2012 | *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2 (2): 1–21

Against Hollywood

American independent film as a critical cultural movement

Sherry B. ORTNER, *University of California, Los Angeles*

In the late 1980s, American independent film broke out of the tiny "art houses" (specialty theaters) of a few major American cities and became a much stronger presence in American public culture. Independent filmmakers see themselves as challenging the hegemony of Hollywood, eschewing *entertainment*—fantasy, pleasure, happy endings—and offering instead harsh and "edgy" stories about life in contemporary society. The present article draws on interviews, panel discussions, filmmaker Q & As, and other contexts in which independent film people talk about what they are trying to do: to make what one indie producer called "movies that matter."

Keywords: independent film, Hollywood, art vs. commerce, public culture, cultural critique, realism

"Hollywood" as both fantasy and material reality dominated the world of American entertainment for virtually the entire twentieth century. But from very early in the history of the industry, there were challenges to the Hollywood hegemony, with various attempts to create alternative sites of movie-making outside of the big studios.[1] This article is part of a larger project on the most recent movement toward independent filmmaking on the American landscape, one that began roughly in the mid-1980s and thrived through the 1990s and into the mid-2000s (Ortner 2010, forthcoming). In this period, independent production companies sprang up, festivals showcasing independent films proliferated, many independent films made it into mainstream theaters, and many won major awards, including Academy Awards. Despite being hit hard by the Great Recession since

1. The first, and still in some ways most spectacular, example of film artists breaking with the studios is the founding of United Artists in 1919 (Balio 1976). For a good overall history of the movies, including both Hollywood and extra- or anti-Hollywood, see Mast and Kawin (2011).

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons | © Sherry B. Ortner. Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported. ISSN 2049-1115 (Online)

about 2007, and despite widespread (but questionable) pronouncements that independent film has collectively sold out to Hollywood, the movement still retains a good deal of artistic and political independence and force.

What then is an independent film? The simplest place to start is to say that an independent film is defined—to varying degrees and in varying ways—as the antithesis of a Hollywood studio film. The contrast can be seen in a variety of relatively objective indicators. Where studio films are very expensive, independent films are made on relatively low budgets; where studio films are in the business of "entertainment," independent films often set out to challenge their viewers with relatively difficult subject matter or techniques or both; where Hollywood films generally eschew taking sides on political issues, independent films are often explicitly political and critical; where Hollywood films are in the business of fantasy and illusion, independent films include virtually all documentary films, and even features are usually highly realist; and finally, where Hollywood films classically have happy endings, independent films rarely do.[2]

Two caveats must immediately be entered here. First, all references to "Hollywood movies" must be understood as referring to the big-money-making movies that are the bread-and-butter of the Hollywood studios. I do not mean to suggest that Hollywood has never produced a movie with complex characters, or progressive politics, or challenging subject matter. But these movies have always been in the minority within the total Hollywood output, whereas they tend to constitute the majority of independent films. Second, it must be understood that there is a spectrum of what is seen as an independent film, with a more Hollywood-y end of the spectrum and a more radically avant-garde and experimental end. For present purposes, however, I write as if there were a clear binary contrast between the two ideal types, and use the above list of typical indie characteristics—low budget, challenging subject matter, few happy endings, et cetera—to provide some simple rules of thumb for distinguishing an independent film (an "indie") from a "Hollywood" or "studio" film.

As a further aid to picturing the indie object, I present here the winners of the Best Picture awards of the two leading American independent film competitions, the Sundance Film Festival and The Independent Spirit Awards, for the past ten years. The two lists also give some sense of the range of variation just referred to, as Sundance leans more toward the strictly independent end of the spectrum and the Independent Spirit Awards lean more toward the Hollywood end of the spectrum. If the reader has been watching independent films (and most of the people reading this article will have seen at least some, whether they realized it or not), they will probably have seen more from the Independent Spirit Awards column than the Sundance column.

2. See Levy (1999) and King (2005) for other attempts to define the genre.

Year	Sundance	Independent Spirit Awards
2003	*American Splendor*	*Far From Heaven*
2004	*Primer*	*Lost in Translation*
2005	*Forty Shades of Blue*	*Sideways*
2006	*Quinceañera*	*Brokeback Mountain*
2007	*Padre Nuestro*	*Little Miss Sunshine*
2008	*Frozen River*	*Juno*
2009	*Precious*	*The Wrestler*
2010	*Winter's Bone*	*Precious*
2011	*Like Crazy*	*Black Swan*
2012	*Beasts of the Southern Wild*	*The Artist*

In addition to these feature (i.e., fiction) films, virtually all documentaries are independent films. With rare exceptions, Hollywood studios do not make documentaries as they are not considered commercially viable, and in any event are not seen as fulfilling the fundamental mandate to entertain. Even the big box office documentaries of recent years—most of Michael Moore's films, as well as *An Inconvenient Truth* starring Al Gore—have not really changed the fact that documentaries almost never attract studio financing.

One of the striking features of contemporary independent films is a pervasive darkness—of mood, of tone, of look, of story. Many of the films range from very gloomy to "pitch-black" (see David Ansen [2007: 65] on *Se7en*). *Newsweek* film critic Ramin Setoodeh complained that between 2005 and 2009 "roughly three fourths of all the films [nominated for Academy Awards] fixated on death" and described many films as "piling on the pain" in what "is starting to feel like Misery Porn." (2009: 70) David Denby of the *New Yorker* described a recent indie as "grating, almost punitive" (see Denby 2010 on *Margot at the Wedding*). Hollywood-oriented producer/director Jennifer Farmer described independent films in general as "dark, dysfunctional, heavy, violent, twisted, alternative kinds of things" (quoted in Stubbs and Rodriguez 2000: 28).

The darkness of so much of independent film raises many questions: Who is making these films? Who is watching them? Why did a movement toward such a harsh view of life emerge when it did? In the larger project noted above, I try to answer these questions, in terms of the dramatically changing class configuration of the United States under neoliberal capitalism.[3] I argue that the indie movement that emerged in the 1980s represented a critical cultural movement, an attempt to critique the dominant culture (represented by Hollywood) through film. With the phrase "dominant culture" I signal Raymond Williams' by now classic model of social stasis and change (1977). In this model, at any given moment, certain ideas

3. I have discussed neoliberalism elsewhere; see Ortner (2011), drawing on Harvey (2005) and Klein (2007). Briefly, I take it to be a combination of the unregulated capitalist profiteering and the shrinkage of state services and benefits that has taken over the American economy and much of the world economy starting in the 1970s.

and institutional formations are dominant or hegemonic in the sense of being deeply embedded in social life and naturalized for social actors as sheer common sense. But other ideas and formations are also always in play, representing alternatives to the dominant culture with the potential for change if not radical transformation. Acknowledging and setting aside many complexities of both Hollywood movies and independent films, for the purposes of this discussion I treat "Hollywood" as part of the dominant culture, and the post-1980s independent film movement as, in Williams' (1977) terms, an "emergent," "alternative" formation.

As such, independent films can be productively read as embodying what George Marcus and Michael Fischer (1986) have called "cultural critique."[4] Marcus and Fischer develop this idea in relation to discussing the critical role of anthropology: "[One] promise of anthropology has been to serve as a form of cultural critique for ourselves. In using portraits of other cultural patterns to reflect self-critically on our own ways, anthropology disrupts common sense and makes us reexamine our taken-for-granted assumptions" (1986: 1). It is not a stretch to transpose this idea to the world of independent film, which often uses many of the same de-familiarizing strategies of anthropology and ethnography to "disrupt common sense and make us reexamine our taken-for-granted assumptions." Specifically, many independent films embrace a kind of harsh realism, making films that display the dark realities in contemporary life, and that make demands on the viewer to viscerally experience and come to grips with those realities.

Most independent filmmakers[5] would not use a language of "cultural critique." But they do have very strong ideas about the importance of "independence," which is to say, independence from Hollywood and all that it stands for. I will approach this central issue through an examination of the discourse, the self-representations, circulating within the world of independent filmmaking. The notion of discourse has had a long and complex life in the field of linguistics, and also plays a distinctive role in the philosophy of Michel Foucault (see especially Foucault 1986). But I use it here in the nontechnical sense of the vocabulary of terms, tropes, and styles distinctive to a particular social universe, in this case, the universe of independent filmmaking and all its associated institutions and support structures.

I locate "discourse" in this sense within ordinary talk among the participants in the independent film world, derived from interviews and from attendance at hundreds of panels and Q & As with filmmakers. I locate discourse as well in the public culture of the independent film world: public representations beamed out from film festivals, filmmaking magazines, and films-about-filmmaking that construct both film people and audiences as part of a complex public that shares a

4. There are of course other traditions of "critique," beginning with Kant, and including the "critical theory" of the Frankfurt school. For my purposes here, the Marcus and Fischer (1986) concept of "cultural critique," specifically situated within an anthropological context, is the most useful.

5. The "filmmaker" is normally both writer and director of the film, and receives virtually all of the creative credit. Independent filmmakers are contrasted with Hollywood directors who do not write their own material. Producers are very important in the indie world as well, but receive much less credit for the final product.

particular worldview and a value system. I will return to the idea of ethnography through discourse interpretation in the conclusions.

One more caveat before going on: There is a widespread, even vast, skepticism among observers of the culture industries as to whether independent film has been able to remain truly independent, or whether it has not in fact become simply another kind of Hollywood product for a particular niche audience (see e.g., Curtin 1996; Klawans 2000; Wyatt 2001; Timberg 2004). The most common version of this position is that there may have once, briefly, been a moment of real independent filmmaking, perhaps in the 1980s, but it has all by now been absorbed or infected by Hollywood in one way or another. Of course there must be some degree of truth to this view. After all, Hollywood and the American cultural hegemony of which it is a part, is indeed very powerful; that is the whole point. Yet I resist—at the risk of charges of naiveté—buying into this view completely. Insofar as the independent film movement tries to position itself in opposition to mainstream culture, I am less interested in deconstructing and debunking their self-constructions (and their films), and more interested in exploring the oppositional political potential in those claims (and those films).

Against Hollywood

The discourse of independent filmmaking is always a reactive discourse, always set strongly against certain stereotypical notions of "Hollywood." Producer Larry Drubner* called Hollywood blockbusters "disgusting" (interview, March 23, 2007), and said, "I don't love the industry, I hate it."[6] Independent filmmaker Ramin Bahrani (e.g., *Man Push Cart, Chop Shop*) said Hollywood movies "just don't make any sense. They create massive confusion" (in Scott 2009: 43). Producer Ted Hope, one of the pioneers of the indie movement, talked about his early move toward independent film production:

> [I was 19, 20, but] was already [thinking], what is this junk that Hollywood is producing? . . . It was all supposed to be hip and cool, and I was just, this is such saccharine crap, and I remember just being angry at what was supposed to be groundbreaking and wasn't. (Interview, March 15, 2006)

Not all indie film people are literally angry about Hollywood, but all by definition are in some sense against what Hollywood is and stands for; that is the basis of the decision to work independently and to go against the grain of the standard Hollywood movie.

But this negative stance toward Hollywood is set at two relatively distinct levels. The first level might be called the level of cultures and practices: independent filmmaking sees itself as different from or better than Hollywood in its ethos and practices of making films, specifically in terms of the commercial intention of the studios and the relatively noncommercial intention of independent filmmaking. The other level concerns the nature of the films themselves in the two worlds. Here there is a critique of the stereotypical Hollywood movie not only as informed primarily by the commercial intent, but also by a relatively unquestioning relationship to the dominant or mainstream culture. Here then we can find in the

6. All names in the article are real names unless marked with an asterisk (*).

discourse of independent filmmaking a more articulated set of ideas about critical filmmaking: making films that challenge the dominant culture, making films that challenge the audience, making, in the words of independent producer Christine Vachon, "movies that matter"(Vachon and Edelstein 1998).

Before getting to that discussion, I need to say a few words about the approach to the interpretation of discourse I will be using here. I will not be doing what is called "discourse analysis" in linguistic anthropology, a method that entails a close, and relatively technical, examination of conversational texts. Instead I will be doing something we might call cultural ethnography through discourse, listening to the ways in which people spontaneously seem to say or write the same things in many different contexts. For example, many people in the independent film world will say things like "I hate Hollywood" or "Hollywood is crap," or "you have to stay out of the studios or they will destroy your film." After the fourth or fifth repetition of these sorts of statements by different people in different contexts it seems reasonable to conclude that there is something like an established discourse of contempt for Hollywood prevalent in the indie world.

But—and this is very important—this does not mean that everyone who says something like this has the same intention or relationship to the discourse. For some people it expresses a genuine and deep-seated personal animosity toward Hollywood and its products. For others it is a kind of posturing: to say something like this is to declare one's status as an *auteur* (a unique artistic creator). For yet others (and we will see examples), they might say something like this today and sign up for a studio contract tomorrow.

For the most part I am not interested in this kind of individual variation and with the quest for getting behind informants' backs that this would imply. At the level of discourse, informants are always right; that is, regardless of their intentions or their subjective relationship to what they are saying, they nonetheless say what they say, and what they say is, from this perspective, an instance of a particular discourse. (I am, on the other hand, interested in contestations over the discourse itself, but that is a different issue and unfortunately I do not have the space to explore it within the confines of this article.) Here I turn to the most central term in the language of independent filmmaking, "independence."

The discourse of independence

Bob Rosen, former Dean of the UCLA School of Theater, Film, and Television, was one of the founding board members of IFP/West (Independent Features Project/West, now Film Independent), in which they tried, in the early years, to hammer out—amid "prolonged and heated debate"—a definition of what made a film "independent." They came up with four criteria: that the film be "risk-taking in content and style"; embody a "personal vision"; be funded by "non-Hollywood financing"; and embody the "valuation of art over money" (interviews, July 25, 2006 and November 10, 2008). Would-be and practicing independent filmmakers are encouraged and liberated to make "personal" films, in which they tell the stories they want to tell in the ways they want to tell them. As Hollywood is famous for controlling directors and the contents of their films, "non-Hollywood financing" is meant to ensure that the filmmaker is truly independent.

The value of independence from Hollywood (and ultimately from the necessity for pleasing an American public that has been programmed with Hollywood values

and expectations) is repeated over and over in the public representations of the independent film community. One site in which it is particularly audible is at the annual Independent Spirit awards, hosted by Film Independent. At the 2007 awards ceremony, a short film was shown at the beginning of the ceremony. As I wrote in my notes while watching:

> Film Independent staged a competition for a short film about the idea of "independence." The winning film, called *Independence*, was really pretty good, starring a homeless guy [standing amid his junk, including a TV with no screen]. He just sort of raps along in a funny way about the upsides and the downsides of independence. On the one hand, nobody can tell you what to do. On the other hand, your TV set doesn't have a screen. It ended with the guy saying, "Of course, in order to be independent you needs lots of other people." (Fieldnotes, February 24, 2007)

The last point is important. "Independence" does not mean isolation, it means being part of a community of people who share the value of being independent from the mainstream represented by Hollywood.

More generally, the term "independence" must have been repeated a hundred times in the course of the awards event:

> People went on and on and ON about the value and meaning of "independence," and how everyone in this room shares this ultimate value. . . . The foreign directors seemed especially passionate about it—the Mexican cinematographer [Guillermo Navarro] who took best cinematography for *Pan's Labyrinth*, and the German Director [Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck] who took best foreign film for *The Lives of Others*. One got the feeling from them that the ultimate horror is to have to bow to the views of others, and the thing about independence is really just following your vision without interference. . . . The German filmmaker said, the best way to have independence is to lower your budget. He made *The Lives of Others* [which went on to win many prizes] for $2 million. He said, "People are not in this for the money." (Fieldnotes, February 24, 2007)

Another major site for the public reiteration of the discourse of independence is at the Sundance Film Festival, which I attended in 2007. I have a large-format (11 x 16.5 inches) brochure about the Sundance Institute that I think was handed to me as part of my packet when I picked up my pass, or perhaps was just lying around among the volumes of free literature at the festival.[7] The front of the brochure has the word INDEPENDENT in all caps and very large font. Above the word it says, "Free the Artist," and below the word it says, "Free the Audience." We open the brochure and see the "Free the Artist" spread, which asks, "What if the question, 'How will your film . . . make money?' were never asked? Then only two questions remain: 'Is this the story you want to tell?' and 'What is the best way to tell it?'"(Sundance Institute 2007: 3). The idea of artistic independence is then given an urgent political spin: "What's ultimately at stake—the creative use of freedom in an open society—is far too important to trust to economic or political forces, or to the whims of fashion" (Robert Redford, quoted in Sundance Institute

7. Brochure kept in author's files; copy available on request.

2007: 5). As with Film Independent, but less strongly emphasized, there is an invocation of a balance between celebrating the artistic independence of the filmmaker and situating the filmmaker in a collaborative community: "Here, the tenuous coalition between independence and productive collaboration strives to achieve surprising results" (Sundance Institute 2007: 7).

At the same time there is much greater emphasis on reaching and indeed creating the audience that will appreciate these films. We first read the following: "When independent artists, free from the constraints of the marketplace and political pressures, find their own truth, audiences are freed to experience new truths within themselves. The affect is intoxicating, addictive, and life-sustaining" (ibid.: 5). The brochure seeks to conjure an audience that is not merely open to the kinds of films these filmmakers will make, but is actually thirsting for them: "The Institute continually explores innovative ways to put the voice of freely expressed ideas before audiences that crave originality, diversity, and authenticity" (ibid.: 7). All of this comes together at the Film Festival, "Where independent film meets independent audiences" (ibid.: 11).

The discourse of passion

In *The field of cultural production*, Pierre Bourdieu (1993) provides a theoretically sophisticated exploration and analysis of the world of "art." Opposing both reductive social interpretations (e.g., linking specific kinds of works to specific social groups) and reductive "charismatic" interpretations (vesting the value of the work of art in the creative genius of its creator), Bourdieu develops the concept of the "field of cultural production," a social field in which artists and a large cast of supporting players vie with one another for recognition and prestige, in the course of which specific values—of what counts as art, and of what constitutes good and bad artists, genres, and works—are constantly created, maintained, and transformed.

At the base of the field of cultural production is the fundamental opposition between art and commerce. The world of art as a whole sets itself off from the wider social and economic world as what Bourdieu calls "an anti-economy," which "is so ordered that those who enter it have an interest in disinterestedness" (1993: 40). More importantly, the art/commerce opposition structures the relationships between different kinds of art *within* the field of cultural production:

> The opposition between the "commercial" and the "non-commercial" reappears everywhere. It is the generative principle of most of the judgments which, in the theater, cinema, painting or literature, claim to establish the frontier between what is and what is not art, i.e., in practice, between "bourgeois" art and "intellectual" art [or] between "traditional" and "avant-garde" art. (1993: 82)

In certain parts of his discussion, Bourdieu divides the field of cultural production into two subfields, a "field of restricted production" and a "field of large-scale production." The field of large-scale production is the more or less commercially and popularly oriented zone of the field of cultural production, producing for large/mass audiences. On the other hand, the field of restricted production at its most extreme is one in which cultural producers produce only for the recognition and approval of other like-minded cultural producers, and not for more widespread recognition (ibid.: 53 and passim). The opposition between large-scale

and restricted fields obviously maps reasonably well onto the Hollywood/indie opposition, and I will return to it later. Here I want to explore a particular manifestation of the commerce versus art opposition in American independent film, the opposition between money and "passion."

From the point of view of the indie world, independent films are made from passion, from the filmmaker's intense personal commitment (*personal* is another keyword here) to tell a particular story in a particular way. Passion is the opposite of a commercial sensibility; the heat of passion is opposed to the coldness of cash. Passion is also the opposite of a mechanical filmmaking sensibility; a film emerges from the filmmaker's personal vision, as opposed to (in the worst case) the formulas and franchises and mechanically stamped out "cookie cutter" movies of Hollywood. Filmmaker Richard Linklater wrote about going to a commercial casting agency when he was casting *Slacker*:

> The place smells so much like the business side of filmmaking we run in horror. We're now determined more than ever to avoid these industry types *who have no passion* for cinema. We'll find ALL of our people elsewhere and do the film a full 100% against the industry way. (Linklater 1992: 4, italics added)

Passion-talk can be heard everywhere in the film world; "passion projects" are virtually synonymous with independent films. Ursula Jackson,* a partner in an independent but studio-oriented production company, had this to say:

> A really good friend of mine just won one of the Nichols contests [for a film set in Bosnia], which is the screenplay contest that is run by the Academy. And everything that wins that is *so much a passion piece*, almost a documentary, the films are so involved in true life and all that. (Interview, December 2, 2005)

For another example, Cherien Dabis (*Amreeka*), a young Palestinian-American independent filmmaker, spoke about doing two kinds of filmmaking:

> My career is such that I have *my passion projects* that I want to write and direct, and those are really mostly Middle Eastern stories, and then I also have this commercial sensibility, like writing on *The L Word* [where she is a staff writer], things I feel like I need to do to pay the bills, things I think are fun, that I would like to see made. (Interview, April 4, 2006)

Or Fred Irving,* the head of a specialty division of a studio, was talking about why producers would take risks investing in certain independent films:

> There are *movies of passion* and the people putting up the money realize it's a huge risk, a bigger risk [than backing studio films]. It's like buying junk bonds instead of buying high quality municipals or something. [In the latter case] you know what your return is going to be, or you think you do, [like] on a movie with Tom Cruise in it . . . or with certain subject matter. But other movies [like *Brokeback Mountain*] about gay cowboys, you sort of would say you'll be lucky to make your money back. Everybody does this for the love of the movie; that's the only reason you're doing it. (Interview, March 27, 06)

In all of these examples, independent films as passion projects are contrasted with studio or commercial films: passion projects are personal (Dabis' Middle Eastern

films; Jackson's friend's film about Bosnia); and they are made first and foremost for love, not money (commercial films are things that "pay the bills," that generate big "returns on investment," and are "good business").

The discourse of passion as against the coldness of commercialism and of formulaic filmmaking is one version of the art/commerce opposition in the world of independent film. Another is the discourse of staying out of the studios, where the commercialism of the studios represents the death of creativity.

Trying to stay out of the studios

Hollywood is often represented as a dangerous place for a filmmaker with vision and integrity, and many filmmakers believe that it is important to stay out of the Hollywood studios entirely in order to maintain their artistic independence. The ideal of filmmaking independence is symbolized, even mythologized, in the very low budget film. The "no-budget, DIY [do-it-yourself], down-and-dirty, whatever-it-takes filmmakers" (Adam Fish, personal communication) who manage to put the film together with grit, ingenuity, and their mothers holding the lights are the heroes of independent filmmaking. Kevin Smith, who worked in a convenience store in Red Bank, NJ, and who made *Clerks* (1994) for $27,575 by maxing out all his credit cards, is one such indie hero. So is Mark Borchardt, hero of Chris Smith's documentary, *American Movie* (1999), who had no job, who scrounged money from relatives, and who cast his entire family in a little horror film called *Coven* (2000). John Cassavetes, who is one of the ancestors of the contemporary indie movement, made very low budget films on his own in the 1950s and 1960s, outside of studio control (e.g., *Faces, A Woman Under the Influence*). The Independent Spirit Awards still have a category called the John Cassavetes Award, given to films with budgets of $500,000 or less.

Some filmmakers who have yielded to the temptation to make a film in a studio felt they have been badly burned by the experience. Kevin Smith talked about his bad experience with *Jersey Girl* (2004), which was made by Miramax/Disney; it involved expensive stars (especially Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez), and it earned mostly very bad reviews:

> I had to actually listen to studio notes [comments]. . . . So there were changes made to the movie. . . . I never want to go through this shit again. I don't want to work with fucking really famous people. It got me to a point where I was like, "I don't want to fucking work with a lot of money, because that means that the studio is going to make you do whatever you can to make it more palatable to the masses." (Horowitz 2006: 279)

Or here is Guillermo del Toro talking about a bad experience making his film, *Mimic* (1997), speaking during a Q & A after a screening of his new film, *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006):

> MODERATOR. Let me ask you about your relationship with studios.
>
> DEL TORO: This film [*Pan's Labyrinth*] was completely independently financed. [He had had a bad experience with Miramax, for his film *Mimic*.] It turned into a cockroach movie. Hollywood is not like a tidal wave, it is like mildew, fuckin' fungi. It was a very shocking experience. The way they do marketing is obscene. (fieldnotes, November 11, 2006)

Steven Soderbergh (e.g., *sex, lies, and videotape, The Informant!*) similarly yielded to the studio temptation, and found it a bad experience when he made *Ocean's 11* (2001) for Warner's.

> "For me, *Ocean's* made no sense," he says. "It was the hardest thing I ever did. It's a movie about absolutely nothing. I found it just brain crushing. I never felt fluent, never felt comfortable. Every day I was hanging on by my fingernails. . . . About two weeks into it, I was feeling like, I want to do a little, a guerrilla movie. I just need to wash this out of my system." (quoted in Biskind 2004: 416)

And finally, when Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, director of *The Lives of Others*, received his Academy Award for that film, he brandished the statue and exclaimed, "Filmmakers, the only way you can make the films you want is to remain independent! Lower the budget! Stay out of the studios!" (fieldnotes, February 24, 2007).

Insiders will be quick to point out some of the ironies forecast earlier. Despite his strong comments, Soderbergh went on to make more *Ocean's* films for the studio, although he is famous for using the money to finance the more challenging indies that he also continued to make. Von Donnersmarck seemed passionately sincere at the time he accepted his Academy Award about exhorting filmmakers to stay out of the studios. Nonetheless he went on to make a big commercial film called *The Tourist* (2010), starring megaexpensive stars Angelina Jolie and Johnny Depp, which incidentally flopped both critically and at the box office. And there are other examples one could name.

But it is important to recall that we are talking about a discourse, a kind of accepted vocabulary of terms and tropes and ideas that makes ongoing sense within a particular social world even when it is violated by individuals. Discourses are maintained in many ways—through reiteration at the level of talk, through at least some level of behavioral conformity in practice, but also, and importantly, through certain kinds of reflexive representations. Specifically, in relation to the present discussion, the idea that the studios are dangerous places for an independent filmmaker has been dramatized in several independent films. Space prohibits discussing any films in detail in this article, but I mention two here for the curious reader: a relatively small film called *The Big Picture* (Christopher Guest, 1989), and Robert Altman's classic, *The Player* (1992). In both films, idealistic independent filmmakers are crushed when they try to work within a studio context. Their films are messed up beyond recognition and their personal integrity is corrupted. These and other films thus turn the key messages of the indie world—good films are made from passion, not money; stay out of the studios or they will eat your soul—into public-cultural morality tales, full of drama, pathos, irony, and humor, and with real (at least within the films) material consequences.

Telling the truth, showing the real

What then makes independent films different from, and ideally better than, your stereotypical Hollywood movie? If one listens to the discourse in conjunction with watching the films, the short answer is something like this: Independent films seek to tell the truth about contemporary society. Where Hollywood films seek to provide escape and fantasy, independent films seek to tell realist or hyper(bolic)-

realist stories about the world as it really is, in all its ugliness and cruelty, or all its weirdness and strangeness, and if this makes audiences uncomfortable, so be it. In order to get to these points about truth and realism, I need to work through the discourse of pleasing or not pleasing the audience.

Independent filmmakers and their audiences

Independent filmmakers often have a prickly and somewhat adversarial relationship with the imagined audience, that is, the mainstream American audience schooled in Hollywood movies, and presumed to want only to be mindlessly entertained. Hollywood-oriented screenwriters and directors like John Hamburg (e.g., *Little Fockers*) have found themselves looked down on because they cared about pleasing the audience:

> [I was making] a comedy in film school. And at NYU, there weren't a lot of guys doing comedy. There were a lot of movies about homeless people in Washington Square Park. . . . I remember getting into arguments with people who were like, "Oh, you just care about the audience." (quoted in Horowitz 2006: 107)

Many independent filmmakers by contrast make films to please only themselves and a small handful of people who share their tastes. In "The Good Machine No-Budget Commandments," producer Ted Hope and his business partners set out a list of dos and don'ts for making independent films. Point eight is, "Write for a very limited audience—your closest friends. Do not try to please anyone—crowd pleasing costs"(Hope 2010). Screenwriter/filmmaker Charlie Kaufman (e.g., *Synecdoche, NY*) is quoted as saying "It's never my goal to win an award or to write a screenplay *that people will really enjoy*. It is about a subject that I am exploring and to do it in a truthful way" (quoted in Muñoz 2008: 5, italics added).

Independent filmmakers hope their films will find an audience—they certainly have to persuade their financial backers that their films will find an audience—but ultimately they are ready to say to hell with the audience if necessary. Filmmaker Rodrigo García has made films like *Things You Could Tell Just By Looking at Her* (1999), which he described as "practically a thesis on what an uncommercial movie is" (interview, July 14, 2006). I asked him about the degree to which he thought independent filmmakers do or should listen to the advice and feedback of others. He replied:

> I think it [varies from] movie to movie. I have a script right now that I've written that I want to make. It touches on a lot of things that I want to make a movie about. . . . Not many people say to me it's bad, but a lot of them say, "what is this?" So I'm not listening [to them]. Or I'm listening but I think there are just some movies you have to make the way you see them. This will be one of them and I may make it and crash and burn and it will never see the light of day but screw it. (Interview, July 14, 2006)

And here is a more extended example, from the screening of a documentary called *Kabul Transit* at the 2006 LA Film Festival. The film, showing Kabul as a heartbreakingly ruined city but its people as survivors, is presented with no narration, no story line, and no clarifying information for the viewer. It is simply a series of striking and beautiful scenes that follow one after the other. After the

screening, anthropologist/filmmaker David Edwards and his codirectors Greg Whitmore and Meliya Zulfacar, participated in a Q & A session:

> Q. [Somebody in the audience starts out saying admiringly that the film is really cool, all fragmented as it is, he wants to congratulate the filmmakers.]
>
> DAVID. Yes, there is no single story, no single character. . . . And anyway that's the way it is, Kabul is really very fragmented.
>
> Q. [from another audience member, approvingly] Non-Western films and European films are like this, they don't "mollycoddle the audience."
>
> Q. [from a woman who seemed to know she was swimming against the tide of the previous comments] But I think it was too fragmenting, you didn't provide enough context, I couldn't make sense out of the film.
>
> MELIYA. The situation *is* very fragmented.
>
> DAVID. Some people like the way the film is made and some people get frustrated. [*emphatically*] *We made a decision.*
>
> SPONTANEOUS APPLAUSE. [In favor of this position and against the previous question.] (Fieldnotes, June 28, 2006)

As we were walking out, David was approached by someone with a press badge from *Variety*. He commented to David about the low level of sophistication of American audiences who want simple stories. He blamed it on TV. As he was walking away another man walked up and congratulated David on a brilliant film. I asked David if he would compromise the film by adding narration or other signposts, since that might enhance the possibility of getting a television contract. He said, "Absolutely not, I'd rather put it on Google Video" (ibid.).

All of this is very much in the vein of Bourdieu's arguments about the field of "restricted production," noted earlier. We hear artists who hope people will see and like their films, but who will not compromise their artistic values, shared with a relatively small group of cognoscenti, in order to please the audience. From Bourdieu's point of view this performance of an "interest in disinterestedness" is a kind of posture that seeks the highest possible level of prestige within the field of cultural production as a whole, at the furthest remove from an interest in commerce and money. I am sure there is some element of truth to this; independent filmmakers are certainly not immune to the calls of the ego.

Yet I would argue that a purely Bourdieusian reading of these kinds of statements, at least in the world of independent film (and perhaps in general) is simply too thin, too focused on the prestige effects of this positioning, too cynical about the ideals behind this attitude. For behind the negative stance toward the (mainstream) audience are a number of positive values related to the critical function of independent film. One has to do with the idea of telling the truth about the world around us, showing it "as it really is." The other has to do with disturbing or shaking up the complacent or passive audience so that people will become aware of these realities.

Real vs. Fake

I indicated earlier that some independent producers and filmmakers can get quite angry about what Hollywood films are doing and saying. When they are explicit about what makes them so upset, the issue almost always revolves around things like truth versus lies, and reality versus fakery, with independent film on the side of truth and the real. Of course truthfulness is not necessarily the same thing as realism. One can tell all kinds of truths in nonrealist modes—through fantasy, poetry, abstraction, and so forth. But in practice in the world of independent film, truth-talk tends to be intertwined with reality-talk at the level of discourse, and it translates much of the time into an ethic and an aesthetic of realism or hyper(bolic)-realism at the level of film.

For the purposes of the present essay, we remain at the level of discourse. For example, indie screenwriter/filmmaker Charlie Kaufman said:

> I hate *movies that lie to me*. Should I sit there thinking my life sucks because it's not like the ones on the screen, and I'm not getting these life lessons? My life, anyone's life, is more like a muddle, and these [Hollywood] movies are just dangerous garbage. (quoted in Waxman 2006: 155, italics added)

Or independent filmmaker Harmony Korine (e.g., *Kids, Gummo*) said, "I can't stand plots, because *I don't feel life has plots*. There is no beginning, middle, or end, and it upsets me when things are tied up so perfectly" (quoted in King 2005: 59, italics added). Similarly, in the interview quoted above independent producer Ted Hope later said:

> Looking at the crap Hollywood was turning out when I was 20, I was like, nobody is making a movie for me and I am just this normal kid from the suburbs. . . . Really all I wanted was a story of a normal person with normal problems because at the end of the day that is what I thought made movies really work. It was not so much even what you saw, but what you were able to talk about afterwards. And that is not often the story of alien invasions, but the *story of real life problems*. (Interview, March 15, 2006, italics added)

What Hope means by "a story of a normal person with normal problems" is not necessarily what the average filmgoer might envision by the word "normal"; Hope has produced films like *American Splendor* (2003), about the underground cartoonist Harvey Pekar, who was physically unattractive and chronically depressed. But that is clearly Hope's point—that most "normal" people are not beautiful and happy, and certainly not all the time.

Closely connected to the question of truth in independent films is the question of endings. Hollywood feels compelled to deliver the happy ending, while independent filmmakers feel such endings are usually false, far from the realities of life. Director Brian De Palma started his career as an independent filmmaker, and always remained something of a maverick in Hollywood. We learn from an account of the making of *Bonfire of the Vanities* that De Palma was worried about the ending:

> He understood audiences wanted catharsis, some way to synthesize everything they had just seen. . . . He understood that one reason people went to the theater and movies was for the chance to experience

> the kind of satisfying endings they rarely found in life . . . [but] such moments seemed elusive to him, and false. . . . (Salamon [1991] 2002: 373–74; sentence order rearranged)

Similarly, Danish filmmaker Susanne Bier discussed the nonhappy ending of her film *After the Wedding* (2007) at a screening in Los Angeles. Here is an exchange between Bier and various audience members during the Q & A:

> MODERATOR. I read a quote from you, to the effect that the world is a hurtful place.
>
> BIER. I am a happy person. But there is a lot of pain in life.
>
> AUDIENCE MEMBER. Americans want happy endings.
>
> ANOTHER AUDIENCE MEMBER. I'm Scandinavian. Most Americans like happy endings. But life is not about happy endings.
>
> BIER: Happy endings *are not truthful.* (Fieldnotes, February 26, 2007)[8]

Beyond the question of endings, most independent filmmakers and producers are committed to a kind of realism in their films that represents a more general commitment to tell the truth to their viewers. As one young filmmaker recently blogged about his new film, about to open in a theater, "If it speaks with honesty, people will listen and respond" (Porterfield 2011). Filmmaker Rodrigo García discussed honesty and realism (again, the two are always very closely tied together) in an (unrecorded) interview:

> He went off at some length about how bad Hollywood movies are, how fake—that was the difference, between fakeness and honesty. . . . When he was talking about what he valued in filmmaking, he kept using the word "naked," trying to look at something *as it really is.* He also kept using the phrase, "taking a truthful look." He said you could make a film about anything, the important thing was looking at it as nakedly as possible, taking a completely truthful look at whatever it was. (Fieldnotes, July 13, 2006)

Or take Christine Vachon, another of the major independent producing pioneers: "I built my company on a rebellion against conventional taste, against the no-rough-edges, film-by-consensus style [of Hollywood]" (2006: 4). She continues, "At Killer [Films] we don't believe that people make the right choice, and then the wrong choice, then fix everything with minutes to spare"(ibid.: 12). She then goes to the reality issue:

> The most dangerous movies Killer [Films] has made are the ones that reflected the real world back with the least amount of artifice: *Kids, Happiness, Boys Don't Cry.* I wouldn't call these films "realistic"; nothing on screen is. What they are are stories without clear heroes or redemptive "arcs." People may or may not get what is coming to them, and those plots spook an industry premised on wish fulfilment and getting the girl. (Vachon 2006: 75)

---

8. The focus of the study is on American independent cinema. But international films are a significant part of the independent film circuit in the United States, and I occasionally include them in the discussion.

If we look back at many of the comments disparaging "Hollywood" or "American audiences" quoted earlier for other purposes, we can see in them too that the issue is one of truth or realism or both. Thus we heard Charlie Kaufman say that his goal in filmmaking was not to please audiences but to explore particular subjects "in a truthful way." Or we heard David Edwards and his codirectors defending the fragmented and hard-to-understand nature of their film about Kabul by saying that fragmentation was the reality of Kabul as a city today. Or we earlier heard Hollywood-oriented producer Ursula Jackson (condescendingly) describe independent films as "almost documentary, . . . so involved in true life."

Film critic A. O. Scott has dubbed this trend in independent film "neo-neo-realism." Discussing a number of contemporary independent films in this realist mold (*Wendy and Lucy*, *Man Push Cart*, *Ballast*, and others), Scott locates them in a lineage that begins with Italian neorealism after World War II (the iconic example being Vittorio de Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* [1948]). He describes the art of these films as lying "in their discovery of a mysterious, volatile alloy of documentary and theatrical elements" (2009: 40). Although he, like the filmmakers, does not use a language of "cultural critique," he recognizes the critical function these films serve:

> To counter the tyranny of fantasy entrenched on Wall Street and in Washington as well as in Hollywood, it seems possible that engagement with the world as it is might reassert itself as an aesthetic strategy. Perhaps it would be worth considering that what we need from movies, in the face of a dismaying and confusing real world, is realism. (Scott 2009: 40)

There is one final piece to this reading of independent film as setting itself up against the cultural hegemony embodied in Hollywood movies. We have already seen that many independent filmmakers refuse to try to please the audience. In fact, many go further than that and actively seek to make audiences uncomfortable to one or another degree. For example, filmmaker Karen Moncrieff (e.g., *The Dead Girl*) said, "I'm interested in movies that make people feel something, and that's what I gravitate toward. I like to be pushed off my center when I go to the movies. I like to be invited to feel and think" (Moncrieff n.d., circa 2006). Rodrigo García, in the interview discussed earlier, made similar comments about "how a film needs to make demands on you, and throw you off balance" (fieldnotes February 10, 2007). He went on to say that "art is not supposed to make you feel good, it's supposed to question things, hold up the mirror, take you somewhere you won't or would rather not go in real life." He also used stronger language about the kind of impact he sought from a good film. Talking about how Americans are conditioned by Hollywood movies to want "entertainment" and a happy ending, he said "he just can't stand it, for him a film is only worth something if it really 'beats him up'" (ibid.).

I see this urge to disturb the audience as part of the larger project of cultural critique behind the independent film movement, which I have tried to frame and forecast in this article. Without using a language of "cultural critique," independent film people (producers and filmmakers) seek to challenge the dominant culture, as embodied not only in Hollywood movies but also in the mainstream audience that voraciously consumes those movies.

Some conclusions

In this article I have sought to tease out some of the distinctive values, and ways of seeing, of the world of independent film. I have approached this through an interpretation of the terms and tropes and categories—the discourse—to be found in the talk and texts of the indie world. I should say immediately that the entire project (again see Ortner, forthcoming) is not devoted to the interpretation of discourse. Other parts of the study include a history of the post-1980s independent film movement,[9] the social profiles of producers and filmmakers, a participant-observational account of production work on film sets, and more. But the kind of listening-for-discourse, and the effort to understand what some repetition of a striking term or phrase is telling us about how indie people see the world, has been an essential part of my overall methodological tool kit.

By way of conclusion, I would like to spend a little time on two phrases that have been central to this discussion: "public culture" and "cultural critique." The idea of public culture underlies the entire discussion of this paper, but in two slightly different senses. The first is a kind of Geertzian sense, in which the public culture of the independent film world is read as emerging from and speaking to that world. Geertz never actually used the phrase "public culture," but it was part of the originality of his theory that he defined all culture as "public," in the sense of seeing culture as embodied in public symbolic forms (like language) rather than hiding in the recesses of people's heads (1973a). From this point of view, I have looked at the (public) culture of the world of independent film as embodied in the ordinary talk of the participants in that world, as well as in more "made" texts like the Sundance brochure or Robert Altman's *The Player*. And I have read these cultural forms as, in the famous Geertzian phrase, the stories indie people tell themselves about themselves (Geertz 1973b: 448).[10]

The second sense derives from Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge's development of the concept in the context of naming the journal they founded in the late 1980s, *Public Culture*. "Public culture" in this context is intended as a way of grasping how culture works in a globalizing world, a world in which cultural products circulate and confront one another on a vast and always-in-motion global terrain. Appadurai and Breckenridge explain their choice of the phrase as follows: "[it] allow[s] us to hypothesize not a type of cultural phenomenon but a *zone* of cultural debate, . . . an arena where other types of cultural phenomena are encountering, interrogating, and contesting each other in new and unexpected ways"(1988: 6). In relation to the present project, independent film in this sense represents one entry in the larger field of American public culture, challenging and contesting the hegemony of "Hollywood."

---

9. For an excellent account of the on-the-ground emergence of the independent film scene in the 1980s, see Biskind (2004).

10. Geertz's place in contemporary anthropological theory is complex. His work has been called into question as part of the critique of the culture concept more generally, and also because of his commitment to the now largely discredited "modernization theory." Nonetheless, his theorizing of the formal (as opposed to political) aspects of culture, as used here, remains powerful.

This brings me then to the question of "cultural critique." For I argue—though I have only been able to note this very briefly in this essay—that independent film's challenge to Hollywood beginning in the 1980s needs to be understood as a response and a challenge to much larger social changes in American society and culture. Dark and violent films about the misery of work in the new economy, or about the dysfunctionality of families in a world of absent parents, among others, tell stories that Hollywood is almost never willing to tell, about the fraying social fabric of American society today. As against the cynicism of many observers about the survival of "independence" in independent film, I have chosen to take their self-representations seriously, and to read the movement and its films as at least embodying, and sometimes articulating, "cultural critique."

"Cultural critique" in indie *features* is almost always implicit, embedded in the stories and mise-en-scènes of the films. It is for the most part only in documentaries that we see more overt and explicit critical representation and analysis of contemporary society, including among other things a critique of contemporary neoliberal capitalism. Documentaries often go beyond "cultural critique" and enter the space of more direct political criticism and even action. But that is another part of the story.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Giovanni da Col for his enthusiasm and patience, and to Sean Dowdy who provided particularly helpful and insightful comments based in part on his background in indie music. Thanks as well to the anonymous HAU readers who also provided very useful comments.

References

Ansen, David. 2007. "The rage of Aquarius." *Newsweek*, March 5, 65.

Appadurai, Arjun, and Carol Breckenridge. 1988. "Why public culture?" *Public Culture* 1 (1): 5–9.

Balio, Tino. 1976. *United Artists: The company built by the stars*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Biskind, Peter. 2004. *Down and dirty pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the rise of independent film*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1993. *The field of cultural production: Essays on art and literature*. Edited and Introduced by Randal Johnson, with various translators. New York: Columbia University Press.

Curtin, Michael. 1996. "On edge: Culture industries in the neo-network era." In *Making and selling culture*, edited by Richard Ohmann, 181–202. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press.

Denby, David. 2010. "Image Problems." *The New Yorker*, March 22, 82.

Fischer, Michael M. J. 1995. "Film as ethnography and cultural critique in the late twentieth century." In *Shared differences: Multicultural media and practical pedagogy*, edited by Diane Carson and Lester D. Friedman, 29–56. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1986. *The history of sexuality, Volume I.* New York: Vintage Books.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973a. "Religion as a cultural system." In *The interpretation of cultures*, by Clifford Geertz, 87–125. New York: Basic Books.

——. 1973b. "Deep play: Notes on the Balinese cockfight." In *The interpretation of cultures*, by Clifford Geertz, 412–54. New York: Basic Books.

Harvey, David. 2005. *A brief history of neoliberalism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hope, Ted. 2010. "The good machine no-budget commandments," *Truly Free Film, Hope for Film* (blog). Accessed September 14, 2010, http://trulyfreefilm.hopeforfilm.com/2010/07/the-good-machine-no-budget-commandments.html.

Horowitz, Josh. 2006. *The mind of the modern moviemaker: 20 conversations with the new generation of filmmakers.* New York: Plume (Penguin).

King, Geoff. 2005. *American independent cinema.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Klawans, Stuart. 2000. "Independents' Day." *The Nation*, March 16. Accessed July 27, 2011, http://www.thenation.com/article/independents-day?page=full.

Klein, Naomi. 2007. *The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism.* London: Penguin Books.

Levy, Emanuel. 1999. *Cinema of outsiders: The rise of American independent film.* New York: New York University Press.

Linklater, Richard. 1992. *Slacker.* New York: St. Martin's Press.

Marcus, George E., and Michael M. J. Fischer. 1986. *Anthropology as cultural critique: An experimental moment in the human sciences.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mast, Gerald, and Bruce F. Kawin. 2011. *A short history of the movies*, 11th edition. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Moncrieff, Karen. n.d. "Interview together with Mary Beth Hurt," *NYC Movie Guru.* Accessed May 9, 2010, http://www.nycmovieguru.com/karen&mary.html.

Muñoz, Lorenza. 2008. "Interview with Charlie Kaufman." *Film Independent Magazine* 17 (10): 5.

Ortner, Sherry B. 2010. "Access: Reflections on studying up in Hollywood." *Ethnography* 11 (2): 211–33.

——. 2011. "On neoliberalism." *Anthropology of this Century.* 1 (May). Available online: www.aotcpress.com/articles/neoliberalism.

——. forthcoming. *Not Hollywood: Independent film at the twilight of the American dream.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Porterfield, Matthew. 2011. "If we speak with honesty, will people listen & respond?" *Truly Free Film* (blog). Accessed via e-mail, February 17.

Salamon, Julie. (1991) 2002. *The devil's candy: The anatomy of a Hollywood fiasco.* Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.

Scott, A. O. 2009. "Neo-neo realism: A handful of young American directors are making clear-eyed movies for hard times." *New York Times Magazine*, March 22: 38–43.

Setoodeh, Ramin. 2009. "Apocalypse Now." *Newsweek*, December 7: 70.

Stubbs, Liz, and Richard Rodriguez. 2000. *Making independent films: Advice from the filmakers.* New York: Allworth Press.

Sundance Institute. 2007. "Independent." Brochure in the author's files.

Timberg, Scott. 2004. "After the indie revolution." *The Age.* Accessed July 26, 2011, http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/01/14/1073877894564.html.

Vachon, Christine, with David Edelstein. 1998. *Shooting to kill: How an independent producer blasts through the barriers to make movies that matter.* New York: Harper Collins.

Waxman, Sharon. 2006. *Rebels on the backlot: Six maverick directors and how they conquered the Hollywood studio system.* New York: Harper Collins Publishers.

Williams, Raymond. 1977. *Marxism and literature.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wyatt, Justin. 2001. "Marketing marginalized cultures: *The Wedding Banquet*, cultural identities, and independent cinema of the 1990s." In *The end of cinema as we know it*, edited by Jon Lewis, 61–71. New York: New York University Press.

L'anti-Hollywood : le cinéma indépendant américain, un mouvement culturel critique

Résumé : Vers la fin des années 1980, le cinéma indépendant américain s'échappait des salles de cinémas d'art et d'essai de quelques grandes villes américaines pour acquérir une notoriété nouvelle au sein de la culture populaire américaine. Les réalisateurs indépendants résistaient à l'hégémonie d'Hollywood et s'opposaient au « spectacle de divertissement » : le fantastique, le plaisir, le « happy-end ». Ces réalisateurs présentaient au contraire dans leurs œuvres des histoires décrivant dans un style plus dur et avant-gardiste la société contemporaine. Cet article se penche sur des entretiens, des conférences et des discussions

auxquels ont participé des réalisateurs, ainsi que sur d'autres contextes dans lesquels les acteurs du monde du cinéma indépendant parlent de ce qu'ils tentent de réaliser : des « films qui ont de l'importance », selon la formule d'un producteur indépendant.

Sherry B. ORTNER is Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Her most recent book is a collection of essays called *Anthropology and social theory: Culture, power, and the acting subject* (2006). Her forthcoming book on the independent film world is called *Not Hollywood: Independent film at the twilight of the American dream.*