

Film History, Film Practices¹

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Two issues may seem disconnected but have the same core historiographical foundation. One is the homogenization of American cinema into the singular category of classical Hollywood cinema. The second is the quandary over transnational versus national cinemas, particularly as played out in Europe, as a consequence of a century of film media globalization.

Both of these issues derive partially from the historiographical problem of grouping that is always a definitional dilemma in balancing between the messy details of the real and the glorious hopes of the ideal. Andrew Tutor's 1973 discussion of the problems in defining genres² lays out the dynamics for most textual grouping quandaries. He points out that one method of grouping is the *idealist strategy*, in which the scholar establishes the "great" example with a specified set of characteristics; all other items are judged vis-à-vis that ideal. The problem with the idealist strategy is the variability of judgement as to which is the "great" example to use. The second method, the *empiricist strategy*, is to construct the necessary and sufficient conditions in which to place the item. Ed Buscombe has noted the flaw in this strategy: it is a very circular system. Applying it to the category of the western, Buscombe writes, "if we want to know what a Western is we must look at certain kinds of films. But how do we know which films to look at until we know what a Western is?"³ One partial solution that scholars have created for this method is to use a *family resemblances strategy* in which several, although not all, characteristics will suffice for inclusion in the group.

A third grouping strategy discussed by Tutor is the *a priori strategy*, similar to the idealist tactic, but rather than selecting a great film, the scholar just provides a definition. Tzvetan Todorov uses this procedure for his discussion of the fantastic genre. As with the idealist strategy, the problem with the a priori strategy is to secure critical agreement about the definition, while a certain teleology exists. The criteria for inclusion are usually established to

fit the purpose. And, fourth, the *social convention strategy* uses characteristics perceived to be in the item (as with the empiricist strategy) but also considers the popular cultural understanding of the item to establish the categorization. Steve Neale's outstanding study of the history of the word "melodrama" in the US trade press is a good instance of this strategy, as is Jason Mittell's recent book on US television genres.⁴ However, Tutor notes the problem with the social convention strategy: how to determine the cultural consensus.

The practice of trying to group texts into genres is similar to what is at stake in writing histories of world cinema. All of us have tackled the tribulations of defining characteristics, marking out group inclusions and exclusions, and facing the empirical while seeking ideal principles. The intransigence of the concrete usually defeats the loftier goals of abstract knowledge. Clearly, though, without some abstraction, then patterns, prototypes, and precedents would not be able to be seen, and so scholars continue their Herculean task.

The two issues I mention above – "American cinema equals classical Hollywood cinema" and "contemporary European national versus transnational cinemas" – could serve as exemplars. However, rather than rehearse the history of forty-plus years of debate about defining these cinemas, I want to take a bold step and present an option. It will (it does) have conceptual holes; however, I think there is enough to it to see whether it might be something worthwhile to pursue.

I want to propose using the concept of "film practices" as a different way to organize the historical existence of film and media texts. This concept would not replace organizing film history on the basis of national and transnational groupings. Rather, it would just be a different way to see the history of cinema and television and, perhaps, to see some similarities and differences that are often lost in the habit of writing our media history by national or regional categories. After defining "film practice," I will apply the concept to three possible film practices: studio-era and contemporary classical Hollywood cinema; contemporary "European quality cinema" (which is only one of several film practices existing currently in the region); and primarily US-based "indie" cinema. I am not going to address how this would work with serial texts, but I am not excluding them in principle from consideration.

Film Practices

I take the term "film practices" from David Bordwell in his 1979 essay on art cinema, in which he writes, "My purpose in this essay is to argue that we can usefully consider the 'art cinema' as a distinct mode of film practice, possessing a definite historical existence, a set of formal conventions, and implicit viewing procedures."⁵ When Bordwell used the concept, he was particularly

concerned with arguing that 1950s and 1960s European art cinema's implicit viewing procedures expected spectators to explain unusual (non-classical Hollywood) narrative form and style as objective realism, subjective realism, or authorial expressivity.⁶

As I have revised and expanded Bordwell's schema, I propose the following set of characteristics to define a film practice: (i) *A definite historical existence* involving specific political, economic, cultural (including language), and aesthetic contexts which helps explain the arrival of the film practice; (ii) *A set of conventions* including (a) form of narrative, (b) style of narration, and (c) subject-matter; and (iii) *Implicit viewing procedures*. Beyond art cinema, examples of other easily recognizable film practices would be the film practices of classical Hollywood, the European avant-garde of the 1920s, German expressionism, Soviet montage, French impressionism, political modernism, Bollywood, and others that I will mention below.

Let me explain further these three characteristics of film practice. The first element – *a definite historical existence* – is critical for explaining the historical foundations for the arrival and departure of a specific film practice. Usually what seems to be an obvious film practice occurs within a national space (and is labelled by a national term) because of the economic and political organization and institutions of the nation-state. For instance, the cine-clubs and theorizing in cine-journals amongst French intellectuals spurred the 1920s French impressionist cinema, and the French *nouvelle vague* appeared via a youthful desire to break into an industrial structure. Of course, the Soviet Revolution and Marxist discourse set the platform for the Soviet montage films. Material influences include cultural and aesthetic environments that also usually occur within geopolitical and linguistic configurations: witness German expressionism. But as communication transcends national boundaries and since the global circulation of media is part of the distribution of movies and television formats, finding film and media practices more often exceeding national boundaries makes historical sense. As many scholars have noted, the profit advantages of promoting a film through the international festival circuit has specific effects on the texts. The dynamic of global distribution provides the material explanation for film practices being adopted and adapted by other filmmakers: see French *film noir* of the 1950s, spaghetti westerns, and so forth. In fact, another film practice – Hamid Naficy's "accented cinema" – relies on the historical migration of exiled and diasporic peoples. In his outstanding book of that title, Naficy provides an extensive list of formal, stylistic, and subject-matter conventions for this group of films, buttressed by a distinct and historical explanation for its appearance.⁷

While Bordwell does not define what should be included in the second term, the *set of conventions*, his discussion of art cinema focuses on *form* (the

particularly episodic and loose chronological sequence of narrative events and the more aimless protagonists, leading to ambiguous and inconclusive endings of the text) and *style* (deviations from continuity editing and reflexive narrational gestures). Many film practices can be recognized by comparing and contrasting form and style, but *subject-matter* is potentially another central distinction. Soviet montage films speak to the new social order; art cinema comments on post-war culture. Andrew Higson initially attempts to establish national cinemas from an internal perspective rather than oppositional one (against another national cinema). In his useful essay, “The Concept of National Cinema,” he proposes considering first, the content or subject-matter ... that which is represented (and particularly the construction of “the national character”), the dominant narrative discourses and dramatic themes, and the narrative traditions and other source materials on which they draw. ... Second there is the question of the sensibility, or structure of feeling, or world-view expressed in those films. And third, there is the area of the style of these films, their formal systems of representation ... and their modes of address and constructions of subjectivity.⁸

Although Higson backs away from his claims in that essay – that national cinemas address national matters – to argue that films produced within national environments may also address other cultural issues than the nation,⁹ his schema here is similar to the one I am proposing, and seems compelling as a list of characteristics to consider in comparing groups of texts.

Most important for one point I will make is Bordwell’s third term – *implicit viewing practices*. Bordwell hinges his argument on the textual address of art cinema, emphasizing that when the unusual form and style confront a spectator, the spectator’s tactical operations *should be* to explain the oddities as objective realism, subjective realism, or authorial expressivity. Or, to expand on Bordwell, for the film practice of French impressionism, the spectator presumably should be engaging with character subjectivity and seeking photogénie for aesthetic pleasure. For Soviet montage films, the spectator should be building intellectual and emotional reflections on old and new social realities. In the case of political modernist films of the 1960s and 1970s, the use of modernist form and style should produce, based on Brechtian or third-cinema theory, distantiation and the contemplation of political matters. In the instance of accented cinema, Naficy claims that these films “are in dialogue with the home and host societies and their respective national cinemas, as well as with audiences, many of whom are similarly transnational, whose desires, aspirations, and fears they express.”¹⁰ Thus, the implicit viewing procedure is to see, and intellectually to engage with, this dialogue.

Here, I want to underline that this third feature is exceptionally useful in distinguishing what is at stake in comparing film practices. I also want to em-

phasize that while I would argue that most people electing to watch a film or television programme have a fairly good idea about what they are supposed to be doing with the textual material (because of the material context of selecting that film or programme to watch), the real consequences of reception are another matter. What I am proposing here has potential value (*i*) to explain cultures of production of films and media and (*ii*) to serve as an analytical tool for comparative historical textual analysis. It has some implications for reception studies, but only insofar as the spectator is engaged in those historical and textual knowledge bases. That is, if the spectator is cognizant of that horizon of expectations, then the implicit viewing procedures become part of the reception context.

While I hope that my examples along the way have provided a sense of the schema of a film practice, to offer additional evidence of its value, I would like to apply the schema to three film practices to see where this propaedeutic leads.

Classical and Contemporary Classical Hollywood Cinema

Probably one of the most well-known film practices is the classical Hollywood cinema. Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and I argue that the classical Hollywood cinema forms by 1917, and we point to the industrial structure and mode of production as facilitating both the economic and sociological system that maintained, and maintains, its longevity. The set of conventions of the classical Hollywood cinema are many, but just three obvious ones are that the film practice has a (usually tight) linear and casual narrative; the causality has verisimilitude; and causality dominates time and space. It is the case that the set of conventions as laid out by Bordwell and Thompson emphasize style and form. Murray Smith is accurate in pointing out that we deal with subject-matter only when it is involved in an aesthetic outcome, particularly the heterosexual coupling that supports the appearance of narrative unity and coherence at the end of the film.¹¹ However, other scholars have expanded on the conventions of classical Hollywood's subject-matter, especially in terms of representations of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, and class and, occasionally, nation.

In *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, we employ a production of culture approach that emphasizes the real, material sharing of discourse among Hollywood workers as to what constitutes the good film. We describe the circulation of this discourse in trade journals, screenwriting manuals, and worker interviews about how a proper film looks and sounds. One of the points we repeat is that these workers believe films should be comprehensible and coherent. Looking back at this, and now applying this schema of a film practice, I would currently say that the implicit viewing procedure for a classical Hollywood film is that the audience should follow the story so as to be *af-*

fectively involved in the events depicted. One of the concerns that I previously have expressed is that at times the discussion over-emphasizes the necessity of the stylistic conventions to enable viewers to comprehend the plot, so as to create a causally linked story as the adequate viewing experience. However, Bordwell does assume another outcome: the language he uses in developing his problem-solving model of spectator activity is laced with affective terms. For instance, he writes, “the [detective film] aims to create curiosity about past story events (e.g., who killed whom), suspense about upcoming events, and surprise with respect to unexpected disclosures about either story or syuzhet.”¹² “Curiosity”, “suspense”, and “surprise” are good examples of not only cognitive but also affective states-of-viewing. That the implicit viewing procedure for the classical Hollywood film is usually derisively described as “being entertained” would hardly surprise anyone, and it is that spectator objective that allows Hollywood to be positioned as the “other” to art cinema.

I believe we can see in the discourse among Hollywood workers that the actual objective of comprehension and coherency in the narrating of plot to be the more fundamental purpose of affective engagement. Here are some examples:

Real dramatic construction is the art of selecting the vital incidents of a story, chopping away the unnecessary parts, condensing and making more tense the essentials and arranging them so that they will have coherence, swift and certain movement, a stirring climax whether of comedy, romance or tragedy with a justified and satisfactory finale.¹³

Eustace Hale Ball, 1913 (photoplay advice author)

Punch possesses a variety of synonyms. It is heart interest, grip, suspense and a dozen other things rolled into one. ... Punch is that element of the story which gives it interest. It is dramatic situation, but it is more than that and it is because the word means so much that it is not easy to define.¹⁴

Epes Winthrop Sargent, 1913 (photoplay advice author)

The American people, however, attend motion picture entertainments partly because they desire action, movement and adventure, something which will counteract the deadly routine of the machine, the office desk and the cook stove. It does not matter whether the action is physical, as in the case of the heroic cowboy chased by a band of Indians, intellectual as in the matching of wits of Sherlock Holmes and some criminal, or emotional, as when *Oliver Twist* causes the whole audience to hunt for their handkerchiefs.¹⁵

Orrin C. Cocks, 1917 (photoplay advice author)

Three classes of appeal exist in every film that tells a story. They are: first, the sense appeal to the eye; second, the emotional appeal; and, third, the intellectual appeal. The sense appeal and emotional appeal are primary, elemental, and strong, while the intellectual appeal is secondary and relatively slight.¹⁶

Victor Oscar Freeburg, 1918 (academic instructor)

One of the most important things to remember if you attempt to write photoplays, is the interest of the audience. In order to create interest that is sustained throughout the entire story, you must have a well-founded plot. It must be a plot that demands action, suspense, drama, tense situations and romance.¹⁷

H. H. Van Loan, 1922 (photoplay author)

Goldwyn reputedly said, "I want a film that begins with an earthquake and works up to a climax."¹⁸

James P. Cunningham, 1941 (newspaper columnist)

I actually place [cutting for continuity] at the bottom of a list of six criteria for what makes a good cut. At the top of the list is Emotion. ... *How do you want the audience to feel?*¹⁹

Walter Murch, 1993 (film editor)

Although the question remains, as it does for any analytical act of grouping, as to when an item breaches sufficient instances of its supposed characteristics to fall outside of its group, I agree with Thompson and Bordwell that contemporary Hollywood cinema's adjustments in the past forty years are just that – adjustments – rather than some new film practice. I would agree that arguments as to whether or not an individual film does justifiably fall within the classical Hollywood film practice may be a worthwhile discussion,²⁰ but that becomes a question of returning to the basis of the grouping procedure: ideal, empiricist, a priori, or social convention. In the situation here of a film practice, I am laying out a rather large set of characteristics to use to include or exclude individual items. I am also working from primarily a social convention approach in that I am assuming most people still see these films as a contemporary version of older Hollywood films. As the discussion about a supposedly "post-classical" or "postmodern" Hollywood cinema is too large to recapitulate here, I am choosing to focus on responses by Thompson and Bordwell to what might or might not be novel since the 1970s. Just to be clear, I am not including in the classical Hollywood film practice the "new wave" or "Renaissance" adaptations by some US filmmakers of the European art

cinema in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I will also be suggesting that another film practice – the “indie” film practice – has existed in the US since about 1960.

However, to the point about recent Hollywood cinema’s conformance (or not) to the classical film practice, both Thompson and Bordwell prefer to describe some changes as “intensifications” of certain classical conventions.²¹ In her detailed analysis of current narrative form, Thompson states, against the idea that Hollywood lost its narrative drive as it developed “high concept” promotional strategies, that “What happened in the mid-1970s was not a shift into some sort of post-classical type of filmmaking. Rather, some of the younger directors helped to revivify classical cinema by directing films that were wildly successful,” using older genre forms.²² She proceeds to contend that Hollywood films are four-act structures with turning-points based on changes in the character’s goals. The point is, though, that “the most basic principle of the Hollywood cinema is that a narrative should consist of a chain of causes and effects that is easy for the spectator to follow. This clarity of comprehension is basic to all our other responses to films, particularly emotional ones.”²³

Now, understanding how a narrative is structured is different from what its primary objective might be, and Thompson points to that objective, or implicit viewing procedure, as being emotionally involved. Likewise, Smith agrees in his “Theses” essay that linear, causal narrative is not lost in films heavily reliant on spectacle, style, and music. He writes, “in action films, the plot advances *through* spectacle; the spectacular elements are, generally speaking, as ‘narrativized’ as are the less ostentatious spaces of other genres. ... careful narrative patterning – a prerequisite for the kind of emotional response associated with classical narratives – is still very much in evidence in the biggest blockbusters of our time.”²⁴ Thus, even if I were to grant that contemporary classical Hollywood films have loosened their strict cause-effect system (which, of course, never was as strict as interpretations of the model sometimes imply), that is but one part of the second feature of the film practice: its set of conventions. If anything, the implicit viewing procedure is even more the norm in the present-day, or at least the means to its successful achievement has intensified.

The same statement can be made about contemporary Hollywood films’ style. In *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, Bordwell lays out five extensions of the formal and stylistic system post 1970. (1) Minor genres are turned to for opening up and renovating the formulas. (2 and 3) Visceral action and pace increase. (4 and 5) “World-making” and motif construction are also sites of labour.²⁵ I like to label this a *hyper-classical* style. The last two extensions edge backwards to melodramatic means of narrating in much of classical

cinema²⁶ while “rapid editing, bipolar extremes of lens lengths, reliance on close shots, and wide-ranging camera movements”²⁷ accomplish the second and third. Now, as with the observations made by Thompson about post-1970s’ classical Hollywood, these changes are noteworthy but not sufficient, I believe, to throw the films out of the classical Hollywood film practice. Take two examples. The opening of *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, with its screeching sound and fast cutting, has a confrontational aesthetic; *Blade Runner* has a delightfully complex mise-en-scène. But these stylistic choices are part of a large number of other conventions and, more significantly, employed to achieve intense affective engagement with the narrative.

Of course, other film practices also seek affective viewing. The popular cinemas of other nations share with the classical Hollywood cinema these aims. What may distinguish these film practices from the classical Hollywood practice lies in the realm of subject-matter and occasionally some formal and stylistic conventions (as well as the conditions for their historical existence such as cultural determinants). Seeing these similarities and differences may help us relate these popular national cinemas to one another while still distinguishing between them. Perhaps some of the value of this scheme for such comparative purposes will be more obvious after I consider my next two examples.

The Contemporary European Quality Cinema

Numerous scholars have described the contemporary European art or quality film, or at least have attempted to discuss this film practice in relation to other cinemas. John Hill’s note of warning is worth noting here. He writes,

Is there a recognizable filmmaking tradition which is linked to Europe the place (however defined) or are there simply individual authorial and national traditions within Europe? Does the label European identify any common formal and thematic features in films or simply provide a convenient peg on which to hang a variety of films with nothing in common other than their place of origin? The idea of the “European art film” has suggested there might indeed be a unifying European tradition but there are problems with this. First, it doesn’t include what is probably the bulk of European film production and, second, it is the shared “art” (non-classical narration, stylistic foregrounding, ambiguity and authorial expression) rather than any shared “Europeanness” which seems to provide the category with its main unifying principle.²⁸

Hill's cautions here about grouping films, especially based on the single context of place of production, are worth pausing over. However, it may be possible with the schema of a film practice to deal with his concerns. If films are grouped on the bases of several characteristics, it might be justifiable to ask what historical conditions produced the appearance of a group of films with similar sets of filmic conventions – for example, the “new wave art film” practices of the 1950s and 1960s – within a geo-political region labeled “Europe”? Usual answers for the European new wave art film of the 1950s and 1960s lie in political and generational change. For the European quality cinema of the 1980s and beyond, usual answers are that these films are a consequence of co-production financing, the European Union, and competitive battle with Hollywood cinema. This competitive battle includes adopting filmic conventions from the earlier 1950s and 1960s new wave art cinemas.

Grouping some films produced in this region into this film practice also respects the multitude of film practices occurring simultaneously in Europe. Mary Wood suggests producers are financing at least five types of cinema in Europe: (i) the *authorial* cinema (low- to mid-budget films from individuals seeking “to establish a recognizable creative profile”); (ii) “movies for a *mass audience*” that are blockbuster co-productions with, or products of, divisions of global-based media production companies; (iii) *popular cinemas* and local stories, usually products of a national culture and state; (iv) *historical/heritage* films; and (v) – the ones to which I am pointing now – “*quality*” films which she describes as: “the top end of the authorial and art cinema market [which] is characterized by big budgets, stars, international distribution and visually, by spectacle.”²⁹ Wood lists examples, including the French *cinema du look* such as Luc Besson, Jean-Pierre Jeunet, and Jean-Jacques Beineix and certain films by Almodóvar, Bertolucci, and von Trier. A quality film, she writes, “engages with the experience of having plural identities in the contemporary world”. It has authors and big budgets.³⁰ While her discussion does not specifically suggest what might be its implicit viewing practices, I would suggest that it is similar to the classical Hollywood cinema in hoping to secure dramatic emotional engagement from its audiences while occasionally raising contemporary intellectual issues.

Wood's description of the quality film may at first glance seem analogous to Thomas Elsaesser's international “festival” film, which he describes as functioning on the basis of a similar art-cinema style across national boundaries, including beyond Europe. As Elsaesser points out, the festival film's style addresses an audience of cinéphiles, steeped in the texts of film history.³¹ His account of this provides a succinct description of the international festival cinema's implicit viewing procedure:

one assumes that the European art cinema merely sets its audiences different kinds of tasks [than does the Hollywood film], such as inferring the characters' motivation (as in Ingmar Bergman's *The Silence*), reconstructing a complex time/scheme (as in the same director's *Cries and Whispers*), or guessing what actually happened and what was projected or imagined in a character's consciousness (as in *Persona*).³²

Elsaesser's international festival film practice is thus ultimately different from Wood's European quality film. Obviously, the implicit viewing procedure for the European quality cinema does not rely on cinéophile expertise or pleasure. It is much more accessible to a broader film audience, upon which its producers rely for big-budget financing.

European cinema and international cinema are complex sets of practices, and so I simply put this on the table as potentially worth developing further, as I think that sorting through the various film practices operating in Europe or the broader transnational circuit of film distribution could help move scholarship into other sorts of media histories and away from always describing cinematic and media life nation by nation. Thus, in thinking about contemporary European cinema via a film-practice model, I would argue that multiple film practices are currently operating within the region, one of which is the European quality cinema film practice.³³

American Indie Cinema

The opening of a 2008 “mumblecore” indie film, *Baghead*, written and directed by two Austin-based filmmakers, Jay and Mark Duplass, begins with a scene of two couples watching the conclusion of an indie film. The male character within the interior film is petitioning his former girlfriend; to prove he is now prepared for their relationship, he strips naked, and the couple embrace – happy ending. The lights come up on the audience, and it is apparent that the two males of the couples in the audience are quite impressed with the film. A standard question-and-answer with the filmmaker begins. The filmmaker touts the realism of his work and its low cost. In fact, he is embarrassed that he spent as much as \$5,000 on it. Again, the men in the audience are impressed by these revelations.

As the opening scene indicates, *Baghead* gestures toward parody of the indie scene, particularly the sort of subgenre in which the Duplass's work, described by one reviewer as “the undercurrents of contemporary relationships [of] shallow, crabby characters” shot in “semi-improvised performances, which seem so natural that it is tempting to confuse the actors with their characters.”³⁴ Despite the parody-like opening of the film, *Baghead* quickly

settles into another relationship film among the four characters who have varying desires toward each other exacerbated by the potential threat of a slasher killer in the woods near their weekend cabin.

Baghead typifies the current US indie scene not only in its conventions but as well in its somewhat novel platforming distribution that set up implicit viewing procedures. Sony Pictures Classics, which organized the marketing campaign, premiered the film in Austin and then moved it to other indie-centric towns such as Portland, Oregon, hoping to pick up Internet buzz before screening it in the normal first-run towns of New York City and Los Angeles.³⁵ The Austin Film Society, begun by Austin indie-filmmaker Rick Linklater and a thriving film society despite competition from DVD-rentals and Netflix-on-demand, sponsored the local premiere using another Austin-centric screen practice: the premiere was shown at the Star Hill Ranch, out in Texas Hill Country, with a \$75 benefit dinner, the menu of which included smoked rainbow trout with a leek mousse, fresh sorrel, and pickled black-eyed peas; forest mushroom soup; pork tenderloin grilled with a garlic-blackberry glaze alongside goat-cheese grits; and ginger-apple upside-down cake with crème fraîche and chocolate ganache.³⁶ *Baghead* achieved decent reviews from *The New York Times* once it made it to the big cities,³⁷ but its overall box office by April 2008 was a very weak domestic gross of \$140,106 after twenty-three weeks and its widest release of eighteen cinemas.³⁸

What might be the set of conventions – form, style, and subject-matter – defining the American indie film practice?³⁹ A definition of this cinema appears in Annette Insdorf's 1981 essay "Ordinary People, European-Style: or How to Spot an Independent Feature." Arguing that an American independent film must have differences from Hollywood in terms of its mode of production, subject-matter, and conventions, she outlines the alternatives as including an "abundance of dialogue – especially intelligent dialogue" and thoughtful "preoccupations."⁴⁰

More of these sorts of definitions of indie cinema based on the films' conventions come from:

Emanuel Levy in 1999: "fresh perspective, innovative spirit, and personal vision' with 'a gritty style and off-beat subject-matter that expresses the film-maker's personal vision"; "offbeat characterizations" but "as a whole not artistically ground-breaking or politically provocative";

Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell in 2003: indies from 1985 onwards tend toward artifice and stylization, "low budgets and risky subjects, themes, or plots," and neglected genres;

Geoff King in 2005: American indies depart from Hollywood filmmaking “either in making greater claims to verisimilitude/realism, or in the use of more complex, stylized, expressive, showy or self-conscious forms” and “offer visions of society not usually found in the mainstream”;

Chris Holmlund in 2005: “social engagement and/or aesthetic experimentation – a distinctive visual look, an unusual narrative pattern, a self-reflexive [sic] style”;

John Berra in 2008: “a romantic vision of film productivity” coming from *Easy Rider* and Ken Loach’s *Kes* (1969) as “films [that] traded studio shooting and rigid scripting in favour of real locations, improvised dialogue, episodic narrative, and reflective codas that would encourage discussion amongst critics and audiences alike”;

And Geoff West in April 2009, reviewing a recent indie film: “a cute, romantic tale about the awkward new love between idiosyncratic” protagonists with the indie film’s “stereotypical best and worst – emotional poignancy (good), contrived absurdity (bad).”⁴¹

In fact, one view is that “independent film started to become more of a brand than a movement by the mid-1990s,” and Berra writes that it was in the 1990s that American indie cinema appears as an idea.⁴² Michael Allen notes that in the early 2000s only two per cent of the films on US screens are foreign films: “The values associated with foreign film-making – serious treatment of adult issues, self-conscious cinematic style, film seen as art – were taken over by American independent film-makers.”⁴³

The indie cinema, I would argue, has a definite historical existence, starting in the 1960s. Certainly economic, political, and cultural contexts stimulate the non-studio financing of the projects, although these conditions for its historical existence have been changing over the past fifty years as major film companies see the potential economic profits in this minor film practice. Although a wave of acquisitions of minor companies occurred in the late 1990s, the recent recession saw many of them sold on. These events remind us that while economic context does matter, defining a film practice on the basis of its financial source is potentially misleading.

More salient explanations for the indie film practice are cultural and aesthetic – desires to produce films with different formal and stylistic conventions than the classical Hollywood cinema and with subject-matter ignored or repressed in that film practice. At times, indie cinema seems to exude a sort of “rock” authenticity or “punk” do-it-yourself sensibility.⁴⁴ In fact, indies’ subject-matter tracks the generations through the decades of their practice:

key films used to point to the arrival or resurgence of indie cinema are *Shadows* (Cassavetes, 1959), *Easy Rider* (Hopper, 1969), *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (Van Peebles, 1971), *The Whole Shootin' Match* (Pennell, 1978), *Girl Friends* (Weill, 1978), *Stranger than Paradise* (Jarmusch, 1984), *Sex, lies and videotape* (Soderbergh, 1989), *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994), and *Clerks* (Smith, 1994).

While I think the set of conventions of the indie cinema might be a place for some debate, the definitions I quoted above offer a good starting-point. I would note the definitions show a consistent emphasis on (i) dialogue for purposes other than advancement of a plot, (ii) “quirky” or odd characters, (iii) emphasizes on certain aspects of verisimilitude, and (iv) ambiguity and intertextuality in narrative and narration. For example, in discussing *Blue Velvet* (Lynch, 1986) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) as non-classical films, Thompson notes: “much of the dialogue in both films, and especially in *Pulp Fiction*, exists to create atmosphere and explore idiosyncratic characters rather than to further the story.”⁴⁵ A summarizing statement would be that indie cinema focuses on using form, style, and subject-matter to suggest objective realism and occasionally authorial expressivity. As a result, the American indie cinema overlaps somewhat with the European art cinema of the 1950s and 1960s; however, it differs as well, since US indie cinema seems seldom directed toward subjective realism. Moreover, while indie cinema does occasionally produce a reflexive narration, the occurrences of authorial expressivity are fleeting rather than “the point” of the film.

Finally, and very significantly, beyond interpreting the conventions as objective realism and authorial expressivity, the indies’ implicit viewing procedures seek an emotional and an intellectual engagement with the film. In fact, films without an intellectual engagement might better be relegated to the traditional classical Hollywood cinema film practice. After all, classical Hollywood films are about emotionally driven entertainment; indie movies are challenging, using filmic conventions and cultural capital to establish their alternative status.⁴⁶ For example, while *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) is definitely an independently financed and produced film, I would exclude it from the American indie film practice and group it within classical Hollywood film practice. If a complex narrative film emphasizes the puzzle of its plotting, rather than the representations, then it probably should be allocated to the indie film practice.

Carl Wilson has discussed how the director’s or writer’s name may help an audience infer the intellectual implication of the film: see the consequences of “Charlie Kaufman” as indie auteur or, as Erin Hill Parks has noted, the changing implications of the name “Christopher Nolan.”⁴⁷ Certainly, the criterion of the implicit viewing procedures allows me to establish easily the prototypical American indie film, Cassavetes’s *Shadows* (1959), with its lack of a narrative set-up, extended conversations among friends, episodic narrative,

improvised acting, slice-of-life use of location mise-en-scène, extensive close-ups without standard continuity editing, and, importantly, explicit raising of contemporary social issues. Films can be “hybrids.” Michael Newman makes an excellent case that *Juno* (2007) begins as an indie film but turns into a classical Hollywood teen pix.⁴⁸ Finally, I want to emphasize that both emotional and intellectual engagements are pleasurable, albeit in different ways.



What does the schema of a film practice do for scholars of media? For one thing, it separates out issues of financing films and television programmes from matters of historical determinants, textual conventions, and implicit viewing procedures. I want to underline that if I were considering the financial arrangement of a national media culture, I would definitely want to arrange these texts differently than I do here with the schema of a film practice. Moreover, I want to emphasize that a film practice must consider the historical conditions for its existence, which often include financial and production circumstances.

Secondly, this method avoids defining European quality cinema as totally in opposition to the classical Hollywood film; many aspects are similar as are the film practices of European popular cinemas. Third, this method avoids implying that the classical Hollywood cinema is entertainment and European cinemas are not and, vice versa, that European cinemas are all about intellectual engagement and certain modern art gestures while Hollywood cares not about either. The conventions of subject-matter as well as form and style for all film practices require analysis.

Thus, in a separate move, I would want to examine American indie cinema, European quality cinema, and classical Hollywood cinema for their ideologies. All three film practices exude fairly conservative ideologies as well as occasionally progressive ones. An alternative film practice to Hollywood, as has been argued regarding the European art cinema film practice of the 1950s and 1960s, does not guarantee better representations of women or minorities or general social justice. In fact, often, American indie films and European quality cinema reinforce sexism and racism and revel in elitist viewing practices for the initiated cinéphile.

Finally, my purpose in proposing the use of the schema of film practices is not to replace the discussion of national cinemas, but to provide an alternative means to discuss occasionally the varieties of cinemas produced both for national and transnational audiences, and to avoid the homogenization of any national cinema into one film practice. The schema has a flexibility that seems productive to me, and I hope it does to others.

Sammanfattning

Denna artikel föreslår ett nytt sätt att organisera historiska grupperingar av film- och mediatexter genom användandet av konceptet ”filmpraktiker”. Detta koncept är inte tänkt att ersätta organiseringen av filmhistorien utifrån nationella och transnationella grupperingar. Istället skulle det innebära ett alternativt sätt att betrakta film- och mediahistoria och analysera de likheter och skillnader som ofta försvinner i de film- och mediahistorier som utgår ifrån nationella eller regionala kategorier. David Bordwell definierar en ”filmpraktik” som ”upprätthållande en definitiv historisk existens, en uppsättning formmässiga konventioner, och implicita sätt att betrakta” Detta koncept tillämpas här på klassisk Hollywoodfilm, samtida ”europeisk kvalitetetsfilm” och den i första hand USA-baserade ”indie-filmen”.

Keywords: Film practices, film history, genre, formal conventions, viewing procedures

Notes

- 1 I want to thank the European Network for Cinema and Media Studies for inviting me to speak at its third conference, especially Erik Hedling, Olof Hedling, and Mats Jönsson. I also appreciate the comments from various audience members and a particularly helpful note from Jens Elder. This article echoes some of my discussion of film practices and indie films in the article “Independent of What? The Ideology of ‘Alternative’ to Hollywood” (forthcoming, 2012).
- 2 A. Tutor, “Genre and Critical Methodology”, in *Movies and Methods*, (ed.) B. Nichols, Berkeley 1976 [1973], pp. 120–21. The labelling here is partially mine.
- 3 E. Buscombe, “The Idea of Genre in the American Cinema”, *Screen* 11/ 2 1970, p. 35.
- 4 S. Neale, “Melo Talk: On the Meaning and Use of the Term ‘Melodrama’ in the American Trade Press”, *The Velvet Light Trap* 32 1993; J. Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*, New York 2004.
- 5 D. Bordwell, “The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice”, *Film Criticism* 4/1 1979, p. 56.
- 6 Writing in 1979, Bordwell was referring to 1950s and 1960s European art cinema. As we look back now over sixty years of art cinema, these characteristics may no longer apply to all art cinema or apply only to some films. For a good discussion of the issues of art cinema, see R. Galt and K. Schoonover, “Introduction: The Impurity of Art Cinema”, in *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories*, (eds.) R. Galt and K. Schoonover, New York 2010.
- 7 H. Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Princeton 2001.
- 8 A. Higson, “The Concept of National Cinema”, *Screen* 30/4 1989, p. 43.
- 9 A. Higson, “The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema”, in *Cinema & Nation*, (eds.) M. Hjort and S. MacKenzie, London 2000.
- 10 Naficy, p. 6.
- 11 M. Smith, “Theses on the Philosophy of Hollywood History”, in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, (eds.) S. Neale and M. Smith, London 1998, p. 4.
- 12 D. Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Madison 1985, p. 65.
- 13 E. H. Ball, *The Art of the Photoplay*, New York 1913, p. 39.

- 14 E. W. Sargent, *The Technique of the Photoplay*, 2nd edn., New York 1913, p. 85.
- 15 O. C. Cocks, "The Better Films Movement", *Moving Picture World* 33/3 21 July 1917.
- 16 V. O. Freeburg, *The Art of Photoplay Making*, New York 1918, p. 11.
- 17 H. H. Van Loan, *How I Did It*, Los Angeles 1922, p. 77.
- 18 J. P. Cunningham, "Asides and Interludes", *Motion Picture Herald* 142/3 18 January 1941, p. 35.
- 19 W. Murch, *In the Blink of an Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing*, Los Angeles 1995, pp. 17–18.
- 20 For instance, Thomas Elsaesser makes a convincing case that a few films – his example is *Bram Stoker's Dracula* – operate with different narrative and stylistic conventions. Thus, a small set of films might be within this film practice, but I am referring, as Thompson and Bordwell do, to the vast majority of post-1970s blockbuster films. See T. Elsaesser, "Specularity and Engulfment: Francis Ford Coppola and *Bram Stoker's Dracula*", in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, (eds.) S. Neale and M. Smith, London 1998.
- 21 K. Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique*, Cambridge, Mass. 1999, p. 3; D. Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*, Berkeley 2006, pp. 51–62.
- 22 Thompson, p. 8.
- 23 Thompson, p. 10.
- 24 Smith, pp. 13–14.
- 25 Bordwell 2006, pp. 51–62.
- 26 See J. Staiger, "Film Noir as Male Melodrama: The Politics of Film Genre Labeling", in *The Shifting Definitions of Genre: Essays on Labeling Films, Television Shows and Media*, (eds.) L. Geraghty and M. Jancovich, Jefferson, North Carolina 2008.
- 27 Bordwell 2006, p. 121.
- 28 J. Hill, "The Future of European Cinema: The Economics and Culture of Pan-European Strategies", in *Border Crossing: Film in Ireland, Britain and Europe*, (eds.) J. Hill, M. McLoone and P. Hainsworth, Belfast 1994, p. 55.
- 29 M. P. Wood, *Contemporary European Cinema*, London 2007, pp. 25, 67, 43. Other attempts to make some of these sorts of distinctions are in D. Eleftheriotis, *Popular Cinema of Europe: Studies of Texts, Contexts, and Frameworks*, New York 2001; R. Galt, *The New European Cinema: Redrawing the Map*, New York 2006; and R. Halle, *German Film after Germany: Toward a Transnational Aesthetic*, Urbana 2008; while something of this sort seems to prompt Geoffrey Nowell-Smith to argue that *Once Upon a Time in the West* (Leone, 1968) is not an Italian film (G. Nowell-Smith, "The Beautiful and the Bad: Notes on Some Actorial Stereotypes", in *Hollywood and Europe: Economics, Culture, National Identity 1945–95*, (eds.) G. Nowell-Smith and S. Ricci, London 1998, p. 141).
- 30 I think what Wood describes here is not the European cinema described by Philip French ("Is There a European Cinema?", in *Border Crossing: Film in Ireland, Britain and Europe*, (eds.) J. Hill, M. McLoone and P. Hainsworth, Belfast 1994, p. 51), which may be related to the Euro-pudding film (see below n. 33).
- 31 T. Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood*, Amsterdam 2005, p. 18.
- 32 Elsaesser 2005, pp. 44–45.
- 33 One other sort of film is what has been called the "Euro-pudding" film, which attempts to represent Europe as an imagined whole; Halle, pp. 30–59.
- 34 S. Holden, "Gabbing, Flirting, Drinking, Missing", *New York Times*, 25 July 2008, B14.
- 35 M. Cieply, "In a Reverse Rollout, an Indie Film Has Its Premiere in Austin", *New York Times*, 3 June 2008, B1, B5.
- 36 Austin Film Society, e-mail to members, 7 June 2008.
- 37 Holden.
- 38 Box Office Mojo, "Baghead", [http://www.boxofficemojo.com/\(09-03-31\)](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/(09-03-31)).

- 39 I am using the term “indie” here to emphasize that this is a different concept to that of “independent cinema”, which I would argue has a long history of use in the US as meaning films produced by sources other than the major companies. The authors I am quoting, however, may still use the term “independent” despite discussing filmic aesthetics, not modes of production.
- 40 A. Insdorf, “Ordinary People, European-Style: or How to Spot an Independent Feature”, *American Film* 6/10 1981, repr. in *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, (eds.) C. Holmlund and J. Wyatt, London 2005, pp. 30–31.
- 41 E. Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film*, New York 1999, pp. 3, 53; G. King, *American Independent Cinema*, Bloomington 2005, p. 10; K. Thompson and D. Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 2nd edn., Boston 2003, pp. 696–700; C. Holmlund, “Introduction: From the Margins to the Mainstream”, in *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, (eds.) C. Holmlund and J. Wyatt, London 2005, p. 2; J. Berra, *Declarations of Independence: American Cinema and the Partiality of Independent Production*, Bristol 2008, pp. 9, 12; see also C. Kleinhans, “Independent Features: Hopes and Dreams”, in *New American Cinema*, (ed.) J. Lewis, Durham, NC 1998, p. 308; and G. West, “Indie Conventions Help – and Hurt – Film”, *Austin American-Statesman*, 24 April 2009, D3.
- 42 M. Polish, M. Polish and J. Sheldon, *The Declaration of Independent Filmmaking*, Orlando, Fla. 2005, p. 9; Berra, p. 11.
- 43 M. Allen, *Contemporary US Cinema*, Harlow 2003, p. 140.
- 44 Geoff King hypothesizes the term “indie” may have come from “indie” music in the 1980s (G. King, “Thriving or in Permanent Crisis? Discourses on the State of Indie Cinema”, American Independent Cinema Conference, Liverpool, United Kingdom, 8–10 May 2009).
- 45 Thompson, p. 340.
- 46 Indie cinema probably includes much of what Jeffrey Sconce calls “smart” cinema, but indie cinema is a broader film practice than smart cinema (see J. Sconce, “Irony, Nihilism and the New American ‘Smart’ Film”, *Screen* 43/4 2002). On the place of cultural capital in this film practice, see also M.Z. Newman, “Indie Culture: In Pursuit of the Authentic Autonomous Alternative”, *Cinema Journal* 48/ 3 2009a; M.Z. Newman, “Indie Authenticity: Categorizing *Juno*”, American Independent Cinema Conference, Liverpool, UK, 8–10 May 2009b.
- 47 C. Wilson, “Charlie Kaufman and the Contradictions Raised by ‘Hollywood Independent’ Authorship”, American Independent Cinema Conference, Liverpool, UK, 8–10 May 2009; E. Hill-Parks, “The Changing Perception of Independence: The Case of Christopher Nolan”, American Independent Cinema Conference, Liverpool, UK, 8–10 May 2009.
- 48 Newman 2009b.