



Review: D. K. Holm (2008)
Independent Cinema
Harpenden: Kamera Books
ISBN 1904048706
58 pp.

John Bleasdale

Independent Cinema is a denomination which, although strictly speaking ought to be defined by economics, inevitably veers into a generic status, as it does in the final chapter of D.K. Holm's study. This is highly problematic. Although there are certain similarities in films that are often discussed under the heading Independent Cinema and certain trends, Independent Cinema does not and cannot have the kind of recognised and recognisable generic markers which define something like the Western or Film Noir, Horror films or Science Fiction.

Of course, there are 'features of convenience', as Holm terms them, which crop up in many independent films (43). Most independently made movies lack the financial wallop of a Hollywood blockbuster, and therefore scripts, especially for first time features, will tend to be restricted to a paucity of locations and by the casting of either unknowns, perhaps non-professionals, or actors such as Chris Cooper and Johnny Depp, who regularly appear for a nominal fee as a way of diversifying their output and supporting nascent film-

152

making talent, or mavericks such as Jim Jarmusch. There might also be technical limitations. Digital video might be chosen over film, available light employed rather than expensive lighting rigs, minimal soundtracks recorded by unknown musicians or found music, instead of original full orchestral scores. However, these traits are usually by-products of a specific economic condition. With some notable exceptions such as the Dogma movement which made of these limits a manifesto, most directors on moving outside of the hinterlands of independent cinema happily abandon these imposed limitations for the freedom, the possibilities and the sophistication a good sized budget might afford. Doug Lyman, Steven Soderbergh, Sam Raimi, Richard Linklater, James Mangold and the Coen Brothers are all film makers who began by making low budget independent movies but almost instantly moved into the mainstream and although their financing might in some cases still arrive from outside of the studio system, their films retain the high production values of a Hollywood movie. Quentin Tarantino has certainly retained some of 'the features of convenience' of an independent filmmaker: his soundtracks for instance are almost exclusively made up of source music. On the other hand, the limited number of sets in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) was abandoned for the globe trotting of *Kill Bill* (2001) and his casting of unknown actors such as the then unknown Steve Buscemi was succeeded in *Pulp Fiction* (1994) by a string of A-list stars, Bruce Willis and Uma Thurman, as well as the almost miraculous resurrection of John Travolta. *Walk the Line* (2005), despite its independent status, was in many ways indistinguishable from the Hollywood biopic *Ray* (Taylor Hackford, 2004). What could be most readily seen as the apotheosis of Hollywood commercial film making *Star Wars, Episode One: The Phantom Menace* (Lucas, 1999) was actually financed independently and George Lucas could arguably be seen as the most commercially successful independent film maker. And yet we would be hard put to corral these films into any serious generic space under the title 'independent cinema'. Indeed it would be difficult to find a common thread to them without opening the financial ledger. It is not there on the screen.

Independent film is most frequently defined in opposition to what it is not, i.e. Hollywood. Rather than this making for a handy ad hoc definition which helps to clarify the picture, what we actually are left with is some lazy thinking and unexamined assumptions. In his short book on independent cinema, D. K. Holm calls on Hollywood as a way of delineating what independent filmmakers refuse to be. Writing in his introduction, he is

careful to note that behind the word Hollywood there 'is a world of complex interconnections', but when he refers to it later, Hollywood is all too readily reduced to a monolithic entity in contrast to the diversity and implicit virtue of independent film makers. Hollywood is a 'cookie cutter', grinding out product (41).

The format of the book is a handy guide and exists as part of a series of books which predominantly deal with genre: 'The Western', 'Horror Films' etc. Each chapter focuses on a different independent filmmaker, giving a general introduction and specific analysis of their most important films. The film makers he describes are perhaps necessarily an odd selection: Jill and Karen Sprecher, James Mangold, Whit Stillman and Guy Maddin each receive chapters, and Jill Sprecher and Guy Maddin are both interviewed. There are also short interviews with Lance Weiler and Bilge Ebiri at the end of the book. There seems to be little logic to this selection. Although apparently in the process of developing a film, Stillman has not released a film in ten years and the three films he did make, had nothing like the influence of Soderbergh's *Sex, Lies and Videotape* (1989). Mangold's last two films were *Walk the Line* (2005) and *3:10 to Yuma* (2007), hardly good examples of Independent Cinema as genre which is the book's central premise.

In a chapter subtitled 'Independent Cinema as Alternative to Commercial Storytelling', the work of Jill and Karen Sprecher is considered. But the title itself raises a series of questions that it fails to address. What is commercial storytelling? Are there different kinds? Holm admits that independent movies are as prone to clichés as any Hollywood film, reciting a typical independent storyline as lampooned by Christopher Guest's *For Your Consideration* (2006). 'Films by the Sprechers do indeed have some of these comical components,' Holm writes 'but with one major difference. Their films are good' (38). The judgement may be right, but it is unqualified. How does an independent film tell a story differently to a commercial film? Is there some evil that comes from wanting to make money which automatically sullies the narrative arc? Is non-commercial storytelling non-chronological story telling? Multi-narrative? Does it reveal in flash back? Is it hyper-complicated? Does it render truth ambiguous by showing different perspectives? Wilfully confuse the viewer? These attributes could all be cited as typical of independent cinema as a genre, if you wished to make that case, or of a whole raft of commercial films, or, for that matter, an episode of *Lost*.

The subjects themselves seem resistant to foregrounding their independence and none of them appear driven to make films in opposition to Hollywood. Director Jill Sprecher 'favours screenplays with ordinary life content over special-effects-driven tales. She is interested in stories rather than lavish visual pyrotechnics' (40) we are told. This dichotomy cannot withstand much examination. Hollywood product is not confined to *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008), and even *Iron Man* for all that it is, is not *Spiderman 3* (Sam Raimi, 2007). The danger here is that in suggesting that because something is independently financed, it is a priori valuable; it has a jump on studio films because it holds onto an authenticity that the money men of Hollywood cannot approach. It is a wishful ascribing of value, jumping from worthy to worthwhile. Were that it were true that the nasty capitalists of Hollywood produced nothing but 'cookie-cutter' output, mediocre, shallow and without artistic merit, whereas the smaller and nicer capitalists of the independent sector produced nothing but eminently and obviously brilliant, original and challenging cinema.

Jill Sprecher, herself, gives a sensible appraisal of a possible advantage of an independent film, 'fewer hands have touched it', but many's the independent film that would be better for a few more hands, a point made by Bilge Ebiri in another interview when commenting that independent film makers should not do everything: 'I always thought that John Carpenter was a terrible composer' (132). Sprecher admits that when she watches a film she doesn't 'really care about the behind the scenes drama regarding how it got financed or how many times it was rejected; it's really what's on screen that's important to me' (52). This is a succinct dismissal of the importance of Independent Cinema as a generic term. As a filmmaker, Sprecher certainly has no illusions about the benefits and virtues of remaining independent: 'We haven't really worked in the studio system at all. And not for lack of trying. We'd be happy to sell out, if we could find any takers' (52). Maddin likewise seems unwilling to make any large claims for independent cinema. Asked if he has a definition of independent, Maddin replies, 'Not a good one. I feel independent, but I'm sure many people working for the man feel okay, too' (111). Holm's questions prod the director towards giving a more definite distinction between the worlds of independent film and mainstream moviemaking, but without much joy:

What are the differences in life on the set between mainstream movies, as you have experienced them in Winnipeg, and low budget or indie films?

It's all very similar the world over I bet. (112)

One problem defining independent film is that it has constantly shifted into the mainstream and therefore been instrumental in shifting the current of the mainstream as well. The companies which have been set up or bought by the major studios to produce 'independent films' such as Fox Searchlight, Paramount Vantage, Focus and Miramax would bode well for thinking of the term as generic, because there are now many films which seek the independent label but are financed, distributed and sustained by major studios, or sister companies of major studios, which in the end is the same thing. And yet films such as *There Will Be Blood* (Anderson, 2007) and *Little Miss Sunshine* (Dayton, Farris, 2006) might well be aimed at a similar audience and might be marketed as the latest 'Independent Film', but they have very little else in common. There are no markers that make these films specifically independent. In the past, non-Hollywood filmmakers could go under different labels. Before Independent Cinema there was 'underground cinema' and 'art house cinema', or there were simply mavericks like Orson Welles, Roger Corman, John Waters and Jim Jarmusch. The labels used captured a specific historical, economic and cultural moment. They were always unsatisfactorily reductive as it is in the very nature of a label to be. A genre is something which moves on, which endures, which has a longer historical moment. It persists. Independent Cinema, as described by Peter Biskind in his *Down and Dirty Pictures*, has a narrative of its own, an arc and ultimately a conclusion. The economic and cultural conditions that made the term relevant for the last twenty five years or so, no longer exist.

Bibliography

Biskind, Peter (2004) *Down and Dirty Pictures*. London: Bloomsbury.