogy's ostensible hero, the young Luke Skywalker, but with the villainous Darth Vader, ruler of a vast empire that crushes all those independent citizens who attempt to rebel against it. If the filmic narrative of the 1977-1983 trilogy is one of an idealistic youth saving a corrupt, dictatorial Father, the extra-textual narrative that accompanied it was one of Lucas becoming that very dictator: utilizing his financial leverage to create his own empire, via Industrial Light & Magic and Lucasfilm Ltd., all within his sizable Northern California estate, the 'Skywalker Ranch.'

Particularly galling for many critics, academics and cinephiles alike is Lucas' dogged determination to view himself as a wholly benevolent figure within the industry; his inability to acknowledge what would seem to be self-evident side effects of the *Star Wars* phenomenon comes to seem like a postmodern rejection of reality in itself. In the years following the release of his original trilogy, for example, Lucas has gone to great lengths to represent himself in such varying roles as: a scholar, whose extensive research into cultural mythology and the writings of Joseph Campbell enriches his films immeasurably; a peer of the acclaimed 1970s auteurs, making films that combine populism and personal aesthetic expression, just as did such figures as Coppola, De Palma and Cimino; and perhaps most laughably of all, an independent director, whose own financial stability enables him to work without answering to the demands of studio executives.

I intend to argue that the compelling historical irony referred to at the outset of this conclusion is that the completion of Lucas' prequel trilogy has in fact proved the man right on at least two of these counts. If the irony of the first three *Star Wars* films lay in its contrast between Luke Skywalker's redemption of Darth Vader and the fall of George Lucas into imperial decadence, then the irony of the recent trilogy is expressed in its simultaneous filmic and extra-filmic inversion of both narratives: now, it is the films themselves which depict a young man's descent into corruption, and the filmmaker behind them who attains a late measure of redemption from the child he has created. A hyperbolic, even melodramatic claim, to be sure, and worth placing at this point in a larger context: by way of conclusion, I wish to offer the evidence of synthesis between the progress of the American independent film throughout the post-*Star Wars* era and the advances of the global blockbuster during the same period. Ideally, by demonstrating the existence of such synthesis – that is, by making a case for an emergent mode of cinema that is able to combine elements of expensive spectacle with a depth of content and artistic complexity typically associated with art-house product – I hope to suggest that the promise of the independent film movement under consideration here is capable of surviving its integration with the marketplace for popular mass entertainment, and in fact gains in strength every day.

In a sense, the narrative of this synthesis is also that of the promise of postmodernism fulfilled. Throughout the 1990s, it became increasingly easy to conceive of the concept in largely pejorative terms, particularly when viewing

mainstream Hollywood entertainment. As already suggested elsewhere in these pages, the contrast between the studio production and the 'indie' film was often one of a vacuous, ironic, self-referential postmodernity contrasted with either an embrace of classical sincerity or an extension of the critical modernism that characterized many beloved films of the 1970s. When the American independent film did embrace postmodernism, with the success of Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*, the timing was tellingly concurrent with the 'Disneyfication' of the independent film: such are the transgressions of postmodernism that Tarantino's films could now evoke the visceral theme-park-ride experiences of the Lucas-Spielberg mold of cinema while also retaining the high art qualities that set independent film apart from it. Tarantino's style became notoriously imitated, throughout mainstream and independent cinema alike; Tarantino himself increasingly seemed to evoke the infantilized, media-obsessed youth said to have been created by a postmodern age; and the Culture Industry appeared to once again have quickly and easily absorbed new formal innovation into its ever-hungry maw.

But the element of modernism contained within conceptions of the postmodern has proved to be strikingly resilient, and in recent years it has increasingly seemed as if the popular American cinema might successfully be able to bring modernism's complex intelligence, its angry urgency and its predominant interest in the real world to the multiplexes. Postmodernism remains an inherently flawed, fractious discourse, but not one without a certain optimism in this regard: finding the progress of modernism too slow, too much an elitist enterprise preaching

only to an already-converted intelligentsia, the promise of postmodernism would be for the reach of global media conglomerates to facilitate the dissemination of truly revolutionary modes of art. This sense of impatient urgency has only heightened, of course, in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks: almost immediately after the tragedy occurred, media analysts hypothesized an imminent end to what suddenly seemed an embarrassingly indulgent 'Age of Irony.' The symbolic horror of the events was inseparable from the collective understanding that such spectacles – plane crashes, collapsing skyscrapers, hordes of panicked onlookers desperately fleeing on foot – were the creation of, and on some level the rightful property of, the Hollywood film industry. When the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen later proclaimed the attack to be, in part, a monumental, and monumentally effective, work of art, the inevitable outcry in the American press nevertheless, even if only inadvertently, gave voice to perhaps the most perverse question of all: would, could the beloved summer blockbuster ever be the same again?

Given that part of the ongoing appeal of Hollywood's product during its 'second golden age' had to do with its countercultural content during a time of intense public turmoil, shaped by anger over an ill-defined American military intervention, and cynicism for a corrupt U.S. government, it is perhaps inevitable that one might ask: when, and how, will American media culture respond to such equivalent present-day events? Is it possible that a return to such modes of filmmaking will result from such ongoing unrest? Such attitudes could easily be heard in 2004, with the release of Michael Moore's documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*;

indeed, the film continues to be so potent a signifier in the public consciousness that it was invoked by a Reuters report on the release of *Revenge of the Sith*. Most likely motivated by each film's heavily publicized early screenings at the Cannes film festival, a Reuters reporter's article, "*Star Wars* Exerts Force in Earthly Politics" begins thusly:

A year after Michael Moore weighed into the 2004 presidential campaign with *Fahrenheit 9/11*, both sides of America's partisan divide are debating the political messages of a far different movie – *Star Wars*. Even before it opened in theatres last week, some observers were drawing unflattering parallels between the story of interplanetary treachery in *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith* and the Bush administration's war on terror and its decision to invade Iraq.³²²

The report goes on to note that many political columnists and critics found a number of resonant, timely passages in the film's dialogue, referring to "Anakin Skywalker, the troubled young Jedi falling under the influence of the 'dark side' warn[ing] his mentor, Obi-Wan Kenobi, 'If you're not with me, you're my enemy' – reminding many of [George W.] Bush's post-Sept. 11 declaration: 'Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.'³²³ The same press services also tended to note a character's reflection on the ease with which fear is manipulated by politicians into repression: "So this is how liberty dies: with thunderous applause."³²⁴

Clearly, given both the film's thirty-year gestation period and, more significantly, the hyperbolic and divisive nature of contemporary politics (especially

³²² Gorman,
http://story.news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20050524/film_nm/leisure_starwars_politics_dc&printer=1

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Ibid.

as represented by the mainstream media), it is easily possible to feel self-conscious finding too much meaning in these examples. Indeed, the report as presented by the Agence France Presse includes a quote from Leo Braudy, offering a cautioning reminder that “any film can be interpreted this way, especially when films deal with conflicts ... Some academics in the future will look at films of today and how the political events are reflected in fiction and find parallels with *Star Wars*, but also *Kingdom of Heaven* or *Troy*.”³²⁵ If *Revenge of the Sith* seems especially meaningful, he suggests, it is primarily due to its being “the most visible film” in the public eye. Similarly, Lucas himself is described widely throughout the reports as stressing, predictably, the more universal and timeless elements of the *Star Wars* series. For example: “When I wrote [a story outline for the series], Iraq didn’t exist.”³²⁶

Such denials are certainly in keeping with the infantilizing blockbuster phenomenon so commonly credited to Lucas and Spielberg throughout the 1980s. When the independent American cinema was celebrated at the expense of this mode of filmmaking, it was lauded for its complex engagement with the real world and its difficult truths; conversely, the comforting narrative of an idealistic youth enabling a corrupt patriarch’s redemption is now easily interpreted as part of a pervasive, reactionary cultural trend in which mythic Stallone and Schwarzenegger characters replay the Vietnam war, win it, and in the process ‘correct’ the unhealthy cultural advances of previous decades. As The New Yorker contemptuously observed in

³²⁵ Agence France Press,
http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20050522/ts_alt_afp/afpentertainmentfilm_050522202005.

³²⁶ Ibid.

reviewing this most recent *Star Wars* episode, “we get the films we deserve.”³²⁷

From this attitude one can recognize a weary disgust at the excesses of a postmodern culture, willfully ignorant of recognizable human behavior, or the complexities of the real world. The review in question, however, was written in 2005, as part of Anthony Lane’s review of *Revenge of the Sith*. Is it fair of Lane to suggest that nothing has changed in thirty years? Or is something less immediately visible in the process of unfolding?

Certainly, if one were to look at the majority of reviews for the first two installments of Lucas’ prequel trilogy – *The Phantom Menace* (1999), *Attack of the Clones* (2002) – it would be easy to quickly conclude that the decades since the original *Star Wars*’ release have seen a clear descent in the quality of expensive Hollywood product. Indeed, it often seems that when one is talking about the *Star Wars* series, and the legion of imitators it has spawned, one is inevitably forced on some level to address questions of our own technological process as it relates to the condition of being human. Many writers drew a direct correlation, for example, between the increase in the recent films’ special effects budgets, and the decrease in their pleasurable aesthetic qualities. What the prequels had lost, then, was a compelling human factor. In its place were: an omnipresence of spectacular, even painterly, sets and landscapes, nearly all of which were entirely created ‘by’³²⁸ computers; an uneasy sense that the stars’ performances are drained of all vitality by

³²⁷ Lane, http://www.newyorker.com/printables/critics/050523crici_cinema.

³²⁸ So often is the concept of computer-generated effects dismissed in mainstream film criticism, one can easily forget that there remain human artists at the controls of the technology used to render such images.

the knowledge (theirs and ours) that all their lines have been uttered in front of a green screen; and, such ill-conceived ‘virtual’ characters as Jar Jar Binks, whose artifice is compounded by his apparent embodiment of offensive racial stereotypes.

The result of such prevalent assessments of *The Phantom Menace* and *Attack of the Clones* was that a great deal of writing about George Lucas and his *Star Wars* series became devoted to hypothesizing about the cause of this aesthetic decline from one trilogy to the next. Were chickens coming home to roost? Was Lucas inevitably tainted by the huge financial success of his earlier films? Was his entrepreneurial spirit so extreme as to become symptomatic of a retreat from reality? Lucas’ Skywalker Ranch came to symbolize a number of depressing notions about celebrity, wealth and popular culture in America: perhaps Lucas had inevitably become a control freak, attempting to impose a single dictatorial will upon as many acres of Northern California as he could afford to buy. Perhaps he had inevitably gone insane, unable to separate reality from the elaborate fantasies he had created, becoming a Howard Hughes-like eccentric recluse, or a Michael Jackson presiding over Neverland next to David Merrick’s remains. George Lucas quickly became himself an important and meaningful cultural symbol as he not only made his prequel trilogy, but revisited his original series as well, adding CGI effects to ‘enhance’ them, a move which many saw as nothing short of rewriting canonical works. Perhaps you’ve seen it on a T-shirt, or heard a student, a friend, or even yourself complain: “George Lucas stole my childhood.”

Given the intensity of such scrutiny from so many devoted fans, it was of course impossible for the prequel trilogy not to disappoint the public to an almost elemental degree: as they always say, ‘you can’t go home again.’ As a result, the meaning of the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy is inseparable from its status as the definitive contemporary cultural symbol of our inability to return to the comforting womb of our mindless blockbusters. Is the prequel trilogy emblematic of the type of film that our culture deserves, in its inability to become adult? Is this what Lane meant in his New Yorker review? Have we collectively turned to the well of inspiration for spectacular films so often that it has run dry, now leaving us with nowhere to turn but towards the embracing relief of art? To answer yes to such questions is to passively accept a narrative of popular film history that is all too easy to register as truth; indeed, to propose, as I have been hinting at throughout this conclusion, that this final *Star Wars* film represents a meaningful synthesis of the two primary American filmic tropes in use since the release of the first *Star Wars* film amounts, in some quarters, to a form of heresy. And yet, *Revenge of the Sith*, both as an individual film and as a segment of the recent trilogy, is worth defending in a manner that is neither a rebuke to those critics who dismiss it nor an attempt to ignore such warnings as Leo Braudy’s about academic over-interpretation. The irony of this film’s release, to which I earlier referred, is that of a compelling inversion between the filmic and auteurist narratives represented from one trilogy to the next. If the original trilogy presented a narrative of a pure youth redeeming his Father through innocent idealism, while simultaneously representing George Lucas’

decisive split from his peer group of 1970s auteurs, then the prequel trilogy is all the more powerful for its status as the exact opposite in both cases. In the late 1990s and early 21st century, our popular summer cinema has instead become a tragic narrative of an innocent blond child doomed to become a corrupt, murderous dictator; and if there is a figure redeemed by this, it is Lucas himself.

Consider for a moment the relationships of George Lucas and Francis Coppola, particularly in light of accounts of the latter that read much of his cinema as fundamentally autobiographical: Jon Lewis' Whom God Wishes to Destroy is merely the best known example of many. *Apocalypse Now*, for example, suggests (at least) two possible Coppola figures in its narrative: at first, the director is a Willard figure, hesitantly optimistic about his assignment in the jungle; by the end of the film's protracted shooting, however, Coppola has become an obese, megalomaniacal cult leader more reminiscent of Brando's Colonel Kurtz. Some have even read *Bram Stoker's Dracula* as equating the eponymous Count with Coppola, interpreting the film, with its many striking references to pre-classical film techniques, as a tragic narrative of the director's inability to keep pace with a modernizing cinema culture.

Most familiar of all, of course, is the perspective that views Coppola as Michael Corleone. Even Coppola himself has said as much when discussing the *Godfather* trilogy: in fact, the director has gone so far as to equate the critical attacks on his daughter Sofia's performance in *Part III* (1990) with the same film's climax, in which her character is gunned down by a bullet intended for her father.³²⁹ Indeed,

³²⁹ *The Godfather Part III* DVD Commentary.

the oft-quoted line of dialogue from the trilogy's final chapter almost speaks more to Coppola's career-spanning attempts to transcend the limitations of his role in the commercial film industry than it does to Corleone's angst: "Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in!"

Like Lucas, then, Francis Coppola is forever linked to a hugely successful film trilogy begun in the 1970s; each is a director whose attempts to represent himself as an important film artist are forever tainted by his moments of seemingly effortless skill at commercial showmanship. It is worth remembering that, for all of the critical praise lavished upon the first two *Godfather* films, they are also an accomplishment of blockbuster populism: full of violence, melodrama and reengagement with a genre that had not been economically viable for decades.

With this prequel trilogy's fated narrative of young Anakin Skywalker morphing into the familiar figure of Darth Vader, Lucas has become himself a Michael Corleone. The consideration of specific details are in order: especially memorable from Coppola's first *Godfather* film is a climactic montage which cross-cuts between a series of executions Michael has ordered and the baptism of his son. The aesthetic triumph of the sequence is derived from the complexity of feelings it arouses in the viewer: though one enjoys the triumph of formerly meek, ineffectual Michael now becoming every bit the man his father was, one is also unable to engage with this enjoyment purely. Through editing, one is forced to realize the powerful irony of the moment: Michael's moment of ascension is also,

simultaneously, a descent into Hell. The sanctity of his son's baptism is tainted by the blood on the father's hands, just as it had occurred a generation before.

Such sophistication on the part of Coppola's film is commonly celebrated both in terms of the director's cinematic mastery (Look at this pure deployment of editing that is worthy of Sergei Eisenstein!) as well as his engagement with the contemporary cultural climate (Look at the corruption of those in power whom we'd previously idealized! How can we help but think of Vietnam and Watergate?). Indeed, moments such as this passage have been crucial to *The Godfather's* canonic status, or its transcendence of the middle-brow. While such complexity is largely absent from the Manichean universe of Lucas' original *Star Wars* trilogy, I would argue that it is indeed present throughout the prequels and comes to its fullest fruition in *Revenge of the Sith*. Much of *Sith's* rejection of this Manichean simplicity is derived from the inevitable intertextual play it offers viewers, given that it directly asks one to read it against a film from 1977. For example, in his DVD commentary for the film, Lucas refers to *Sith's* climactic cross-cutting, between the birth of Anakin's twin children and his own damning incarceration within the suit that identifies him as Darth Vader, as a conscious homage to *The Godfather's* memorable climax. Again, there is a suggestion of an attempt at last minute redemption for Lucas here, by repenting technological spectacle and embracing a purer cinema of his fellow '70s auteurs.

Intertextual echoes of *The Godfather* throughout *Sith* also extend to a lengthy sequence half-way through the film, in which the villainous future emperor

commands, “Execute order Sixty-Six.” The order is for the simultaneous assassination of all his enemies, each of them a valorous Jedi knight. The resulting sequence recalls Coppola’s series of executions, but again replaces postmodern pastiche with meaningful intertextuality: if the *Star Wars* series is on some level autobiographical, then the series of killings in *Sith* suggests the beloved auteurs who fell so that the Lucas-Spielberg empire could flourish in the 1980s. As the Jedi are killed, one may liken them to forgotten directors, such as Friedkin, Bogdanovich, Ashby, even Coppola himself; it is as if a repetition compulsion of some sort has led the director to, effectively, atone for his prior crimes.

Sith’s narrative density is, of course, not purely intertextual. By centering this prequel trilogy around a character audiences know is destined to become a figure of ultimate evil, Lucas is able to problematize the dichotomies of the original trilogy, and to place viewers into an uncomfortable position regarding character identification – an accomplishment that should be all the more laudable for occurring within the context of the summer blockbuster, a mode of cinema typically dismissed as aesthetically bankrupt. Indeed, there are a surprising number of ways in which the most common critical complaints about the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy ironically reveal the extent of the endeavor’s ambitions.

For example: the films’ plots are attacked for their obscure complexity, detailing the intricacies of dull political machinations while denying the familiar, swashbuckling pleasures of the original films. Also: the casting of the central role in all three films is considered flawed. Jake Lloyd, playing Anakin as a child and

Hayden Christensen, playing him as a young man, are both annoying, unpleasant screen presences who lack the charm of Harrison Ford's Han Solo or the earnest innocence of Mark Hamill's Luke Skywalker. Finally: the dialogue! Good lord, it is terrible, they say – wooden, awkward, artificial, constantly calling attention to itself. Sentiments such as these are easy to find. They are peppered, at times quite liberally, throughout the mainstream reviews of the prequels (Lane, mocking the cryptic grammar of Yoda in his New Yorker pan of *Sith*, cries, “Break me a fucking give”³³⁰). They can be found throughout internet fan discussions of the new films (where the pained cries of “George Lucas stole my childhood” are almost audible). They even manifest themselves in forms of popular parody, such as a *Simpsons* episode in which a parallel set of films is mocked for its torpor, and their bearded, flannel-wearing creator, Randall Curtis, is directly berated for his inattention to what made his original films ‘great’ in the first place.

In short: the *Star Wars* prequels are almost universally acknowledged as bad films; those who attempt to defend them are fools; and so, let us simply try to top one another's catty insults and bitchy satires. Case closed.

But what if one turns this narrative on its head? What if the worth of the prequels is directly linked to their withholding of pleasure, both in terms of their lack of narrative transparency and their refusal to indulge in earlier, familiar pleasures? Can these films be defended as an attempt to return to the combined populism and complexity for which Coppola's first two *Godfather* films were so universally

³³⁰ Lane, http://www.newyorker.com/printables/critics/050523crici_cinema.

acclaimed? And, perhaps even more importantly, does the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy represent a return to aesthetic engagement with the real, contemporary world?

Responding to the many reporters at the Cannes festival who, upon exiting the early screenings for *Episode III*, saw parallels between the film's narrative and George W. Bush's support of the Patriot Act's repressions, Lucas was quick to point out that his saga's roots extended to a far earlier historic context. As one report noted, "Lucas has insisted that his themes of corrupted democracy and the rise of a fear-mongering tyrant were outlined decades ago, informed by Watergate and the Vietnam era, as well as Hitler's rise to power."³³¹ Another takes this idea even further, claiming the "original 1977 *Star Wars* movie was a parable about the U.S. war in Vietnam and the scandal surrounding the resignation of disgraced U.S. president Richard Nixon"³³² (!) It is a shame the reporter in question chose not to explore this argument further, as it is something of an allegorical stretch without examples to support the theory. Nevertheless, the comment does reveal a sense in which the prequel trilogy is the child of the original films, retroactively redeeming them (or at least inspiring viewers to redeem them) by investing them with a contemporary critical eye that had largely gone unnoticed until the present moment.

Again, think of the monumental, historical extra-textual irony: the recent films redeem their parents (and their infantilized fantasy narrative of a child redeeming its parent) through the very qualities which prevent them from being as

³³¹ Gorman,

http://story.news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20050524/film_nm/leisure_starwars_politics_dc&printer=1

³³² Agence France Presse,

http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20050522/ts_alt_afp/afpentertainmentfilm_050522202005

immediately satisfying as a fable about a child redeeming a corrupt parent. To accomplish this, Lucas has returned to an aesthetic palate that strongly invokes the beloved hallmarks of the very moment his first trilogy is thought to have destroyed, almost single-handedly: namely, the difficult reflexivity of 1970s Modernist filmmaking. Recall the prior aesthetic flaws outlined a moment ago, each consistently labeled as so self-evident that they become indefensible. Firstly, the narrative density: in the New Hollywood era, this was not only a common pleasure to be found in such popular foreign films as *Rashomon* and *Last Year at Marienbad*, but, by the time of such American conspiracy thrillers as *Chinatown* and *The Parallax View*, it had become something of a selling point. Next, the casting, with its resistance of clear heroes and figures for immediate audience identification: one is similarly reminded of the complex male figures at the center of *Deliverance*, *The French Connection* or *Dirty Harry*, about whom one cannot help but feel ambivalent. Finally there is the self-conscious dialogue, consistently denying viewers' desires to forget the stark proscenium of the movie screen and lose oneself completely within Lucas' extensively detailed fantasy worlds: such rejection of traditional pleasures in favor of the exertion required by thought and contemplation is a fundamental tenet of all Modernist art. By the time one watches *Revenge of the Sith*, often having viewed the original trilogy decades earlier and then finally engaging with the last piece of the prequels (indeed, of the entire series), one has been forced to face both the pain of one's own maturation over that time, as well as the ever more complex and

intricate pleasure offered by the more recent films' interrogation of those earlier, simple pleasures.

Again, think of Anthony Lane's words: "we get the films we deserve." From the pen of a New Yorker critic, this is meant as a withering insult, a testament to a general cultural decline being met with a film series devoid of value. At the other end of the critical spectrum, there are reporters whose political biases are almost embarrassingly influential over their reading of the final episode: it is an 'obvious' anti-Bush allegory, every bit the work of leftist propaganda that the Palme d'Or-winning *Fahrenheit 9/11* had been one summer earlier. Both positions are extremist, and neither is able nor, apparently, willing to account for the range and intensity of responses that a viewer is likely to have while watching the film. Moreover, an unpopular opinion does not find itself commonly articulated: that the earlier prequels' rejection of simple satisfactions has indeed always been part of the design that contributes to the weight of the final piece.

Watching *Attack of the Clones* and *The Phantom Menace*, viewers bristled at their own distance from the central character of Anakin Skywalker; we wanted, and were adamantly denied, a clear hero. Anakin is indeed the prequel trilogy's protagonist, so much so that one wrings as much vicarious pleasure as possible out of his vigorous light-saber duels and extravagant last-second rescues. By the time of *Revenge of the Sith*, however, he murders several children as well as, indirectly, his own wife. In many ways, given that this episode's narrative is effectively preordained by its position in the whole of the *Star Wars* series, it would seem that

the only apparent purpose for this film is the eliciting of surrogate emotion, via a populist tragic narrative that inspires either genuine pity or some reasonable facsimile thereof. More is occurring, however. As a direct result of the film's multiple narrativity (simultaneously the narrative climax of one trilogy and part of an elaborate 'flashback' that expands viewer knowledge of the other), one is forced into a position of responding to many things at once; the film is both an aesthetic achievement and a rewarding cognitive exercise. The fact that Lucas is able to contain both qualities within a massive summer blockbuster, furthermore, speaks to an integration of the American independent and mainstream cinemas to a degree far more significant than the director's own claims that his self-funding 'means' he is inherently a maker of 'indie' cinema.

He is not alone in this optimism. As we have seen throughout these pages, it fills the contemporary discourse around independent film. What unites this optimism, however, is the superficial quality to much of it. Writing for mass publication, such figures as Shari Roman and Steven Johnson are permitted to rush their judgments. It is worth recalling, by way of contrast, Scott Bukatman's concluding pessimism about technologies of morphing; here, the evidence of such optimism quickly revealed itself to be an embrace of arms that offered nothing to be held, nothing to behold.

As I noted at the start of this conclusion, and as Johnson, Roman and Bukatman collectively demonstrate, it is inherently difficult to historicize the present moment. I am left somewhat adrift between the realistic pessimism of academic

theory and the attractive optimism of self-promoting public intellectuals, fully aware of the banality offered by a proposal that ‘the truth is somewhere in between.’ But whereas Johnson and Roman propose new technologies for their own sake, uncritically suggesting that they are somehow inherently good and democratic, Bukatman remains interested in content, in textuality, in history. Only now are we beginning to find the films themselves responding to this call: from the massive production of a *Star Wars* blockbuster to the miniscule art films of Gus van Sant, one can recognize a visible engagement with the hardware of new technologies – their structure, their spectacle, their sense of play – as well as their status as software, as tools to be manipulated by their user for the purposes of expressing that user’s creative ideas.

Frederick Jackson Turner’s ‘Frontier Thesis’ once suggested that the space of the expanding west was an inherent cause of a nation’s turn to democracy; since its writing, American Studies scholars have engaged in profound and committed debate about the merits of this thesis. Now, such figures as Henry Jenkins, as well as such films as *Gerry* and *Elephant* refer to the space of the video game diegesis as a virtual frontier, enabling players and programmers to participate in a democratic narrative art. The debate over the ultimate value of this frontier’s virtuality will be played out over the coming decades, occurring as much in the writings of the Academy as it will in the media texts of American mythology.

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