

This article was downloaded by: 10.2.97.136

On: 22 Mar 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



Edited by Rob Stone, Paul Cooke, Stephanie Dennison
and Alex Marlow-Mann

The Routledge Companion to World Cinema

Rob Stone, Paul Cooke, Stephanie Dennison, Alex Marlow-Mann

American indie film and international art cinema

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315688251.ch18>

Geoff King

Published online on: 27 Sep 2017

How to cite :- Geoff King. 27 Sep 2017, *American indie film and international art cinema from: The Routledge Companion to World Cinema* Routledge

Accessed on: 22 Mar 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315688251.ch18>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

18

AMERICAN INDIE FILM AND INTERNATIONAL ART CINEMA

Points of distinction and overlap

Geoff King

Introduction

How should we understand the relationship between American indie film and the broader realm of international art cinema? Both of these formations—each of which is a complex and often contested territory—are defined in large part in opposition to the dominant institution of Hollywood. But what do they have in common, and/or what markers of *difference* (in a neutral sense) or more value-laden *distinction* can be identified between the two? American indie film has largely been ignored in most academic accounts of art cinema, the international or global basis of which is often also marked in distinction from a US cinema sometimes seemingly conflated with Hollywood. Studies of indie have often viewed art cinema as a point of influence but the exact nature of the relationship has not been explored at any length or, I would suggest, with due acknowledgment of the multiple currents of each. This chapter will examine the relationship between the two formations at two main levels, closely related: the types of films involved (and the traditions on which these draw, including those associated with broader currents such as modernism and the postmodern) and the channels through which they circulate. If indie film is sometimes located in a position somewhere between art cinema and the more commercial mainstream, the argument here will be that it often draws on qualities associated with art cinema and that the lines between the two are often significantly blurred, even if some clear points of distinction can be identified and have been mobilised in certain discursive contexts.

Definitions

To start, we need a working definition of each of these categories. I am using the term “indie” here to signify a particular range of American independent cinema that came to prominence in the period from around the mid-1980s to early 1990s and that has remained a reasonably distinct category to date. Indie, in this usage, is often an abbreviation of “independent” but is not coterminous with everything that goes under the latter label when it is used to refer to *any* kind of filmmaking beyond the realm of the Hollywood studios. Independent, here, is an inclusive term that embraces a very wide range of different kinds of non-studio film. Indie is

used to delineate a more specific type of cinema—although itself containing considerable variety—that became institutionalised in certain ways in this period. This is the kind of cinema associated with the names of filmmakers such as Jim Jarmusch, John Sayles, Todd Solondz, Hal Hartley, Steven Soderbergh, Kevin Smith, Quentin Tarantino, Nicole Holofcener and the Coen brothers; films such as *Stranger than Paradise* (1984, USA, Jim Jarmusch), *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989, USA, Steven Soderbergh), *Clerks* (1994, USA, Kevin Smith) and *The Blair Witch Project* (1999, USA, Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez); institutions such as the Independent Feature Project and the Sundance Film Festival; distributors such as October Films, Artisan Entertainment, Miramax and studio “speciality” divisions (including Miramax during its period under the ownership of Disney) such as Fox Searchlight and Sony Pictures Classics. A number of important distinctions can be, and have been, made between examples such as these but I would argue that they can be seen, collectively and broadly, to represent a particular field of cultural production, to use Pierre Bourdieu’s term, in the conjunction of industrial, textual and discursive practices that they embody (Bourdieu 1993). One area of controversy is the status that should be accorded to the realm known as Indiewood, constituted primarily by the semi-autonomous speciality divisions created at some point by all of the studios to exploit parts of this market. Some commentators have also insisted on narrower uses of the term “indie”, as distinct from “independent”, even within this period and this broad terrain as I conceive it (for a discussion of this, see King (2014), “Conclusion”).

“Art” cinema is a more diffuse category, generally used in relation to films from a longer historical period and from a much broader range of geographical locations. Exactly how art cinema is defined, and from what perspective, and how it might be understood in relation to broader notions of art and its cultural value, is a topic I explore at greater length in *Art Cinema: Positioning Films and the Construction of Cultural Value* (2018). Like “indie”, the term is a marker of distinction from dominant industrial–commercial institutions, particularly Hollywood, that implies not just institutional difference but the production and consumption of films that are distinctive in particular ways, making claims of various kinds to a “higher” cultural status—as implied in the usage of the heavily loaded term “art” as the key feature of its designation. The many examples that might be included here would range from movements such as German Expressionism and French Impressionism to the particular consolidation of the category in the post-war era via Italian neorealism, the French *nouvelle vague* and many subsequent “New Waves” (more recently, for example, the Romanian and the Chinese) and similarly identified currents ranging across much of the globe. Both categories, usually restricted to the domain of feature-length narrative cinema, are best seen as broad and inexact, when subjected to close examination, but also as potent operational markers of particular regions of film culture in which strong investments are made by producers, consumers and the relevant interpretive communities—including, in some cases, investments in notions of distinction between the two or between aspects of one and the other. A definition of art cinema provided by Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover has much in common with how I would define indie, as a category “defined by its impurity” rather than any essence and describing “feature-length narrative films at the margins of mainstream cinema, located somewhere between fully experimental films and overtly commercial products” (Galt and Schoonover 2010: 6). A key difference between art and indie, however, is that the latter is often seen as tending some degrees more towards the commercial while some forms of art cinema lean more strongly towards the experimental end of the scale. How exactly this distinction is articulated is a key part of what follows.

To what extent, then, has each of these categories been considered or included in accounts of the other? Indie cinema has generally received little attention in major accounts of art cinema, for a number of reasons (a search of the index of the authoritative collection edited by

Galt and Schoonover, for example, reveals no entry for “indie” or “independent”; a section on “non-Hollywood models” exists as a sub-category of “United States”, but the examples to which the references apply are works from the experimental avant-garde—and, in one instance, to a mixture of art and soft-porn qualities—rather than anything that would be included in the category of indie as employed here). As a category, art cinema has tended to be associated with an “international” or “global” territory (the term often preceded by one or other of these designations, or in some cases the narrower “European”) in which America is not included. This is largely, it seems, because of a conflation, in this discursive context, of America and its globally dominant institution, Hollywood; so strong a pole of opposition is constituted by Hollywood, and so much has the term art cinema, consequently, come to be conjoined with geographical markers that seem often to imply anything-but-American. Studies of art cinema have also in some cases focused exclusively or primarily on what is often seen as the heyday of the form, in the 1950s and 1960s, a period before the emergence of indie as a consolidated entity. Art cinema has also sometimes primarily been associated with particular forms that display characteristics associated with modernism that are far less if at all prevalent in the indie sector—a point of distinction more central to the understanding of the relationship between the two offered by this chapter (a key source on art cinema in the context of modernism is Kovács (2007)). Indie film has also tended to be ignored or given little place in accounts of art cinema, I would suggest, because of a general tendency to position it less highly in prevailing film-cultural value hierarchies.

One exception to the tendency to separate out indie and art film is David Andrews’ *Theorising Art Cinemas: Foreign, Cult, Avant-Garde and Beyond*, which employs a very broad definition of the latter that ranges from the avant-garde to the quality Hollywood film, including indie, on the basis of their shared, if variable, basis in the creation of comparative forms of cultural value (Andrews 2013). A key emphasis here is on the institutional basis of such definitions, and of the channels through which such films circulate and are valued as different from notions of the mainstream, an issue I return to below. This approach is valuable but comes, here, at the cost, I think, of closer engagement with some of the distinctive qualities of particular parts of this broadly conceived realm and some important process of differentiation that can be identified across its spectrum.

Aspects of art cinema have often been seen as contributing centrally to the particular range and blend of qualities associated with indie. I suggest elsewhere (King 2005) that art cinema is one major pole of influence on the sector, in textual dimensions such as the prevalence of low-key or more complex narrative strategies and in the use of both realist and expressive formal approaches (on which more below). Connections with overseas art cinema were also recognised by some early academic commentators, notably Annette Insdorf in an essay published in 1981 which suggests that makers of films of the period such as *Northern Lights* (1978, USA, John Hanson and Rob Nilsson) “treat inherently American concerns with a primarily European style”, citing core art-filmmakers including Ingmar Bergman and François Truffaut as sources of inspiration (Insdorf 1981/2005: 29). Art cinema is also identified as an important influence on the independent sector by E. Deidre Pribram (2002). She usefully locates some examples of independent film as falling within categories of art film, although in this case the category “independent” is used more widely than usual, to include films that circulate within the same channels as American indies in the United States but that come from a wider range of national locations (a number of her primary examples are British films). This blurring of lines is useful as a way of breaking down some indie/art distinctions, and suggesting some overlapping of the two, but it leaves unclear exactly what qualifies for independent or art film status—as far as these can be understood institutionally as more or less distinct realms—in

the first place. A more explicit account of the relationship between specifically American indie film and art cinema is offered by Michael Newman, although I would suggest that his approach over-states some points of difference and over-simplifies some aspects of the comparison between the two realms.

Newman's primary argument is that indie, as a distinctive film culture, "succeeds art cinema", at least within the repertoire of film cultures available in the United States (Newman 2011: 15). Indie is seen by Newman as "inheriting the social functions previously performed by foreign art films", as "a mode of filmmaking that those aspiring to certain kinds of status adopt as a common point of reference, a token of community membership" (Newman 2011: 15). That indie effectively supplanted art cinema to a large extent, in the sense of taking over much of the limited space available to broadly artistically leaning alternative narrative film in the American marketplace (and potentially beyond) seems clear enough. It did not do so entirely, however. Both indie and art films continue to circulate, through many of the same institutions. Within just the American context, then, or that of the broader circulatory sphere of both, we can still ask what *ongoing* relationship exists between the two, rather than seeing one as having replaced the other.

This brings us on to questions about differences between the two. For Newman, art and indie share certain qualities, particularly an emphasis on realism and authorship as major interpretive frameworks. But, he suggests, they also entail different viewing strategies that are rooted in two different contexts. Each is associated with the intellectual currents of its time: for art cinema, those of existentialism and modernism; for indie, "in place of existential angst and alienation we find the multiplicity and fragmentation associated with multiculturalism and post-modernism" (Newman 2011: 28).

Modernism, postmodernism and realism: distinctions and overlaps

The distinction made by Newman is useful up to a point, and cuts to some key differences that can be identified between the two fields, but it also risks over-simplification. It is true, as Newman suggests, that one key marker of difference between these categories is that art cinema includes many works that are more seriously challenging to the viewer than is anything like the norm in the indie sector; and that this can, indeed, be seen in terms of its greater commitment to qualities associated with modernism and some related intellectual currents identified in this account. Another useful distinction, one that acknowledges a wider range existing under the label of art cinema, is that made by András Bálint Kovács (2007) between what he terms "classical" and "modernist" strands within the broader realm of art film. This is a distinction that amounts to a difference in the nature and/or degree of difference from the norms of the mainstream-classical. For example:

If an art film in general tends to present a complex situation that cannot be reduced to one or two well-defined problems [and on this basis departs from the norms of the conventionally classical] and therefore concentrates on the character's complex persona, what happens in modern art cinema is that this complex situation becomes ambiguous or impossible to define.

(Kovács 2007: 63)

How far this difference is understood to map neatly onto distinct periods remains open to question. Kovács suggests that the era of modernist art cinema as such has ended, having gone into decline by the 1970s and 1980s. While some formal qualities associated with the modern

continue to be found in subsequent art films, and continue to be available as options, he argues they are accompanied by “imported aesthetic phenomena [. . .] that are essentially uncommon to modernism” and drawn from the broader context of the postmodern (Kovács 2007: 47). Modernist art film, in this account, is film that responds specifically to the broader historical modernist art movement (associated particularly with the avant-garde upsurges of the 1920s and 1960s), one that is seen to have been replaced in more recent decades by that of the postmodern, an account broadly similar in this respect to that of Newman. In the field of art cinema, the outcome is seen by Kovács as a shift in favour of the classical variant of the form, or a fusion of the classical and modernist elements.

Whatever the overall balance might be considered to be, across the entire field of art cinema, films that display distinctly modernist characteristics continued to exist into the period in which indie came to prominence, and continue to do so today. This seems to complicate an association of either type with currents seen as prevailing only in one period or the other, as seems to be implied by Newman (2011) (even if they are viewed as more prevalent in a particular era). Multiplicity and fragmentation, for example, qualities Newman associates with the postmodern/indie conjunction, are qualities strongly to the fore in much of the work of Michael Haneke, a prominent figure whose work also retains dimensions that seem clearly modernist (challenging to the viewer, and marked as deeply “serious” in orientation) rather than postmodern (more playful) in character. Even if some of this can be viewed as an inheritance from the earlier period, such concerns seem equally appropriate to the social, political and/or cultural climate of the present, making any such distinction far less clear-cut. Modernist art cinema might be less prevalent after the period of its heyday, as suggested by Kovács, or might have less cultural reach and presence than it did in that period. To conclude that its era is “over”, however, seems, again, overly to simplify the picture.

For Newman, a key characteristic of indie film is that it involves a sense of play, in its use of form, as opposed to the radical ambiguity (and all that this entails) often associated with art film (particularly in an influential account by David Bordwell (1985)). This might be true in some cases, but seems to me too great a generalisation. Elements of play might also be identified in some works of art cinema from the heyday of the 1960s, as in some of the earlier films of Jean-Luc Godard, for example (a different and harsher kind of play is also foregrounded at times in Haneke). It might be identified as a component of tendencies often associated with the postmodern, and is a quality found in some indie films (for example, the play with narrative sequence in *Pulp Fiction* [1994, USA, Quentin Tarantino]). But whether such a dimension should be seen as a *defining* quality of a broad arena—either indie film, say, or contemporary art or other currents labelled postmodern—seems to me to be doubtful and always to risk over-simplification. If play can also be identified in some art films from the period associated with modernism, there are also many examples of indie film (from the period associated with the postmodern) to which this does *not* seem to apply, including but not limited to those that share with art cinema a strong commitment to notions of serious socially conscious realism. If it is true that the most heavyweight of modernist approaches might rarely be found in the indie sector, I would suggest that more points of overlap can be established between some aspects of the two than Newman seems to imply.

Realism, modernism and postmodernism can usefully be identified as three broad tendencies in historical and/or contemporary art film practice, even if they are also components that might be mobilised to greater or less extents or degrees in particular cases from one period or another (and also if distinctions between concepts such as the modernist and postmodern might often be far from clear cut). One persistent strain of art cinema, particularly rooted in post-war Italian neo-realism, claims to present a more objectively realist picture of the world than is the

norm in dominant commercial contexts such as Hollywood. Another can broadly be associated with wider artistic practices characteristically grouped together under the label of modernism, or at least some of these, including elements such as radical ambiguity or opacity, denial of emotional identification with character, and radical self-reflexivity. These are often taken, more or less directly, to embody thematic issues such as alienation, uncertainty and critique of forms of representation such as film and other media—concerns typically associated with what we might term the “heavyweight” end of art cinema, a category I examine in more detail elsewhere (King 2018). Familiar reference points here would be the work of figures such as Michelangelo Antonioni, Ingmar Bergman and Andrei Tarkovsky, but also many later filmmakers such as Haneke. Some of these thematic issues (particularly some forms of uncertainty about the relationship between the nature of reality and representation) can also be identified in currents associated with the postmodern, if with some important differences of emphasis, including in some cases a lighter stress on the playful rather than the bleakly nihilistic. If the style and content of one tendency makes claims to the status of objective realism, the others can be related to another key pole in prevailing notions of art, what Steve Neale terms “the other primary ideology of Art, the Romantic view that Art is subjective expression” (Neale 1981: 14).

Within the axes provided by these tendencies, some quite clear distinctions can usefully be made between art and indie. A strong vein of realism is a major component of many indie as well as art films. Heavier forms of modernism or focus on issues such as alienation are associated far more exclusively with the latter, however, while lighter varieties of play might be more common features of indie. The realist tendency remains an important part of indie film, however, which means that a considerable area of overlap exists between the two domains at this level alone. We might also identify some other tendencies that can be identified across the art–indie divide, including some forms of subjectively expressive filmmaking, often rooted in what might best be viewed as a kind of subjective realism, thus drawing on another major component of the wider artistic tradition. Another characteristic found in both spheres is the use of popular generic formats as vehicles for alternative or less mainstream approaches. In the indie sector, elements that have something in common with art cinema are very often mixed generally with more conventionally mainstream-oriented dimensions, usually associated with the “classical” Hollywood style. This is also true of many products of international art cinema, however, particularly that which falls into Kovács’ category of the classical art film. Untypically for such a work, the main focus of which is European art film, Kovács does occasionally mention some examples from the indie sector (or that of its overlap with Hollywood), including his discussion of modernist narrative procedures in the work of David Lynch, Tarantino and the Coen brothers, although this is framed in the context of occasional space for such approaches in “quality Hollywood” production rather than with any acknowledgement of the specific terrain of indie itself (Kovács 2007: 60).

Even where we might find some important differences of degree—particularly degree of departure from the classical—the relationship between art and indie as a whole seems distinctly less than clear cut in a number of significant respects. If we were to map a spectrum that included both sectors, it would take the form of a continuum with considerable areas of overlap, even if many more examples from the art sector might be found at the “heavier”, modernist end of the scale (beyond which, at the farthest reaches from the mainstream–commercial, we would find the realms of the fully avant-garde and experimental).

Making a case for continuity between the two realms in the case of films that make claims to the status of presenting more objectively realist views of the world seems relatively straightforward. That this is a major strand of art cinema, with an important emphasis on *social realism*, seems beyond argument. The dominant reference point for this tendency is the long-since

canonised phenomenon of Italian neo-realism, as suggested above, a key point of reference usually for subsequent examples, among the more recent of which is the work customarily grouped under the labels of the Romanian and Chinese “New Waves” and the films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne. A similar strand is also easily identifiable in American indie film, from progenitors such as the works of John Cassavetes to a number of films that played a central role in the development of the sector in the 1980s (for example, *Heartland* [1979, USA, Richard Pearce] and *Working Girls* [1986, USA, Lizzie Borden]) to recent/contemporary examples such as the work of Kelly Reichardt and Ramin Bahrani (see King (2005): 63–84, 107–119; for a detailed analysis of the latter two, which includes their situation in the context of the international realist/neorealist tradition, see King (2014)).

It seems equally clear that there is no real equivalent in the indie sector of what we might term “hard-core” art cinema, in the sense of a sustained body of films that present themselves as the more “weighty”, “intellectual”, “difficult” or “forbidding” in character, often drawing on qualities associated with modernism and/or the overt exploration of themes such as the alienating nature of contemporary life. Plenty of such films are to be found among favourites of the art-cinema canon, just a few examples being: the social alienation manifested in Michelangelo Antonioni’s *L’eclisse* (1992, Italy/France); the chilly ambiguities of Alain Resnais’ *L’année dernière à Marienbad* (Last Year at Marienbad, 1961, France/Italy); the philosophical discourses found in films by Andrei Tarkovsky such as *Solyaris* (Solaris, 1972, USSR) and *Stalker* (1979, USSR); and more recent instances such as the alienation/abstraction of Michael Haneke’s *Der siebente Kontinent* (The Seventh Continent, 1989, Austria) and the radical questioning of the position of the viewer in his two versions of *Funny Games* (1997, Austria; 2007, USA/France/UK/Austria/Germany/Italy), or the bleak minimalism of films by Béla Tarr such as *Sátántangó* (Satantango, Hungary/Germany/Switzerland) and *A torinói ló* (The Turin Horse, 2011, Hungary/France/Germany/Switzerland/USA).

The tendency to situate indie film as a “softer” or “safer”, ultimately more commercially oriented cinema, has often been highlighted by the difference that remains in some examples that have been inspired, in some way or to some degree, by works of this kind of heavy weight. Thus Steven Soderbergh’s characterisation of his film *The Limey* (1999, USA) as “Get Carter as made by Alain Resnais”, a formulation that seems reasonably accurately to capture the positioning of the film mid-way between more conventional crime-revenge thriller and art film, or the same filmmaker’s remake of *Solaris* (2002, USA) as a studio feature the qualities of which share a comparable location somewhere in between those of Hollywood norm and arthouse classic (on the former, see King (2011); on the latter, King (2009)). Or the aspects of Tarr—extended following tracking shots—employed by Gus Van Sant in the trilogy loosely comprised of *Gerry* (2002, USA), *Elephant* (2003, USA) and *Last Days* (2005, USA); films that include some such material that is formally radical by indie standards but without quite the intellectual weightiness of context associated with the work of the Hungarian director (King 2006).

What is the nearest we can find to the “heavyweight” variety of modernist-leaning art film in the indie sector? Among the strongest candidates would be the work of Jon Jost, a figure usually located outside the more institutionalised indie sector, however, in features ranging from *The Bed You Sleep In* (1993, USA) to *Over Here* (2007, USA), which employ oblique minimalist strategies to convey a sense of alienation or disconnection. It is precisely because of the radical nature of these films, by indie standards, that they have not really participated in the more concerted sphere of distributors, festivals, etc., that constitutes an important part of its field of cultural production and consumption. As I have argued elsewhere, a substantial gap exists in the indie sector between films of this nature—and, to some extent, the Van Sant films cited above—and those that more closely mix alternative and more classical components (King 2005: 138).

We might identify some other examples at the more art-leaning end of the indie spectrum—including, for example, the aspects of radical narrative uncertainty at the heart of David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997, USA/France), or the expressive digital textures of Harmony Korine's *Julien Donkey-Boy* (1999, USA)—but such cases are both relatively rare and still often less hard-core in their modernist or other non-mainstream strategies than some of the art films cited above.

The explanation for this absence might seem reasonably straightforward, a matter of the degree of commercial viability required within the particular constraints of the indie sector in its principal manifestations of recent decades. If the market for indie films in general can be a difficult one, that for the most demanding art films is likely to be all the more so. Given that the two markets overlap, however, both forming part of the broader “speciality” business in the United States (and often elsewhere), why might the more difficult varieties remain more prevalent elsewhere? The indie sector might have more commercial leanings, in general, as a result of factors specific to the American context, such as the existence of a more commercial, market-oriented culture. Financial subsidy at the national or supra-national level has, certainly, been a major factor in the support of art cinema historically, particularly in Europe and for many examples in the heyday of the immediate post-war decades. Limited support was received by some indie features in the latter decades of the twentieth century, through organisations such as the National Endowment for the Humanities, but this proved short-lived.

A stronger commercial imperative, coupled with expectations created by some notable break-out hits, might also help to explain what has often been seen as a leaning in the direction of qualities associated with the postmodern in the indie sphere. Approaches such as the playful, as identified by Newman, tend to be much easier to mix with larger commercial potential than the bleaker currents of modernist alienation (*Pulp Fiction* is, again, a good example here, among others, both in its qualities and its status as a cross-over success in the marketplace). That is to say, leanings in these kinds of directions might be dictated, or encouraged, as much by particular national-cultural contexts as by broader historical periodisation, although there are dangers of over-simplification in any such arguments (any attempt to make broader generalisations about such large fields of cultural production run this risk to some extent, including this one).

If the generally lighter quality of much indie film is associated with the more commercial US context, the heavier varieties of art cinema might be said to be rooted in locations that can be more hospitable to such material, for various reasons. This might be related to the more complex, storied histories, politics and cultural inheritances of the “old” world, for example, as applicable to locations such as Europe and Asia. These, or some of these, might also have stronger traditions in areas such as the kind of philosophical reflection that feeds into the hard-core tendency and that might be expected to find less traction—even that required for speciality varieties of cinema—in the United States. Heavier-weight varieties of art cinema might also be triggered in parts of the contemporary “developing” world by the more sharply drawn social contexts/crisis affecting some such places, where sufficient resources permit.

It would be a mistake, however, too closely to identify the international art sector with its most heavyweight, demanding or modernist-leaning exemplars. It is here, I think, that the degree of distinction from indie can sometimes be overstated. Considerably closer connections between the two can be identified in many cases, particularly within the kind of territory signified by Kovács' notion of the classical art film and/or examples in which aspects of art or indie are combined with more familiar genre frameworks. The latter is a familiar dimension of indie film, on which I have written at length elsewhere (King 2005). The valuation of indie, as something distinct from mainstream/Hollywood, might often include a disavowal of that seen as the generic, but many indies have worked within genre frameworks, even when seeking to complicate them or to put generic ingredients into contexts usually

associated with the realist. The same can be said of many features that circulate within the realm of international art cinema. Within the broad context of the crime genre, for example, we could cite individual examples that stake or have been accorded varying claims to the status of art cinema, from the work of filmmakers as various as Akira Kurosawa, Jean-Pierre Melville, Jean-Luc Godard, Nuri Bilge Ceylan and Johnnie To.

Fields of circulation and consumption

A key point here is our understanding of art cinema as a field of circulation and consumption, mediated by various institutions and critical discourses, rather than being constituted by particular kinds of texts removed from this context (a key part of the intervention made by Neale (1981)). As Barbara Wilinsky argues, in a study of the history of the arthouse cinema in the United States, art film is best understood as “a dynamic and shifting concept created with pragmatic functions” within particular parts of the film business (Wilinsky 2001: 39). A key part of the discourse surrounding this realm is the myth of its non-commercial nature, as Wilinsky suggests, a notion propagated by those invested in the sector, including producers, distributors, exhibitors and viewers whose consumption of such work plays a part in their own marking of social distinction. This discursive separation from the commercial, a form of disavowal, is important to the success of art cinema *within* a particular commercial realm (Wilinsky 2001: 33–34). And from an early stage, as Wilinsky and others have suggested, one part of the appeal was less high-cultural in nature, art cinema often having traded also on its capacity to be more explicit in areas such as eroticism and violence. While art might often be positioned generally as higher-cultural in location than indie, in comparisons between the two, Wilinsky’s account offers a useful shift of emphasis, in its focus on the extent to which art cinema has also tended in many cases to offer that which is marked as “different” from the mainstream “but not too different” (Wilinsky 2001: 39). The latter is a formulation that might also be used in relation to the American indie sector, suggesting again that what is involved in a comparison between the two is often a difference of degree; what we might term, if rather awkwardly, a difference in “not too different-ness”.

Another key point that follows from Wilinsky’s comment about the “dynamic and shifting” nature of art cinema—similar to the definition offered by Galt and Schoonover and to the way I would define indie—is that there is no *essence* of the form, or any type of art cinema that should especially be privileged over others that circulate within its realm. What often seems to happen is that particular types of art film *are* implicitly privileged over others, particularly those that engage most strongly with its social realist or modernist tendencies. This is understandable on more than one count. These are the types of art films that are positioned furthest from the norms of Hollywood (within the realm of feature-length narrative production rather than including the avant-garde). Given that distance from Hollywood is the single most prominent working ground of definition, greater distance might seem to imply more essential belonging to the category (that *difference* from Hollywood can itself be marked in numerous different ways is a good explanation of the variety found within the art film sector, as Neale suggests, even if this is bounded by particular institutional factors (Neale 1981: 15)).

Added to this is the differential investment in art films, as sources of distinction, on the part of those who participate one way or another in this sphere. The strongest sense of distinction is likely to be gained by—or by consuming, or having any other mediatory relationship with—films situated at the favoured pole. (In reality, the picture is likely to be more complicated, depending on exactly what combination of distinction-marking difference and more comfortably consumable familiarity/lesser-difference might appeal in any particular case.) Some films

within the art-film sector might, therefore, seem “artier” than others, in what amounts to a competitive process of marking degrees of difference—one that includes the differences often asserted between art and indie as a whole. A division can thus be made between how we might understand this analytically—with art cinema as a wider and inessential category that might not be sustainable institutionally without its relatively more classical/mainstream components—and the manner in which such a category tends to function in on-the-ground processes of cultural distinction-marking.

Another key point of overlap between art and indie is the fact that they share, broadly, much the same arena of circulation and discursive articulation, including major festivals, approval by certain kinds of “serious” critics, exhibition primarily in arthouse theatres, and an emphasis throughout on the central role of the filmmaker as individual creative auteur. This remains the case, even if relatively less distinctive indie films have taken over some of the space within this realm that was formerly available to international art films, of whatever pitch those might be. This is why American indie and international art films are sometimes mixed together discursively *without* any particular distinction marking between the two, in forums the focus of which is dictated by the broadly defined “speciality” arena of circulation. The American indie-oriented website Indiewire, for example, often provides lists with headlines such as “The 12 Indies You Must See [fill in the gap for the period concerned, such as ‘This Month’]”, the contents of which shift between American and overseas titles (for example, see Anon (2015)).

The role played by subtitles in international art film is another prominent factor in its differential positioning in relation to American indie when the two circulate in Anglophone contexts. Subtitles are key markers of distinction, often fetishised, as Mark Betz suggests, as markers of authenticity (and, by implication, difference from the mainstream) (Betz 2009). If we imagine the existence of two films circulating in the US or the UK or an English-language dominated festival context, one international art and one indie, that are otherwise much the same in the extent to which they depart from mainstream/classical conventions, the additional factor of subtitles (where these are required in non-English-language examples) would be likely to make the art film seem considerably more distinctive and specialised a product overall. Hence the extent to which dubbed versions of such films tend to be seen as “dumbed down”, as Betz puts it, or generally rejected by those with strong investments in art cinema as a distinction-marking category. Part of their distinction is based in this dimension specifically on their status as markedly “foreign” or “exotic” within particular viewing contexts, and requiring viewers prepared to tolerate the distancing created by the presence of subtitles. This is another example of a point of distinction-marking that is undoubtedly often in play, in the evaluation and consumption of such films, but also based on an oversimplification. As Betz suggests, subtitling is no guarantee of something closer to any notion of the original artistic vision, however much it might generally be preferred as a marker of authenticity by many consumers of art films, as not all dialogue tends to be included (and quality of translation might be variable) and the process of reading titles imposes a form of attention on the viewer that obstructs the integrity of composition and *mise-en-scène* (Betz 2009: 91).

Many examples can be suggested of indie films that might seem a significant degree closer to the status of art cinema—if not the hard-core modernist variety—were they to be imagined (or themselves viewed, overseas) with subtitles. These might include the work of the likes of Jim Jarmusch, Todd Solondz and Todd Haynes, among many other contributors to the establishment of the indie sector from the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, we might identify additional works that circulate in the international subtitled art sphere (outside their own countries of production) that embody characteristics widely associated with indie, for example the manifestly “quirky” aspects of films by figures such as Aki Kaurismäki (Finland) and Johnnie

To (Hong Kong) or the more general pitch of the films of Pedro Almodóvar (Spain), generally accorded the status of one of the auteur stars of the early twenty-first-century arthouse. Terms such as “quirky” and “offbeat” often contribute to the connotations of less heavyweight modality associated with indie films. They suggest something relatively weak, flimsy and superficial, compared with the weight, depth and steeliness often associated with heavyweight art films—but they are far from exclusive to the American indie sector.

Another ground on which art cinema seems often to be accorded higher status than indie is the notion that it (or privileged manifestations) offers a more serious expression or exploration of the nature of contemporary existence than tends to be argued in relation to the latter, in whatever particular historical currents either might be located. James Tweedie (2013), for example, reads art cinema “New Waves” such as those in France, Taiwan and China as figurations of various aspects of issues relating to major processes such as modernisation and globalisation, and the various hopes, fears or complications entailed by such developments. These cinematic movements *matter*, Tweedie implies, precisely because they engage in such weighty issues, both thematically and in their implications for the use of various formal strategies.

Tweedie offers a brief postscript that asks whether any equivalent new wave was experienced in America, concluding that if it was, it was very brief and soon became complicit in the world of corporate media (situated, in this account, in the moment between the writing of *The Graduate* [1967, USA, Mike Nichols] and its realisation on screen). The implication is that all that followed remained similarly complicit. Passing reference is made to a more recent “American independent cinema” (placed in scare quotes that imply a questioning of its independent status), but no comment is made at all about this sector as it developed from the 1980s, as if none of this has any scope to be read in any similar terms—either similar to the specific issues discussed in the rest of the book or as of any significance at all at this kind of level. Whether or not it might partake in any of the particular currents explored by Tweedie, indie film can clearly be read as an expression of particular socio-cultural/historical phenomena that might be accorded substantial significance. For Sherry Ortner (2013), for example, many indie films offer what amounts to a critique of the downside of neoliberal economic policies. Something similar is suggested by Claire Perkins (2016), who argues that indie films often take the contradictions and dissatisfactions of life under capitalism as their primary subject. Some of the issues considered by Tweedie might exist in a more heightened form in the case studies on which he focuses, particularly in the context of the epochal shifts undergone by both society/economy and cultural producers such as filmmakers in China in recent decades. These might also seem somewhat weightier, in their location in the context of such large-scale topics as globalisation and its discontents—compared, say, with satirical portraits of the mores of middle-class Americans, such as those examined by Perkins (2016). A difference of *tone* might sometimes be an important factor here, in the relative seriousness of modality presented by such cinemas or the seriousness with which they are taken by commentators, academic and otherwise. But any distinction between the two seems, again, to be one of degree rather than to be absolute—and in neither case do examples such as those cited typify the whole of the sector they might sometimes be taken to represent.

References

- Andrews, D. (2013) *Theorising Art Cinemas: Foreign, Cult, Avant-Garde and Beyond*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Anon (2015) “The 12 Indie Films You Must See This January”, *Indiewire*, 1 January, www.indiewire.com/article/the-8-indie-films-you-must-see-this-january-20150101.
- Betz, M. (2009) *Beyond the Subtitle: Remapping European Art Cinema*, Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press.

- Bordwell, D. (1985) *Narration in the Fiction Film*, London: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. (1993) “The Field of Cultural Production, or The Economic World Reversed”, in *The Field of Cultural Production*, Cambridge: Polity, 29–73.
- Galt, R. and Schoonover, K. (2010) “Introduction: The Impurity of Art Cinema”, in Galt, R. and Schoonover, K. (eds) *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3–30.
- Insdorf (1981) “Ordinary People, European Style: Or How to Spot an Independent Feature”, *American Film* 6 (10), September 1981, reprinted in Holmwood, C. and Wyatt, J. (eds) *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, London: Routledge, 27–34.
- King, G. (2005) *American Independent Cinema*, London: I.B. Tauris.
- (2006) “Following in the Footsteps: Gus Van Sant’s *Gerry* and *Elephant* in the American Independent Field of Cultural Production”, in *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 4 (2): 75–92.
- (2009) *Indiewood: USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema*, London: I.B. Tauris.
- (2011) “Consciousness, Temporality and the Crime–Revenge Drama in *The Limey*”, in Barton Palmer, R. and Sanders, S. M. (eds) *The Philosophy of Steven Soderbergh*, Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 91–106.
- (2014) *Indie 2.0: Change and Continuity in Contemporary American Indie Film*, London: I.B. Tauris.
- (2018) *Art Cinema: Positioning Films and the Construction of Cultural Value*, London: I.B. Tauris.
- Kovács, A. (2007) *Screening Modernism: European Art Film, 1950–1980*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Neale, S. (1981) “Art Cinema as Institution”, *Screen*, 22 (1): 11–40.
- Newman, M. (2011) *Indie: An American Film Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ortner, S. (2013) *Not Hollywood: Independent Film at the Twilight of the American Dream*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Perkins, C. (2016) “Life during Wartime: Emotionalism, Capitalist Realism and Middle Class Indie Identity”, in King, G. (ed.) *A Companion to American Indie Film*, New York: Wiley–Blackwell, 349–367.
- Pribram, E. D. (2002) *Cinema & Culture: Independent Film in the United States, 1980–2001*, New York: Peter Lang.
- Tweedie, J. (2013) *The Age of New Waves: Art Cinema and the Staging of Globalization*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wilinsky, B. (2001) *Sure Seaters: The Emergence of Art House Cinema*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.