

Alternative Visions

Social, Political and Ideological Dimensions of Independent Cinema

A light, airy romantic refrain wells up on the soundtrack as Bill Maplewood catches sight of the object of his desire. Yearning strings play over images of his gaze; a more playful flute trills over two medium close-ups, giving us his point of view. This is a very familiar movie confection, and just a passing moment in *Happiness*. But it is situated in a context that makes it, in its quiet way, extraordinarily transgressive, beyond the bounds of anything that could be conceived in a product of the Hollywood mainstream. The object of Bill's desiring gaze is, of course, a young boy, 11-year-old Johnny Grasso, who he will proceed to drug and (off-screen) anally rape in the following scenes. What makes the brief sequence described above so unusual is precisely the extent to which it relies on cinematic devices of such banal conventionality: the use of music, especially romantic music, to indicate emotional states, and editing based around eye-line match shots to reveal the object of desire and to heighten (progressively closer shots of both protagonists are used) the implied degree of yearning. The effect, normal enough in other situations but extremely uncomfortable here, is to implicate the viewer, to some extent, in the economy of desire that is on display.

Point-of-view shot structures do not entirely force viewers into particular perspectives, and all the baggage that comes with them, an issue that has long been debated in theories of cinema spectatorship. But they do encourage viewers to allow themselves to be drawn into events on screen, to share vicariously, from the security of their seats, some of the emotions experienced in the fictional world, including those of characters with which they might consider themselves to have little in common. The very idea of offering viewers the discomfort of some implication in the activities and desires of an active paedophile immediately marks *Happiness* as something out of the mainstream. The impression is continued during the scenes described in the previous chapter in which Bill attempts to drug Johnny. The structure of the sequence generates suspense. Will he or won't he succeed? Will he, at last, get Johnny to eat something into which he can mix his sleeping draught? The *at last* is given some emphasis, and contributes to the sense of painful comedy examined in Chapter 4. Bill's repeated initial frustration encourages the viewer to will his success, at least partially, and even while being appalled at the enterprise in which he is engaged. Again, to offer even a sniff of this kind of allegiance with a paedophile in the middle of his manipulations is something that would usually be well beyond the pale of what is deemed acceptable in 'normal' mainstream cinema or society.

Happiness presents Bill Maplewood as an exceedingly ordinary, banal figure, even if his job as a therapist makes him far from typical. Bill is quiet, grey, recessive, middle-class and apparently successful in his career. He is presented as an ordinary man who is also a predatory paedophile, rather than in the dominant tabloid/Hollywood guise as some kind of monster. And it is here that a serious point is being made: that paedophilia tends to be found close to family and friends, in ordinary life, rather than in the form of an exotic threat from outside. The latter is far more comfortable to imagine than the former, which has the potential to undermine a number of generally conservative investments in the supposed sanctity of the 'traditional' family unit. *Happiness* refuses the kind of strategies that would, more conventionally, demonize Bill and leave him safely distanced from the viewer. It encourages instead an uncomfortable degree of proximity: a proximity to character that implies the social proximity of paedophilia.

The result is likely to be a double sense of discomfort for the viewer: not the full cinematic degree of identification or allegiance we would expect to experience with a more obviously sympathetic character, but something awkwardly in between; and discomfort in raising the difficult issue of the extent to which paedophilia is a part of the everyday fabric of our society, one example of what the film presents as a spectrum of sad, often abusive forms of relationship. On both counts, this is quintessentially independent territory, restricting the likely audience and inviting attack from the forces of conservatism.

An important aspect of any definition of independent cinema, in addition to the industrial and formal dimensions considered so far, is the space it offers – potentially, at least – for the expression of alternative social, political and/or ideological perspectives. Formal departures from mainstream convention often have socio-political implications, as has already been suggested in some cases. The American indie sector has also provided an arena hospitable to a number of constituencies generally subjected to neglect or stereotypical representation in the mainstream, the most prominent cases in recent decades being black- and gay-oriented cinema. Greater scope has been found for more liberal, open or radical treatment of contentious issues such as paedophilia, freed to a significant extent from the relatively narrow moral economy typically operative in Hollywood. Independent features have in many cases been able to avoid the kind of ideologically loaded imaginary reconciliations used in Hollywood features to smooth away any awkward social or political issues that might initially be confronted.

Whether independent production of the kind examined in this book more than occasionally constitutes a radical cinema in an explicitly political sense, rather than in the implications of a broader treatment of particular social issues, is more questionable. Independent cinema is certainly not immune to implication in the reinforcement of dominant ideologies (including those of patriarchy, capitalism and racism), and is as far from being a single entity in this as any of the other respects considered so far. Even in its more openly alternative or radical incarnations, the art and business of reaching an audience often necessitate a number of compromises, including the use of some of the genre frameworks examined in the previous chapter.

If independent features such as *Happiness* attract attention – often of a critical variety – for the controversial territories onto which they stray, this might not always be accidental. Controversy often sells, as was seen in Chapter 1 in the case of the marketing strategy favoured by Miramax. Figures such as paedophiles, and others defined as sexually deviant by mainstream society, turn up disproportionately often in indie films, partly because they raise issues independent cinema is more capable than Hollywood of treating with any complexity but also because they offer the potential for a *frisson* that can be marketable, as was demonstrated by the landmark box-office success of *sex, lies, and videotape*. What results might, in some cases, be defined in part as a kind of exploitation cinema for those who situate themselves as more culturally/educationally discerning. The problem of what sells, and to whom, remains a central one for independent filmmakers inspired by strong social, political and/or ideological agendas. Independent features offering alternative social perspectives are often dependent on the existence of niche audiences, rooted in particular social groups, capable of sustaining a particular level of production. But, as was suggested in Chapter 1, there is no guarantee that audiences defined in terms of one specific attribute according to which they are denied adequate representation in the mainstream (such as race or sexual orientation) are likely to have radical or alternative tastes in other respects.

Independent filmmakers are sometimes caught between seeking to cater to the tastes of audience groups defined on social-cultural lines (black or gay, for example) and those defined as likely to frequent more marginal alternative/art-house productions. The strongest alternative visions are likely to combine challenging socio-political material with formal innovation, but in doing so they risk limiting the size of the potential audience within a particular constituency; the appreciation of radically unconventional formal strategies usually requires the mobilization of resources of cultural capital that are unequally distributed in society. To maximize the potential audience tends to entail compromise, in formal innovation and in the extent to which political or otherwise uncomfortable issues are raised in an explicit manner. This is partly a matter of what is likely to be palatable to audiences themselves and partly a question of the economically crucial perception of financiers and distributors, whose notions of the

bounds of what is likely to prove viable are often likely to err on the narrow side. At one end of the spectrum lies material that is radical in both form and content, in aesthetics and politics, while the other shades into the Hollywood mainstream. As in other respects, however, much ground exists in between the two extremes, the precise contours of the landscape varying from one alternative movement to another.

Black Independent Cinema

Films by new black filmmakers were an important component of the indie upsurge of the late 1980s and early 1990s. By far the best-known figure of the period was Spike Lee, the success of his debut feature *She's Gotta Have It* being credited with inspiring a generation of others. The degree of celebrity enjoyed by Lee, who went on to build a career moving between studio and more independent work, is in some ways symptomatic of the dilemma that has faced independent black filmmakers. Lee's has generally been a brash, stylish and marketable variety of indie or studio-based production that contrasts with the much less commercially oriented work of his immediate predecessors in what became known as the LA School, based at the University of California in Los Angeles in the 1970s. The LA School, whose leading figures included Charles Burnett, Haile Gerima and Julie Dash, was an avowedly radical grouping, fuelled by the currents of 1960s struggles such as the civil rights movement, the Watts uprising, the anti-Vietnam-war campaign and support for wars of national liberation in Africa, Asia and Latin America.¹ In its portrayal of the lives of black Americans in the 1970s and after, it stood in opposition to Hollywood's wave of blaxploitation pictures, a primarily action-oriented format used to target urban black audiences at a time when the studios were in economic difficulty.

One of the films that started the blaxploitation trend was, in fact, a more radical independent feature, Melvin Van Peebles' \$150,000 *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), a work that can be situated between that of the LA School and mainstream, mostly white-directed blaxploitation. *Sweet Sweetback* makes a number of inflammatory political gestures of a kind unlikely ever to be found in a Hollywood production. The central character, Sweetback (Van Peebles), named for

his prodigious sexual abilities, is arrested as part of a charade by two police officers seeking to give the impression that they are making headway in a case. Diverted on their way to the police station, they pick up a young black radical, Moo Moo (Hubert Scales), who is subjected to a severe beating. Sweetback at first attempts to ignore what is happening, but eventually responds, rescuing Moo Moo by hitting the officers repeatedly with the handcuffs attached to one of his wrists. A shift of consciousness is implied, in which the previously passive and decadent stud becomes emblematic of an assertive black spirit fighting back against oppression. Sweetback goes on the lam, montage sequences in which he runs through various parts of a decaying urban landscape forming a substantial part of the texture of the film, eventually killing two cops before escaping across the border into Mexico. Along the way, the film suggests that Sweetback has the support of the Los Angeles black community, evidence including a sequence in which he escapes arrest when a gathering crowd torches a police car.

Sweet Sweetback was a radical intervention on more than one level. The presentation of a strongly sexually active male figure was itself in breach of the constraints within which black representation had been held since the furore created by the racist image of a sexually threatening black male caricature in *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915. Black male figures had, for decades, been effectively emasculated, in roles ranging from those of comic buffoons to the idealized and 'safe' middle-class characters played by Sidney Poitier in the 1950s and 1960s.² It was this confident, sexually active black figure that was to be celebrated in a number of blaxploitation features from *Shaft* (1971) onwards. Adding to this a provocatively radical stance, a depiction of routine police brutality that seems to provide justification for the killing of officers in self-defence and the heroic escape of the offender, made for a controversial mixture, and box-office impact that led to a domestic gross of \$15 million. The insurgent impression created by the film was increased by its unconventional stylistic approach, an uneven but potent mix of *vérité*-style hand-held and often oblique camerawork, disjunctive editing and expressive effects including multiple exposures and colour-tinted negative images.

As an alternative to prevailing movie representations of black

Americans, *Sweetback* provoked widely divergent responses, both celebrated and dismissed as offering little more than romantic myth.³ The rhetoric of the film is one of collective resistance, but the central dynamic remains a more familiar individual rebellion and across-the-frontier escape. If the film was a striking departure in its open endorsement of fighting back against blatant police oppression, the figure of Sweetback maintains many stereotypical features. The spectacle of the black male as generously endowed super-stud is the stuff of racist cliché, even if it had been repressed in Hollywood. Here, and in mainstream blaxploitation, the principal emphasis often remains on urban ghetto mythic-fantasy figures – whether as figments of the white or black imaginations – and a narrow range of black experience. In their different ways, independents ranging from leading figures of the LA School to Spike Lee and others who emerged in the 1990s sought to provide representations that accounted more adequately for the realities and complexities of black American life.

The LA School drew upon a rich heritage, including a mixture of documentary-style realism and contemporary developments towards a politically radical 'Third Cinema', associated initially with post-revolutionary Cuba and the Cinema Novo movement in Brazil. The influence of realist schools, including Italian Neorealism and the British social documentary movement of the 1930s (one of the leading figures of which, Basil Wright, taught at UCLA), is particular apparent in films such as Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977) and Billy Woodberry's *Bless Their Little Hearts* (1984). *Killer of Sheep*, shot for less than \$10,000 on black-and-white 16mm as Burnett's master's thesis, is a low-key portrait of the Watts ghetto of Los Angeles. Forward-moving narrative drive is replaced by a series of lingering sequences that create an understated impression of the texture of daily life on the margins, focused around the family of the title character, Stan (Henry Gale Sanders), who works in a slaughterhouse. Much time is devoted to the slow unfolding of action within the frame, including many documentary-seeming sequences of children playing in and around their homes and in a dusty wasteland near the railroad tracks. Typical of the film's style is a scene in which Stan and a friend invest in a used car engine and carry it, laboriously, down the steps from the apartment of the seller. The carrying of the engine is shown

in full, a sequence that halts forward-moving narrative progression and would be likely to be skipped in a mainstream feature. Characters and viewers are obliged to see the action through, without ellipsis, creating an impression of the real, sustained effort involved, both in this particular enterprise and in the keeping together of life more generally. That it ends in futility – the engine falls, broken, from the back of a pick-up truck as soon as it moves off – is also characteristic of the numerous offhand disappointments charted by the film. *Killer of Sheep* avoids sentimentality, however, more so than some of the classic works of Italian Neorealism that also give a central presence to the plight of young children (most famously, *Ladri di Biciclette/Bicycle Thieves* [1948]). The play of the children is sometimes mean and harsh, and extremely naturalistic. Moments of pain and disappointment are mixed with happier interludes, depicted with equally unsentimental detachment, including a sequence in which a single shot is held on Stan and his wife in a slow dance to a blues theme. The film resists pressures for any major/melodramatic plot developments or crises. Stan rejects the overtures of a gangster-type pair who seek his involvement in a killing that might give the film a turn into more generically coded territory, and the film ends in a spirit of endurance, of life continuing as it is rather than being subject to any classical narrative arc or any individual-centred solutions to social problems.

The aim of the filmmakers involved in the LA School was not, generally, to achieve crossover success into the mainstream, but to create a separate and politically more radical version of independent cinema, a project that often put it at odds with the industry-oriented aims of the UCLA film school.⁴ Few of its films received any conventional cinema distribution, although *Killer of Sheep* won prizes in 1981 at the Berlin and US (to become Sundance) film festivals, before most of the key developments in the building of the independent infrastructure examined in Chapter 1. It is in its separation from mainstream circuits, as well as in some specific approaches to form and content, that the LA School has significant points in common with the Third Cinema movement. A more direct connection existed in the person of Gerima, an Ethiopian-born member of the group who contributed a number of key works produced from the USA. A thematic connection between Third World struggle and the Watts landscape of films such

as *Killer of Sheep* and *Bless Their Little Hearts* is introduced in Gerima's *Bush Mama* (1976).

Bush Mama creates from the start a sense of the oppressive nature of impoverished black life in the ghetto. The opening images are accompanied by what builds to a cacophony of overlapping sounds representing the various state forces arrayed against the central character, Dorothy (Barbara O. Jones): the repeatedly questioning voices of welfare and unemployment officials, the crackle of a police radio, the constant overhead presence of helicopters. Third-person shots of street scenes, including a car pulled over by the LAPD, are mixed with hand-held, subjective, first-person sequences that combine with the oppressive soundscape to give the impression of taking the viewer inside the experience. A number of character voices, including that of Dorothy's imprisoned husband, offer more or less radical interpretations of the situation and prescriptions for action. The key turning point, however, is her engagement with a poster featuring an African woman holding a baby in one hand and a gun in the other, an image she comes to recognize as emblematic of her own embattled position. A sequence is edited to create the impression of an exchange of looks between the two, followed by the latest in a series of apparently arbitrary shootings of black men on the street outside her home. When her daughter is raped by a motorcycle cop, Dorothy fights back, killing (it appears) the officer and making a speech that implies a political awakening after being arrested and beaten in a police cell.

The implied link between the situation of black Americans and Third World liberation struggles becomes more explicit in *Ashes and Embers* (1982), Gerima's evocation of the experiences of a black Vietnam veteran still struggling to come to terms with his life eight years after the end of the war. Ned Charles (John Anderson) is angry and alienated, haunted by actuality-footage flashback memories of Vietnam, but a figure employed to ends very different from those associated with Hollywood's contemporary version of the (often psychopathic) disaffected Vietnam vet. Parallels are suggested between the lives of black Americans and those of the Vietnamese, building on a connection implied in *Bush Mama* through the figure of Dorothy's husband, T.C. (Johnny Weathers), a veteran whose Vietnam nightmares feature the helicopter noise that is also ever-present in the ghetto.

Ned's elderly rural Grandma (Evelyn A. Blackwell) is gradually losing the land she toils, forced to sell up to pay taxes and keep herself alive. A thin, bony figure in a wide-brimmed hat, she resembles a Vietnamese peasant, in both appearance and emotional investment in the land; a parallel suggested at first implicitly, later in editing that juxtaposes her in Ned's consciousness with Vietnamese women and children. At one point Ned takes flight, running through trees, a sequence intercut with shots from the perspective of a helicopter machine-gunner shooting down into a green jungle canopy. Directional matches and the sound of gunfire carrying over into the present create the impression that Ned himself is the target of attack. At another point he collapses in pain in the street, projecting onto himself the impact of a beating given in flashback to a Vietnamese captive.

Ashes and Embers achieves an effective balance between individual-character-centred melodrama, focused on Ned, and broader contextual material. The former leans often towards the expressionist, a range of cinematic devices including inversion and spinning of the camera combining with dissonant music to create an impression of his disordered state of mind. The latter is provided largely through group discussions by members of his activist girlfriend's study group, from which Ned usually remains withdrawn, on subjects such as Vietnam and the prospects for unity within the black community. One of the strengths of the film, as a narrative fiction, is its ability to provide some analysis, through such discussions, and the didactic implications of the montage linkages considered above, without favouring abstracted political-ideological commentary over a version of the experience as lived by a central character. *Ashes and Embers* is thus able to offer emotional impact – in a narrative framework that is evocative and circular, rather than forward-driving – as well as ideological intervention. By the end, the film implies, Ned has changed and escaped his alienated state, learning lessons of history through stories of slave rebellion from his Grandma, and others, and being brought to a new, empowered stage of consciousness.

The notion of revisiting the past in order to provide lessons for the present is the guiding thesis of Gerima's later and probably best-known film, *Sankofa* (1993), a joint production with backing from the USA, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Germany and the UK. A black American

model on a photo-shoot at a fortress in Ghana, West Africa, in which slaves were held before being shipped to America, is transported back into the past. Mona (Oyafunmike Ogunlano) is then reincarnated as Shola, a timid plantation house slave who eventually fights back and joins a rebellion of the kind memorialized by Grandma in *Ashes and Embers*. The relationship between history and the depicted present plays an important role in a number of the works of the most prominent figures associated with the LA School, in terms of both narrative material – lessons, hauntings or understandings from the past, a reclaiming of history from its official, white versions – and, in some cases, alternative narrative structure. This is one of the principal formal respects in which links can be suggested between this variety of black independent cinema and conceptions of Third Cinema.

For Teshome H. Gabriel, one of the major theorists associated with Third Cinema, who was based at UCLA, a key characteristic of Third World cinema is its tendency to draw on qualities found in folk art, such as non-linearity and repetition of images, qualities found in some of the work of the LA School.⁵ *Sankofa*, in its journey into the past, has a texture filled with symbols – especially birds in flight – and creates an impression of magic and ritual incantation, both beyond and as part of its narrative momentum. *Ashes and Embers*, similarly, mixes narrative progression with an emphasis on repeated images that establish a spatially oriented symbolic geography. It opens in a Los Angeles sequence in which Ned and a would-be actor friend are subjected to routine oppression by the police, images that recur periodically throughout the film, along with the Vietnam flashbacks, the evocation of Grandma's rural landscape and semi-abstract images of the oppressive memorials and statues of Washington, D.C. The American indie film most celebrated for such qualities is *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash, an evocative portrait of the Gullah community, descendents of African captives living on the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia in 1902. Geographically, the Gullah live in a state of limbo, displaced into a history of slavery from their original homelands yet not in America proper, an in-between state that can be read as a heightened version of the status of African Americans more generally. In their isolation from mainland America, the opening titles inform us, the Gullah created

and maintained a distinct, imaginative and original African American culture. Temporally, the film looks in two directions: forwards, from the perspective of members of the Peazant family, about to cross to the mainland and travel north; and backwards, to African traditions embodied in the shape of the elderly matriarch, Nana (Cora Lee Day), who is to stay behind.

In its own textual strategies, *Daughters of the Dust* favours the perspective of Nana, focusing on a single day, that of a picnic held to mark the imminent departure, around which is woven a complex web of memories, associations and character relationships, including the narrating voice of an unborn child. The non-linear style is a conscious attempt to evoke the traditional West African oral culture of the *Griot* storyteller, according to Dash: 'The *Griot* will come to a birth, wedding or funeral and over a period of days will recount the family's history, with the stories going off at a tangent, weaving in and out.'⁶ The impression created by the texture of the film, in which one sequence passes to another in an order not driven by forward-moving narrative, is that of an overlapping of cultural influences and heritages. The paraphernalia of modernity – a photographer brought in to record the departure, newspapers, a kaleidoscope that offers a perspective akin to that of the film – are juxtaposed with those of ancient ritual, tradition and the presence of ancestral spirits evoked through the use of chanting voices on the soundtrack. The message, conveyed by Nana and embodied in the film, is the importance of maintaining a connection with tradition, a carrying forward of her spirit, as a source of strength and renewal amid the hardships of life in white-dominated America.

Another quality shared by some examples from the LA School and the advocates of Third Cinema is narrative open-endedness, in which situations are left unresolved rather than being subject to the kinds of closure and resolution typical of Hollywood and other mainstream cinemas. To offer closure, as Gabriel argues, is to separate the events of the work from the ongoing business of everyday life or from the possibility of a range of alternative outcomes.⁷ The endings of films such as *Killer of Sheep* and *Bless Their Little Hearts* leave the central characters to continue their existence, with little prospect of any significant point of climax or closure. Their individual fate is no more

subject to facile change than the broader social fabric of which they are a part. States of altered consciousness are implied in *Bush Mama*, *Ashes and Embers* and *Sankofa*, in which we can assume the central characters to have learned and progressed as part of a collective process of resistance, although this is much less clearly the case for the family members who move north, to an uncertain future, in *Daughters of the Dust*. The emphasis of Third Cinema, for Gabriel, is also on collective consciousness and experience, rather than that of the individuals who form the almost exclusive focus of Hollywood-style production, a quality very much to the fore in the multi-vocal *Daughters of the Dust* and implied in the other examples considered above, in which the problems faced by characters are the outcome of social forces rather than individual foibles.

The aim of advocates of Third Cinema was to create a cinema removed from the Hollywood model of passively consumed entertainment. Third Cinema, as a guerrilla cinema that cannot be assimilated by the dominant system, is designed to act as a pretext for politically oriented audience discussion in underground venues, rather than to enter into official channels of distribution. This may have happened to some extent with films associated with the LA School, partly by default, given that they have largely been ignored by both mainstream and independent distributors. Beyond their more immediate constituency, however, these films have achieved recognition as forms of 'art' as much as for their value as tools for directly political agitation and intervention, even if the two are not entirely separable. For Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, the difference is that between Third Cinema, as part of a revolutionary process, and 'Second Cinema', as a cinema of artistic expression (each being distinguished from the dominant, commercial-consumerist 'First Cinema').⁸ As Paul Willemen suggests, products of Third Cinema have often been consumed outside their region or country of origin in Second Cinema terms, 'bracketing the politics in favour of an appreciation of the authorial artistry'.⁹ The same can be said of much of the recognition given to the better-known filmmakers of the LA School, especially Burnett and Dash, each of whom has to date produced one feature that achieved major critical success at the commercial art-house end of the indie spectrum: *Daughters of the Dust* and Burnett's *To Sleep with Anger* (1990).

Daughters of the Dust has a number of qualities that enabled it to find a niche-marketable place in the independent landscape of the early 1990s, although it took a year to find a distributor after its premiere at Sundance. Its 'exotic' qualities, including beautifully photographed landscape, African-influenced music and elements of period-costume drama – young women at the beach picnic, in long, flowing white dresses – give it a lush visual and aural texture likely to be appreciated by art-house audiences. The film's rhythms, and its explorations of time and space, as Ntongela Masilela suggests, are not only 'consonant with the lived experience of time and consciousness by Africans in the Diaspora', but also akin to aspects of the work of earlier international art-cinema directors such as Andrei Tarkovsky, Michelangelo Antonioni and Miklos Jancsó.¹⁰ *Daughters of the Dust* also had a potentially existing niche market in the readers of black women writers such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. With *To Sleep with Anger*, Burnett achieved \$1.4 million in investments and crossover from the margins to commercially distributed art-house independent cinema (Samuel Goldwyn) by gaining the services of a Hollywood star, Danny Glover, in the central role as the disruptive figure, Harry, who inveigles his way into the hearth of a middle-class Los Angeles black family. The film is another exploration of the relationship between the past and the present, Harry being the product of the old South, the heritage of darker forces, a character based on a figure from Georgia folklore. The film exhibits a number of qualities that mark its indie status – winner of the Special Jury Prize at Sundance in 1990 – including its ambivalent attitude towards a central character who may or may not be the incarnation of an actual demon. It performed disappointingly at the box office, handled primarily as an art-house production and doing better with white audiences than black;¹¹ like *Daughters of the Dust*, however, it is distinguished from most other products by filmmakers associated with the LA School by continuing to maintain an existence in mainstream channels of video distribution.

Neither Dash nor Burnett has yet been able to match the combination of critical acclaim and theatrical release achieved by *Daughters of the Dust* and *To Sleep with Anger*, being forced either into work for cinema of a more conventional nature or into

television-funded and/or documentary production. A suggestion of the compromise needed to remain viable in the theatrical business is offered by the film with which Burnett returned to the cinema after *To Sleep with Anger*, *The Glass Shield* (1995), co-produced and distributed by Miramax. The central character is a rookie cop, the only black officer in his precinct, the plot concerning the framing of a young black man who was stopped illegally, simply because he was black. But, these race-themed elements aside, *The Glass Shield* is a mostly conventional and formulaic tale of a young idealist's blunder followed by an earnest attempt to uproot corruption, albeit with a partially downbeat ending. Box-office prospects were intended to be improved by casting the rap singer Ice Cube as the wronged man, but the film was not a success.

Movement into the mainstream-indie, genre-oriented territory of *The Glass Shield* might be seen as a mark of retreat for Burnett, an indicator of the difficulty of sustaining a more radical project in anything other than a marginal existence. The opposite is the case with the career of Spike Lee, for whom low-budget 'guerrilla' production was a necessity rather than a virtue in the case of his first full-length feature, *She's Gotta Have It*. The film's success at the box office (a US gross of more than \$7 million that demonstrated the existence of a significant audience for black indie features) enabled Lee to achieve his goal of gaining access to studio finance for his next film, *School Daze* (1988, Columbia Pictures) and a relationship with Universal that saw the production of *Do the Right Thing*, *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), *Jungle Fever*, *Malcolm X* (1992), *Crooklyn* (1994) and *Clockers* (1995). Since the end of his affiliation to Universal, Lee has also made a number of more independently financed, lower-budget features, including *Girl 6* (with Fox Searchlight), *Get on the Bus* (1996), partly funded by a group of black investors, and the 16mm and DV production *Bamboozled* (2000). Even when backed by major studio finance and distribution, Lee has claimed the status of an independent filmmaker, maintaining creative control over key areas such as script, the hiring of cast and crew, and final cut, although he has often had to struggle to obtain anything more than modest budgets. A continuity of style and approach to issues can certainly be identified across the studio/independent bases from which he has worked.

12. The film that inspired a generation of new black independents: *She's Gotta Have It* (1986).



Lee's work is characterized by a combination of style and content that is generally bright, sassy and accessible, an entertainment cinema, marketed as such, that has also sought to take on board a number of issues specific to the concerns of black communities. *She's Gotta Have It* may be a low-budget, black-and-white production, for example, but it is designed to be of far more popular, commercial appeal than the likes of *Killer of Sheep* or *Bush Mama*. The tone is generally light and pointedly comic, with some exceptions, the emphasis on sex an obvious selling point at the more mainstream/crossover end of the indie sector. The film was sold as a fresh, stylish example of independent production, the suggestive title a blatant borrowing from the tactics of exploitation cinema. At the same time, *She's Gotta Have It* is a contribution to the questioning of simplistic racial stereotyping, sharing with many of Lee's films the portrayal of a diversity of central black characters, none of whom are offered as definitive representatives but as ordinarily flawed individuals.

Many of Lee's films focus on complexities and divisions within the black community that undermine any racist ideologies based on notions of essential black or African American characteristics. *School Daze* revolves largely around splits between the darker and lighter skinned students at a black college, for example, and between middle-class black students and local working-class black youths. The dark vs. light skin issue recurs in *Jungle Fever*, which starts out by setting up what appears to be a Hollywood-conventionally reconciliatory trajectory

in the cross-racial affair between a black architect from Harlem and an Italian American secretary from Bensonhurst, two New York areas noted for a history of mutual hostility. Each, predictably, faces opprobrium from within their own family and community, but the film resists the conventional individualist line that the central couple can overcome such obstacles. A strong, un-Hollywood sense is created of ingrained and embedded communal tensions, a baggage that drags down almost every character in the piece.

A similarly complex and ambiguous portrait of inter-communal relations is found in *Do the Right Thing*, this time during a hot summer's day of rising tension in the predominantly black Brooklyn neighbourhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant. None of the characters is offered as an easy subject for unambiguous audience allegiance, a quality rarely found in the Hollywood mainstream. On one level, the film leans towards the position represented by two black 'radical' characters who campaign against an Italian American owned pizza restaurant, leading a protest that ends with the death of one at the hands of the police and the torching of the business by an angry crowd. They are both presented as caricatures, however, while a more rounded picture is given of the restaurant owner, proud to have fed the community for decades, despite the overt racism of his elder son. The pizza delivery boy, Mookie (Lee), who acts as a narrative intermediary linking a number of different threads, is the nearest thing the ensemble production offers to a central consciousness, but he is presented as essentially lazy and irresponsible. A multiplicity of characters and perspectives are on offer, including a conclusion that juxtaposes conflicting quotations from the writings of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. The impression of a black community united in some respects, while diverse and divided in many others, is maintained in the independently black-funded *Get on the Bus*, in which a number of conflicts are played out among a group of black men en route to Louis Farrakhan's Million Man March in Washington.

Lee's commercial successes have owed a good deal to his personal ability to make the headlines, through both the subject matter of his films and his reputation for self-publicity and outspoken media comment. The deliberate provocation of controversy that generates media coverage, including attacks on the racism of his own studio

employers, has served to make up for the limited scale of promotional budgets allocated to films perceived by Hollywood to be profitable only within particular specialist confines.¹² The high profile enjoyed by Lee created a burden of expectations, however, his work tending to be subjected to intense scrutiny by critics with a variety of agendas who in some cases make the mistake of expecting/assuming the characters and events portrayed to be perfect paradigms of one quality or another, rather than representations of something closer to a flawed, ambiguous and/or messy reality. This is a problem of excessive expectations that often results when the work of one or a small number of individuals is taken to represent an entire community. In the case of *She's Gotta Have It*, for example, Mark Reid castigates Lee for having 'inadequately constructed Nola as an independent woman',¹³ as if she or any of the other characters in the film are meant to be representatives of some ideal. *Do the Right Thing*, for Reid, 'suggests that to celebrate black empowerment, African-Americans must deny an Italian-American small businessman his property rights'.¹⁴ But only if what the film offers is assumed to be simple, positive endorsement of what happens, rather than a more subtle and complex unfolding of events from which no one emerges clearly as a winner.

A difficult gap exists here, between work that aspires to the complex and ambiguous qualities often celebrated in art-house/indie-style production – which might sometimes be a question of positioning in the marketplace but can also be read as honouring the complex texture of lived reality – and the more didactic approach advocated by those seeking to use film as a more immediate vehicle for socio-political intervention. Lee's films are often placed explicitly in socio-historical-political context, but they do not offer detailed analysis of the underlying causes of structural racism or conflict between different ethnically defined communities. A typical Lee strategy is to provide marginal reference to the history of black oppression or struggle, sometimes through photomontage sequences such as that running from slavery to the civil rights era in the opening titles of *School Daze*, or through dedications to real victims of racial conflict or controversy.

Explicitly political issues are raised in the body of a number of Lee's films, from a campaign against black college investment in South

Africa in *School Daze* to the presence of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X as exemplars of different courses of action in *Do the Right Thing* and the specific focus on issues raised by the latter in *Malcolm X*. The emphasis, however, is on symptoms and responses rather than underlying causes, the latter being far harder to square with a cinema in which an important emphasis remains on the commercial imperative of providing entertainment rather than education or analysis. Emotional melodrama generated from close proximity to the experiences of individuals remains the primary mode of presentation, rather than the more distanced modality required for sustained causal analysis, even in a case such as *Do the Right Thing* that provides a larger than usual number of perspectives. A focus on effects rather than causes is one of the key grounds on which Third Cinema advocates Solanas and Getino criticize mainstream, consumer-oriented cinema, although this is a quality that remains even in the more radical socially/historically conscious films of the LA School considered above, none of which makes any real attempt to investigate the causal factors leading to phenomena such as slavery, black poverty or the Vietnam war.

The scale of Lee's success, commercially in some cases and in gaining access to projects of the scale and conspicuous nature of *Malcolm X*, might have proved a mixed blessing for others. He demonstrated that black filmmakers could generate profits without simply reproducing white-oriented cinema, to the immediate benefit of black directors in both the indie and studio sectors in the late 1980s and early 1990s. But, as with 1990s crossover indie profile more generally, the result was also to raise the bar of expectations, potentially making it harder to gain investment or distribution for independent black filmmakers seeking to operate at a lower or less commercially marketable threshold. Lee himself came to work on a smaller, more niche scale by the latter half of the 1990s, however, after a number of films that failed to meet studio box-office expectations.

The early 1990s saw a veritable explosion of black filmmaking, following the breakthrough represented by *She's Gotta Have It* and the equally low-budget *Hollywood Shuffle*, a direct assault on Hollywood racism. A satire that grew out of director Robert Townsend's own years of frustration as an actor faced only with racist-stereotypical parts, *Hollywood Shuffle* is a loose assembly of skits in which Townsend

stars as a performer caught between the desire for a career and his objections to the narrowly racist range of parts on offer. The film, although uneven in quality, is a good example of the balance that can be achieved between the explicit making of serious points and the use of a more marketable framework – in this case, light comedy – within which to do so. The issue of racist stereotyping in the entertainment media, and the complicity of some black performers, is taken up more acerbically in Lee's *Bamboozled*, in which a black middle-class television executive attempts to get back at a crass boss by inventing an appallingly racist black-face minstrel show that turns into an unexpected hit.

Some fifteen American films with black directors were released in 1991, according to Emanuel Levy, 'more than in the preceding two decades', even if this remained a small proportion of total output.¹⁵ If Lee remained by far the most prominent single figure, black filmmaking gained its most solid industrial base elsewhere, in the coming-of-age-in-the-ghetto/gang sub-genre, a format that straddles the studio/independent divide and that offers useful examples of points of similarity and difference between work produced in the two sectors. If the social context of the early years of the LA School was the political radicalism of the late 1960s, Ed Guerrero suggests, that of the early 1990s came out of a period of black frustration, nihilism and anger, in which black rage was often turned inward, 'expressed as gang and drug warfare'.¹⁶ The malaise affecting the black ghetto was a symptom of wider processes including economic restructuring that resulted in the export of jobs from the inner city. For conservative commentators, however, blaming the victims was a convenient way of short-circuiting any analysis of the structural roots of the problem. The ghetto landscape and its disaffected young black inhabitants featured prominently in a number of social and political discourses of the time, giving it the kind of popular currency on which film industry production cycles tend to draw.¹⁷ The portrayals of black youth in the ghetto that played into this context had another strongly marketable component in the form of gangsta rap, an element of black hip hop that had crossed over with great commercial success into the white youth culture of the period.¹⁸ It is unsurprising that this territory was one in which Hollywood felt confident to dip a

toe in the early 1990s, the Columbia production *Boyz 'N' the Hood*, directed by John Singleton, appearing alongside Matty Rich's indie feature *Straight Out of Brooklyn* in 1991. The textures of rap music and its predominant reference points of macho posturing, as a particular form of black youth assertiveness, play a role in both, and in the independently produced *Menace II Society* (Allen and Albert Hughes, 1993), although the combinations of qualities vary considerably from one example to another.

The main emphasis of *Boyz 'N' the Hood* is on the 'cautionary tale' and the imparting of (patriarchal) moral lessons about the importance of responsible fatherhood in keeping black male youth away from a downward spiral into gun-culture and mutual killings. The 'street' culture of violent macho bonding is kept primarily in the background, especially in the first half of the film, although it serves as a key narrative device in the latter stages. *Menace II Society* is in fact the most exploitation-oriented of the three films, more so than the earnest studio picture, in keeping with the usual strategy of its producer and distributor, New Line Cinema. The film mixes a morality tale – the central sympathetic character becomes mixed up in the drug culture from childhood, eventually falling victim to a cycle of violence that he instigates – with a sizeable dose of violent exploitation *frissons*, gangsta rap and ghetto/homeboy atmospherics. A shared strategy of *Boyz 'N' the Hood* and *Menace II Society* is the use of an essentially good-hearted central focus of allegiance, pulled into the life of crime by irresistible environmental forces in the case of the latter, to offer a comfortably touristic route into the exploration of ghetto life, a more distanced perspective being kept on what are presented as its more exotic/violent/out-of-control species.

As an independent portrait of youth in the ghetto, *Straight Out of Brooklyn* is very different from *Menace II Society*, the difference that might be expected between the exploitation-happy New Line and a feature with the credentials of the former: co-produced under the non-profit Public Broadcasting Service's American Playhouse label and distributed by its partner in the early 1990s, the art-house oriented Samuel Goldwyn. The lower-budget (\$450,000) *Straight Out of Brooklyn* offers an unvarnished impression of life in the projects; a strong feeling of rootedness in the place, shot in a

13. Life in the projects, unvarnished: *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991).



plain style, and with no textural romanticization of guns, drugs or youth/gang mythologies; no effort, really, to sell the film through the marketability of rap-oriented crossover black youth culture (rap itself appears only minimally on the soundtrack). The friends with whom the central character, Dennis (Larry Gilliard Jr.), eventually holds up a drug courier, one of them played by the director, come over as ordinary and somewhat foolish, shorn of much in the way of macho ghetto theatricals. The crime comes late in the proceedings and as an anticlimax, easily performed, although it leads to a tragic conclusion, an ending accompanied by a closing title calling for change that shifts the film, like many other black independent features, into a more urgently didactic register. Rather than focusing almost exclusively on youth – clearly a commercial decision in most examples of the format – *Straight Out of Brooklyn* also devotes more than obligatory background space to the situation of the parents of Dennis: a broken and defeated father, who takes out his frustrations in drunken assaults on his own wife and property, and a wife struggling to find low-paid employment to keep the family together.

Other examples of independent black filmmaking have looked elsewhere for generic ground that permits a mix of commercial appeal and scope for the inclusion of specifically black-oriented material, including a revisionist approach to the Western in *Posse* (1993), directed by Mario Van Peebles. Frontier racism and the efforts of black people to create and sustain their own community in the west figure centrally in one of the two main plot devices, while the issues are addressed more didactically in a prologue and the closing titles. In a number of cases, independent black filmmaking has replicated conventionally white-centred formats without any reference, central or marginal, to black-specific social or political issues. *Love Jones* (1997) and *Hav Plenty* (1998) are good examples of this tendency, two slick romantic comedies featuring young, middle-class, black characters and clearly targeted at a similar demographic. The existence of such relatively 'ordinary' films demonstrates, from one point of view, the status of black-directed/oriented films as an established part of the indie landscape. The fact that black characters and their relationships can be represented in essentially colour-blind terms represents a victory over a long history of racist stereotyping. It comes at the cost of an absence of any engagement with the realities of continued structural racism in the United States, however, a middle-class focus generally being required if such issues are entirely to be avoided, although that is no more than is the case for a great deal of non-black independent and mainstream production. Neither *Love Jones* nor *Hav Plenty* exhibits any narrative or formal qualities that would, in themselves, be marks of indie status, a fact that underlines the extent to which merely to be black written and directed and to feature an all-black cast remains, in most cases, to be restricted by definition to one or another part of the independent sector.

Institutions of the kind that were central to the expansion of independent cinema more generally have developed to offer additional help and support to black filmmakers. The Black Filmmaker Foundation (BFF) was created in 1978, offering facilities such as workshops, seminars, conferences and a skills bank and employment listings for members.¹⁹ Other organizations include the African American Filmmakers Association and the Organization of Black Screenwriters. Bodies focused on the crucial areas of marketing and

exhibition include Blackfilm.com and UniWorld Films. The latter produces events such as the Black Cinema Café, a showcase for indie films targeted to potential audiences in cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Detroit, Washington and others with high-density African American populations. Black-oriented film festivals have played something of the role that events such as Sundance perform for the wider indie movement, examples including the Acapulco Black Film Festival and New York's Urbanworld Film Festival, which also has a distribution arm.

Gaining other than very minimal distribution remains difficult for most black filmmakers, however, a fact that has driven some into doing the job for themselves. Director Robert Hardy's student-coming-of-age drama *Chocolate City* (1994) was shot for \$20,000 while Hardy was studying for an engineering degree in Florida.²⁰ It was not shown in theatres, but gained a national home video release and was distributed independently over the internet. Hardy and producer William Packer created their own company, Rainforest Productions, during the process and raised the \$200,000 budget for their next feature, *Trois* (2000), from 50 African American investors. Much of the package was put together at the 1998 Acapulco festival, where the film premiered as a 'work in progress' in 1999. Rainforest then marketed and distributed the film by itself, grossing more than \$1 million in some 90 cities after securing openings in mainstream rather than art-house venues, an achievement based on the racy nature of the material, which centres around a *ménage à trois* relationship that turns into a lurid *Fatal Attraction*-style melodramatic thriller.

Self-distribution and other alternative approaches, including grassroots marketing targeted at ethnically or hyphenate-American defined constituencies, have also been used by filmmakers from other non-white communities, including a number of examples cited in Chapter 1. The independent sector remains the only viable option for most non-white American production that seeks to challenge dominant stereotypes – the implicit function of which is to legitimate inequalities – whether African American, Chicano, Asian American or Native American. Examples of independent Chicano production include Gregory Nava's *El Norte*, the distribution campaign for which is examined in Chapter 1, and Nava's larger-budget *My Family* (1995).

Each offers a distinctively Hispanic perspective, the former more obviously political in its sympathetic treatment of illegal migrants into the USA, the latter charting three turbulent generations of a Mexican American family in East Los Angeles. The dominant modality in both cases, however, is heightened emotional melodrama more than emphasis on the specific social conditions facing different parts of the Chicano community. An effort to create a spiritual dimension, rooted in the exoticism of Latin America, is found in both films. This is oddly at variance with any more politicized perspective in a sequence in *My Family* in which one character, who narrowly escaped death in a fast-flowing river as a young child, is deliberately and unnecessarily shot by the police. The spirit of the river came back to claim him, concludes the narratorial voice of the film, a reading that pulls into the orbit of myth what otherwise appears to be a simple act of racist murder.

A low-key, de-dramatized narrative style of the kind analyzed in Chapter 2 characterizes the early films of Hong Kong born director Wayne Wang, a style that produces a commitment to subtle and insightful portrayals of the textures of Chinese American life. Wang's first feature, *Chan is Missing*, is, nominally, a detective story in which a cab driver and his nephew search for a friend who goes missing with \$4,000 of their savings. The emphasis, however, is on a leisurely exploration of various facets of the San Francisco Chinatown community rather than any resolution of the central mystery. The more Jo (Wood Moy) and Steve (Marc Hayashi) investigate, the more complex and contradictory the case becomes. Conventional ingredients of the detective genre, including Jo's voice-over and hints that Chan might have been involved in a number of dramatic incidents, including a murder, are combined with sequences in which a documentary-style impression is created as the often hand-held, black-and-white photography dwells on an assortment of background characters and their environments. The portrait that emerges, in contrast to conventional one-dimensional stereotypes, is of a community marked by various shades of opinion, from political rivalries between supporters of the People's Republic of China and Taiwan to varying grades of allegiance to the cultures of China, the United States or a combination of the two.

A similar sense of the rival pull of two cultures, characteristic of recent-generation immigrant populations, is found in Wang's second feature, *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart* (1984). A few lines of intra-family conflict are engaged, gently, principally the tension between a mother and her unmarried daughter, but the primary emphasis is on the evocation of a slice of life. The character-based narrative dimension is bracketed by interludes in which quietly contemplative, static shots – images of empty rooms, trees, hanging washing, reflections on water – create the impression of an alternative sensibility, reminiscent of the style of the Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu. The main narrative hook, the effort of Mrs Tam (Kim Chew) to see her daughter Geraldine (Laureen Chew) married before the former reaches her 62nd birthday, the age at which a fortune teller predicted her death, is abruptly dropped towards the end, demonstrating the extent to which the investment of the film lies elsewhere, with the revelation that the fortune teller's view has now changed and the pressure on Geraldine is removed. Tensions reflecting the different experiences of succeeding generations are an important source of material more generally in films from representatives of more or less recent immigrations to the United States, including *Dim Sum*, *My Family*, and films by Ang Lee such as the Taiwan/US co-productions *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) and *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* (1994).

Gender: From Independent Women Filmmakers to New Queer Cinema

If black filmmakers or those from other ethnically defined communities have often struggled to get their voices heard, even in the independent sector, the same has generally been true for women, and doubly so for women of colour. *Daughters of the Dust* is by far the most critically high-profile production by an African American woman but the density of its texture did not make it a vehicle by which Dash could readily gain access to funding for future theatrical releases. Black women directors have, generally, been given a lower profile and have to struggle harder than their male counterparts to get their films funded, produced and distributed, suffering from the dual burden of prevailing gender and racial inequality. Relatively few have been able to produce feature-

length fictional narratives. Of those produced, many have been denied anything other than marginal exhibition, as in the case of Kathleen Collins' *The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy* (1980) and *Losing Ground* (1982), films credited with paving the way for *Daughters of the Dust* to become the first narrative feature created by a black woman to gain commercial distribution.²¹ A few other independent films directed by black women also gained distribution during the early 1990s upsurge, the best-known of which, *Just Another Girl on the IRT* (1993), written and directed by Julie Harris, is a portrait of an outspoken teenager coming of age in the Brooklyn projects. The emphasis on family, and especially mother/teenage-daughter relationships, is a central feature of other features by black women, including *Alma's Rainbow* (1993) and *Love Your Mama* (1993). The difference of dynamic often found in films made by women is evident in the treatment in *Love Your Mama* of the narrative thread relating to the older son, Wren (André Robinson), the familiar figure of the inner-city black youth drawn to a life of crime, in this case stealing cars. Wren narrowly escapes death after being shot repeatedly during a police raid. The emphasis is not on Wren himself, however, or the criminal subculture into which he is inducted, but on the impact of this and a series of other crises on the matriarch, Mama (Audrey Morgan), around whom the film revolves.

Like black filmmakers, male or female, women are often given little choice but to operate in the independent sector, either because they seek to go beyond the confines usually permitted in the mainstream or because it is the only place where any options are open. Even in the indie world, women face persistent inequality. Where opportunities are created, women filmmakers tend to receive lower budgets and find it harder to gain distribution or to build a sustained career after making the initial breakthrough. A number of groups have sought to help women film- and video-makers, the best known being Women Make Movies, created in 1972, which operates a distribution service, providing copies of many titles unavailable through mainstream channels, and a Production Assistance Program offering various forms of training and assistance. As with the products of those from particular racially or ethnically defined backgrounds, there is no necessary connection between the gender of the filmmaker and the material produced, no essentially 'female' aesthetic, although there are some

identifiable tendencies. Independent films made by women range from more or less overtly feminist work to productions that can be seen as women-oriented in a general, culturally defined sense (often through focusing on relationship-based issues, a quality conventionally associated with women) and others that are gender non-specific.

Contemporary feminist currents fed to varying extents into a number of films produced in the 1970s, both in and outside Hollywood. An example in the independent arena is Claudia Weill's *Girlfriends* (1978), an \$80,000 feature which focuses on the break-up of the relationship between two New York college graduates. A more overt and militantly feminist vision of a kind that could only have been produced in the independent sector is offered by Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (1983), set in a near-future New York, ten years after a social-democratic war of liberation that was supposed to have led to equality but has left women with many grievances. A number of scenes depict women routinely being hassled on the street, while protests are made about cutbacks in day-care, the ending of free abortions, the forced sterilization of minority women and discrimination against single women and lesbians in housing and employment. A montage sequence depicting women performing various forms of menial work points forward to Borden's next film, *Working Girls*: the image of hands placing a condom on a penis is inserted between shots of food-packing and washing-up, implying an equivalence between sexual and other forms of labour. A guerrilla Women's Army plans armed intervention, the murder of its founder leading to the unification of some of the diverse women's voices heard in the preceding scenes.

Born in Flames is an unusually radical and directly political intervention for a feature-length production. Some of the protests voiced are specific to the fictional scenario, but many have obvious relevance to the world beyond that of the screen, a dimension emphasized by the fact that no effort is made (partly because of budgetary constraints) to create a projected future world different in texture from that of the time the film was made. In advocating an insurrection that includes both physical violence and media interventions, the film takes a political stance that seems as radical today as when it was made. It also departs from the norms of fictional narrative style. Instead of emotional proximity to central characters,

in the conventionally character-centric dynamic maintained by most independent features, the fabric of *Born in Flames* is woven from a mixture of strands including television news reports, broadcasts from rebel radio stations, footage and voice-over commentary from FBI reports and activities, and numerous brief scenes of comment and analysis from various perspectives. The effect is to create a modality closer to that of politically oriented documentary, in which the viewer is encouraged to remain emotionally distanced and receptive to analysis.

A more general sense of foregrounding the experiences of women is found in many other independent features, including the work of two figures prominent in the indie scene of the 1980s and 1990s, Susan Seidelman and Allison Anders. A good illustration of the way marginal, low-budget qualities can be mixed with more established formats is provided by Seidelman's first two features, *Smithereens* and *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985). The \$60,000-budget *Smithereens*, shot soon after Seidelman finished film school, is set on the edges of the New Wave culture of New York's Lower East Side, a hip but seedy milieu that gave the film a cult appeal at an early stage in the development of the contemporary independent movement. The film's narrative is limited to a series of abortive engagements between the central character, the abrasive and self-centred Wren (Susan Berman), and two males: a sensitive-artist type, who lives in the back of a van, and a narcissistic sometime New Wave singer (played by the punk singer/writer Richard Hell) into whose life Wren seeks to inveigle herself. The success of *Smithereens*, which became the first low-budget American indie to be accepted into competition at Cannes, led to Seidelman being hired to direct *Desperately Seeking Susan*, a more mainstream independent production budgeted at \$4.5 million and featuring stars such as Madonna and the upcoming Rosanna Arquette. *Desperately Seeking Susan* foregrounds a world similar to that of its predecessor, but one into which the viewer is led by more generically familiar and plot-oriented devices. A dull, timid housewife from New Jersey (Arquette) becomes mixed up in aspects of Lower East Side culture, along with a background crime-thriller plot, after being knocked out, losing her memory and being mistaken for the more exotic Susan (Madonna). The result is a contemporary version of classical screwball

comedy-of-mistaken-identity, a more conventional/commercial re-packaging of some of the elements of *Smithereens* that grossed \$24 million in the USA.

Allison Anders' second feature, *Mi Vida Loca* (*My Crazy Life*, 1993), is an example of a distinctly women-oriented take on generically familiar, male-dominated territory, in this case the world of Los Angeles gangs. By the age of 21, we are told, most of the men in Latino neighbourhoods such as Echo Park, where the film is set, are either disabled, in prison or dead. In response, considering their men essentially unreliable sources of support, the group of women around which the film revolves begin to establish their own, rival operations. Conventional gang-related material, a world of deadly rivalries and revenge killings, is given a fresh spin, the primary focus being on the women left to bring up fatherless children, figures usually pushed to the margins of the text.

A central focus on relationships between women is a defining characteristic of many independent features made by women, including *Mi Vida Loca* and Anders' first feature, *Gas, Food, Lodging*. The enduring nature of such bonds is often celebrated, amid the assorted pressures of life, as in Nicole Holofcener's quirky comedy of romance and relationships, *Walking and Talking*, a low-key portrait of the stresses put on the close friendship of Amelia (Catherine Keener) and Laura (Anne Heche) when the latter announces her engagement. *Walking and Talking* was generally critically lauded, if not a box-office hit, but the problems often faced by women filmmakers were highlighted by the difficulty writer-director Holofcener faced getting finance for her subsequent feature, the more biting (but award-winning) *Lovely and Amazing* (2001). The project, developed by Holofcener and Good Machine, was rejected everywhere it was offered and only went into production after Holofcener's agreement to shoot in high definition video on a budget lower than that for her debut.²²

An emphasis on the close texture of relationships often comes at the expense of narrative momentum, as is the case in both *Walking and Talking* and *Lovely and Amazing*. A stronger investment in narrative drive is consonant, generally, with more goal-oriented dominant western male gender constructions. Any such distinctions on gender lines have to be qualified, however, especially in the independent

sector, where there is a wider tendency to focus on character and life-texture rather than plot. A significant overlap may exist between two forms dominant in their own spheres: forward-moving, linear narrative and a wider, male-oriented culture. To eschew plot-centric forms in the cinema is, in many cases, to choose or suffer operation on the limited resources available in the independent sphere, to be relegated to what some would consider a secondary position akin to that generally offered to women in society. The corollary should be that women are more likely to be at home in the indie sector, which may be true in some respects as far as sensibility is concerned but is clearly not the case in terms of equal availability of opportunities or resources. A critical bias often exists in favour of narrative resolution and marked character development, dimensions taken for granted by some critics as markers of quality, even in works such as *Lovely and Amazing* and some of the films examined in Chapter 2, to which they are of less relevance.²³ An impression of closure is created in *Lovely and Amazing* in one dimension, for example, when the mother (Brenda Blethyn) is released from hospital after complications during her liposuction treatment, a narrative core emblematic of a wider engagement in body-image insecurity issues. Few of the myriad personal/emotional problems faced by the major characters appear in any way resolved, however, a fact that seems central to the edgy and uncomfortable nature of much of the material.

One of the most striking manifestations of the early 1990s boom in independent production, and a contributor to its wider and sometimes controversial public profile, was the movement that became known as New Queer Cinema, a term coined by the critic B. Ruby Rich to mark the appearance of a group of fresh, provocative and formally inventive lower-budget gay- and lesbian-oriented features including Todd Haynes' *Poison*, Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*, Gregg Araki's *The Living End* and Tom Kalin's *Swoon*. In its original incarnation, New Queer Cinema was very much a product of its time, in terms of both the developing state of indie cinema and alliances and organizations formed in the gay and lesbian communities in the wake of the impact of the AIDS virus; 'a more successful term for a moment than a movement', as Rich was to put it on reflection at the end of the decade.²⁴ It also had deeper roots in American independent cinema,



14. En route to murder-as-bonding-ritual: *Swoon* (1992).

however, and, whether or not the term is still merited, contributed to the creation of one of the most successfully institutionalized parts of the indie sector, with its own well-established network of festivals and distributors.

New Queer Cinema can be read as a revisiting, in a more commercially viable, feature-narrative form, of the radically gay element that was an important constituent part of the American avant-garde cinema of the 1960s, the work of filmmakers such as Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith and Andy Warhol. It is testament to how much had changed in gay and lesbian communities by the 1990s – and in the scope for independent feature production – that a similarly polemical stance, if not exactly similar material, was translated into a much less marginal form of cinematic production. The underground cinema of the 1960s received little if any coverage in the gay and lesbian press of the time, a period in which its flaunting of transgressive sexuality ran contrary to a prevailing strategy of seeking to project a ‘respectable’ image of homosexuality.²⁵ A drive for assimilation and ‘acceptance’ continued to mark the dominant strain of gay and lesbian activism in the 1970s and into the 1980s, its correlative in cinema being the use of restrained and largely conventional approaches. As with products

from other marginalized groups, films from gay or lesbian perspectives were confined to the independent sector initially through necessity – the fact that they could not be made elsewhere – rather than through the adoption of formally innovative strategies.

Early examples include *Desert Hearts* (1985), a lesbian-themed feature that adopts an otherwise very conventional narrative framework in which an uptight New York English professor, Vivian (Helen Shaver), ending a lifeless marriage in Nevada in 1959, is reawakened by the erotic attentions of Cay (Patricia Charbonneau). Cay is figured as a representative of earthier, rebellious forces, challenging Vivian’s excessively ordered existence. The underlying dynamic buys into broader notions of the western frontier experience as one of awakening from the inauthenticities of existence in the metropolis, the Nevada desert offering a zone of freedom and potential regeneration. This is another example of the way genre-related frameworks can both contain and provide a space within which to develop unconventional material. The frontier dynamic is schematic and conventional, reducing somewhat the impact of the material, yet given a different content when the principal representative of its hallowed virtues is a lesbian.

Desert Hearts is clearly sympathetic towards the couple’s burgeoning relationship, and the dilemma faced by Vivian, and proved successful at the box office, providing a rare instance at the time of an affirmative portrait, in which a lesbian relationship does not end in either death or despair.²⁶ Cay remains coded somewhat as an ‘outsider’, however, and the plot device ensures that lesbianism is visited only via a character who begins as unambiguously heterosexual. The structure is that of a lesbian awakening/discovery or coming-out story, an alternative to dominant gender narratives but less radical than those in which the non-heterosexuality of the principal characters is taken as a given. The principal novelty of the first two gay male indie features to appear in this period, *Parting Glances* (1986) and *Longtime Companion* (1990), lay in the simple fact that they presented gay characters in a world in which their sexual orientation was taken for granted from the start, rather than an issue or problem in its own right. *Parting Glances* explores a triangle of relationships that functions much the same as any other, gay or straight, even though one of the central characters is suffering from AIDS. AIDS itself is treated as an established fact of

gay life rather than a major plot device. A restrained, matter-of-fact approach to AIDS is also found in *Longtime Companion*, which traces the ravages of the virus on a group of gay men during its spread in the 1980s. The tone is quiet and undemonstrative, without great flourishes of emotion, an impression heightened by the use of an elliptical narrative framework, in which the characters are visited at different moments between 1981 and 1989. The illness and death of some individuals are dwelt on, while others are passed over. The contraction of the virus or death often occurs in the narrative interstices, a device that creates a strong impression of the implacable nature of the threat, and the resilience of the gay community, while minimizing any tendency for melodrama.

The tenor of these films, whatever their individual differences, creates an implicitly assimilationist stance that stakes claims for the common humanity of gay or lesbian characters. Some of the problems they face may be specific to their particular gender identity, most obviously the level of threat from AIDS, but form and character/relationship/emotional content create an impression marked as 'ordinary' or 'normal' rather than exotically alternative. To treat gay or lesbian characters in this way, rather than as a 'problem' or source of amusement of some kind, was itself a not insignificant step, in comparison with prevailing tendencies in Hollywood. The style of filmmaking that gained the label New Queer Cinema went further, however, in keeping with a contemporary shift towards a more confrontational brand of gay and lesbian campaigning. The term 'queer', formerly part of the lexicon of homophobic abuse, was adopted as a positive signifier by groups ranging from activists to academic theorists. The activist group Queer Nation was born in New York in 1990, with its slogan 'Queers Bash Back', in response to attacks on gays and lesbians in the East Village. The more aggressive, in-your-face stance of groups such as this was a response to both the AIDS crisis itself, which prompted new forms of community activity, and the increased level of homophobia it created. In American independent cinema, and some examples elsewhere, including the work of the British directors Derek Jarman and Isaac Julien, the same climate encouraged an equally bold and assertive burst of activity.

Two of the distinguishing characteristics of New Queer Cinema

are portrayals of gay or lesbian characters that make fewer concessions to notions of what might be palatable or especially accessible to straight audiences and, very much in keeping with this in many cases, a more radical approach to form. If previous gay- or lesbian-oriented productions belonged to the independent sector largely by default, the works associated initially with New Queer Cinema are more wilfully and assertively independent on a number of counts. The overtly gay-oriented prison narrative strand of *Poison*, for example, offers no outside perspective, no compromise to any other sensibility, sufficiently so to have provoked howls of outrage at the fact that the film received funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Queer or otherwise sexually deviant subtexts also exist in the two other strands of the film, most obviously in the potential for 'Horror' to be read as a metaphor for AIDS. Little effort is made to offer 'positive images' of gay characters, or of any other homoerotic activity, in the prison strand, the polarities of which range between hazy romantic nostalgia and anal rape. The same goes for *Swoon*, which could hardly be imagined as a plea for sympathetic understanding of gay characters, given its focus on the relationship between Nathan Leopold (Craig Chester) and Richard Loeb (Daniel Schlachet), the notorious real-life pair jailed in Chicago in the 1920s for the murder of a 13-year-old boy. The crime is committed solely for kicks, the film suggests, playing a part in sexual bonding rituals between the two protagonists. The viewer is thrust into uncomfortably close proximity to their actions, the killing being performed in a claustrophobic sequence inside a car. Little of the conventional sense of access to the interiority of central characters is provided, however, despite alternating voice-over commentaries from both. The presentation of the pair remains as cool and detached as the characters appear to be from many of their acts. *Swoon* reinstates the gay dimension of the Leopold and Loeb story, an aspect glossed over by earlier films inspired by the case, most notably Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), and does so in a manner that seems deliberately provocative, focusing on precisely the kind of material that might otherwise be used to support homophobic perspectives such as those manifested by the voices of authority within the film. The rejection of an approach based on the creation of positive images is taken to more disturbing extremes in Todd Verow's first feature, *Frisk*

(1996), an adaptation of the novel by Dennis Cooper in which both gay sex and a connection between sex and murder are presented in a far more explicit manner than anything found in *Swoon*, in a narrative based on a series of letters from a character whose desire for greater sexual knowledge and possession leads him beyond the surface of the skin, in acts of increasing violence and mutilation.

One of the most sustained bodies of provocative, in-your-face queer indie filmmaking is found in the work of Gregg Araki. From the opening titles, *The Living End*, *Totally Fucked Up* and *The Doom Generation* announce their intention to incite, with possessive credits reading, respectively, 'An irresponsible movie by Gregg Araki', 'Another homo movie by Gregg Araki' and 'A heterosexual movie by Gregg Araki' (the latter far from entirely true!). The Araki style here, and in *Nowhere* (1997), is a lurid, sexually polymorphous version of the mainstream youth/teen-angst movie, shot through with a strong vein of anger. The teen world imagined by Araki is one in which a fluidity of gender orientation is largely accepted by the slacker-generation principals, against a background of sporadic and often violent homophobia. The latter reaches its highest pitch in the climax of *The Doom Generation*, in which a homophobic assault against the three main characters, caught during a *ménage à trois*, culminates in a shocking, blood-spattered sequence – shot in strobe-effect lighting that creates a nightmarish impression – in which Jordan (James Duval) is killed by having his penis amputated with a pair of shears. The fact that the assailants bring out an American flag and conduct the attack to the accompaniment of *The Star Spangled Banner*, one mouthing from the Oath of Allegiance, creates a political subtext present on occasion in other Araki films (in *The Living End*, for example, one of the principals proposes infecting President Bush with the AIDS virus, suggesting that it would prompt a magic cure to be found the following day).

Araki obliges the viewer to confront the existence of virulent AIDS-era homophobia, employing AIDS itself as either a foregrounded narrative device or a persistent subtext. It provides the romantically doomed impetus for the lovers-on-the-run, road-movie structure of *The Living End*, in which the introspective Jon (Craig Gilmore) saddles up with the violently inclined and rootless hustler Luke

(Mike Dytri), the latter needing to escape Los Angeles after killing a cop. Both are HIV-positive and, as Luke declares, have nothing to lose. The romantic-nihilist attitude struck by the film is expressed in background textural detail such as the 'Fuck the World' graffiti viewed at the start and in Jon's 'Choose Death' bumper sticker. Jon does have something to lose, however, and maintains an attachment to his settled existence through telephone contact with a girl friend in LA, eventually deciding he wants to return to the relative comforts of home. The contrast between Jon and Luke is typical of a dynamic that offers a bridge between violently rebellious figures such as Luke, and Xavier in *The Doom Generation*, and 'safer', more domesticated or 'easily led' representatives of gay or potentially gay/bisexual youth such as Jon, Jordan in *The Doom Generation* and Andy in *Totally Fucked Up*, the latter both played by Araki regular James Duval.

AIDS discriminates against no one, intones a TV public information announcement in *Totally Fucked Up*, a point immediately contested by one of the characters, who describes it as government-sponsored genocide, 'a born-again Nazi republican wet dream come true'. Araki's work supports José Arroyo's suggestion that, even when not mentioned so directly or provocatively by name, AIDS can be understood as the 'political unconscious' of New Queer Cinema, as both an 'absent cause' and an important interpretative context.²⁷ An impression of doom and pending death is pervasive, from the emphasis on high levels of gay teen suicide in *Totally Fucked Up* to literal signifiers of imminent apocalypse in *The Doom Generation*, which opens with flaming letters in a nightclub reading 'Welcome to Hell' and throughout which the number 666 is a recurring motif. *Nowhere* is set on what is supposed to be Armageddon Day, with the approach of the biblically predicted Rapture; it also offers a student milieu in which classes to which casual mention is made include Thermonuclear Catastrophe and History of Lethal Epidemics (not to mention the notes from Human Sex Orgy requested by one character). Jordan pulls back from intercourse with Amy (Rose McGowan) in an early scene in *The Doom Generation*, commenting, 'I'm afraid of catching AIDS', a fear he later overcomes, although his subsequent involvement in a three-way session is a precursor to violent death. The AIDS-era conjunction of sex and death, especially gay male sex – seen at its most disturbing in *Frisk* – is

given stark figuration in *The Living End*, in the image of Luke fucking Jon, after the latter's decision to return home, while holding a gun to his own head. He pulls the trigger, as he climaxes, but the gun proves to be out of bullets, leaving the pair alone in a bleak expanse between highway and the sea.

Araki's films are clearly products of an assertively queer sensibility, mixing social-political resonances with more marketable and exploitation-oriented youth genre dimensions, the latter including plenty of opportunities for the display of nubile, scantily clad bodies, male and female. The emphasis on a generation of angst-ridden or doomed teenagers comes over as both seriously coded AIDS-era material or metaphor, specific to a particular constituency, and as a more familiarly romantic alienated-youth posture. Formal departures from convention also play an important part in the location of Araki's films within the independent landscape, as both arty-alternative and as 'cool' youth-oriented indie productions. If Araki's films, and other examples of New Queer Cinema, are often provocative at the level of content, in their treatments of the lifestyles and actions of gay or lesbian characters and issues such as AIDS, the same can be said of some of their stylistic features. Formal qualities are often drawn to the attention of the viewer, through a range of devices including direct reference, parody and stylistic excess.

Reminders of the existence of cinema or video, as constructs, rather than transparent windows onto versions of reality, are found in a number of Araki's features: Jon writing an article on 'the death of cinema' in *The Living End*, with a Godard poster among other cultural reference points in his apartment; the video-maker Steven (Gilbert Luna), whose interview footage with other characters forms part of the texture of *Totally Fucked Up*; the central character, Dark (Duval), with a video practical assignment to be completed in *Nowhere*. Self-conscious devices embedded more firmly in the structure of the films include the chapter-title headings of *Totally Fucked Up*. Headings such as 'more teen angst', 'lifestyles of the bored and disenfranchised', 'the young and the hopeless' create a distanced, ironic perspective on the film's own stance. The same effect is created by various statements in the form of graffiti and other signs found elsewhere in Araki's work. 'God help me' reads a large sign next to one character in *Nowhere*, a part

of the diegetic background that, because of its excessive appropriateness and role as non-diegetic commentary, draws attention to the constructed nature of the film's fabric. As he declares his desire to leave towards the end of *The Living End*, Jon comments on the 'hackneyed, romantic fantasy we've been having', another self-conscious gesture in which familiar devices are simultaneously drawn upon and drawn into a foreground position in which they might be questioned.

A striking aspect of Araki's work is an aesthetic of excess based on garish, over-stylized images, the strongest example of which is the lurid use of colour in *The Doom Generation*. On exiting a QuickieMart, after the bloody and absurd decapitation of its proprietor, the three principals walk past a wall divided into successive fields of bright yellow, blue, orange and green, for which no realistic motivation is remotely available. In their car afterwards, they are enveloped in a red glow, with touches of blue, colours that also predominate in other sequences. They visit a bar done out in silver foil and a motel room where everything is chequered black and white: walls, floor, curtains, bedspread, lamp, phone, ashtray, towels, along with the white-skin/black-underwear favoured by Amy. The result is akin to the stylistic excess found in other examples of independent cinema. This can be an attraction in its own right, as suggested in Chapter 3, but it may have further, more specific appeal in queer cinema.

For Arroyo, the appeal of excess to the gay consumer of forms such as opera, melodrama and some women stars is related to the expressions of emotion they permit, an outlet for homosexual emotions traditionally repressed on screen:

Just as our sexuality is often regarded as transgressing the bounds of the socially unacceptable, it has historically been forms that threaten to transgress the bounds of the aesthetically acceptable that seem to give us greater access to identification, that sometimes offer hints that 'we' [...] exist.²⁸

Arroyo's analysis of excesses of prop and costume in Jarman's *Edward II* (1991) might also apply to *The Doom Generation*: that such excesses 'not only help communicate setting and character but signal a sensibility'.²⁹ An important ingredient of that sensibility is camp, a much-debated aspect of gay culture. Five dimensions of a distinctly



15. Excessive design as evidence of queer sensibility: *The Doom Generation* (1995).

queer form of camp – as opposed to the use of camp assimilated into the mainstream – are identified in Araki's work by Glyn Davis: a drawing to attention of performance (often through poor or bombastic acting, a style that resembles the earlier work of Paul Morrissey, or through excesses of costume); a delight in the use of trashy ephemera (the assorted detritus of pop culture found in Araki's films, often rubbing shoulders with high-art reference points such as the Godard poster in *The Living End*); the use of parody (of genres such as the road movie in *The Doom Generation*; the cartoon-like QuickieMart killing might be a parody of *Natural Born Killers*, released the previous year, in which case the colour-fields outside could be read as parody of a green-hued sequence at a drugstore in the original); a political ingredient, as already discussed; and references to earlier queer camp filmmakers (a Warhol poster in *The Living End*, a killing in *Nowhere* in which the victim is finished off with a can of Campbell's tomato soup).³⁰

The effect of the strategies detailed above is to denaturalize the material, a move that has the potential to shift attention from form to content; from awareness of the constructed nature of film, and the

world it represents, to consideration of the constructed nature of the social reality – including the gender frameworks – we all inhabit. Araki's films remind us that we are watching actors performing, as Davis suggests; the emphasis on performance 'exposes the supposed "naturalness" of everyday behaviour and identity as a sham'.³¹ A similar effect is found in other examples of New Queer Cinema, including *Poison* and *Swoon*. The narrative structure of *Poison* remains in the foreground because of the problem it constantly poses of how to make sense of the relationship between the different strands, across which teasing but minimal connections are drawn. A conventional level of absorption into the material is blocked, encouraging a more critical-analytical level of response. *Swoon* also has a stylized surface – its black-and-white photography – that plays a substantial part in the maintenance of viewer distance. An impression of dissociation is created in a stylized sequence immediately after the murder, in which, in successive shots, the camera keeps sliding into and swinging away from the principals. The effect may partly be to figure the state of consciousness of the characters, especially Leopold, who plays a more passive role, but it also suggests a fracturing of the relationship between character and the perspective of the viewer. *Frisk* also employs a highly non-naturalistic aesthetic, closer in places to works of the avant-garde or underground, in a dense texture that includes the intrusion of rapidly cut sequences of 8mm found-footage, pixelvision, and a narrative frame that ultimately leaves open the question of whether or not the activities of Dennis remain in the realm of fantasy. Narrative disruptions and uncertainties of this kind in New Queer Cinema are seen by Monica Pearl as a response to the nature of the AIDS virus itself, in both its unconventional behaviour as an illness – one in which the body ends up attacking itself – and its depredations on the gay community.³²

Qualities such as self-consciousness, parody, the use and abuse of existing genre formats and the mixing of elements ascribed to 'higher' and 'lower' cultural forms give New Queer Cinema much in common with prevailing definitions of the postmodern, as suggested in Rich's catchy original designation of the phenomenon as 'Homo Pomo'. New queer films and videos are not all the same and do not share a single aesthetic or concern, Rich argued in 1992, but

they are united by a common style: 'There are traces in them of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind.'³³ Denaturalization of both form and gender constructions is a strategy that mobilizes the wider resonances of the term 'queer'; not just as a reference to gay, lesbian or bisexual identity, but a more general making-strange or 'queering' of what usually passes for familiar or 'normal' in prevailing (bourgeois, heterosexist, patriarchal and often racist) terms. In some cases this entails a discovery of or shift towards non-heterosexuality, but it can also embrace a broader range of transgressive desires. Sexual orientation is not a matter of rigid binary opposites, or a strict separation between heterosexual and homosexual, but a potentially more fluid field of possibilities, a view of the world that often emerges in the films of Araki, in which characters can slide relatively easily and unfussily from one form of engagement to another.

A sense of queering that goes beyond material focused directly on issues of gay or lesbian sexuality is found in Todd Haynes' *Safe*, discussed in Chapter 3. *Safe*, along with the director's subversive short film, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), focuses on a disease that acts as a metaphorical equivalent of AIDS while not being restricted to its primary associations with the gay community.³⁴ *Superstar*, a 43-minute production tracing the events leading up to the title character's death from anorexia, offers an irresistible queering of the clean-cut Carpenters' image, confounding realistic conventions with its use of Barbie dolls and cardboard sets and juxtaposing the 'purity' of the song lyrics with contemporary footage including images from the war in Southeast Asia. *Safe* creates a more pervasive and subtle sense of dislocation in the form of an illness the precise source of which is not quite defined and that strikes not at the social margins but in the heart of upper-middle-class suburbia, qualities that make it an ideal vehicle for a more general queering or making strange of dominant and familiar social terrain.

It is at this point that a specific dynamic within New Queer Cinema crosses over into a wider segment of independent cinema, in its scope for creating unsettling impressions within otherwise more conventional forms. A subtle form of 'queering' is a useful term to describe the effect of some of the distinctly indie qualities outlined

in earlier chapters, tending to work on and subvert rather than outrightly reject dominant norms. While *Happiness*, for example, does not celebrate the paedophile Bill Maplewood, it offers a perspective in which his activities are normalized, disturbingly – both in terms of his bland façade and the cinematic devices through which his desires are articulated – and in which a gulf is opened up in the construction of apparently 'normal' suburban family life. Something similar happens in David O. Russell's debut feature, *Spanking the Monkey* (1994), in which an incestuous relationship develops between a bright undergraduate, Ray (Jeremy Davies), and his mother (Alberta Watson), recovering from a broken leg and depression. What gives *Spanking the Monkey* a queer dimension is the fact that the relationship between mother and son is both eroticized and seems like an entirely 'natural' development, in context; but also that so highly charged an encounter does not become the sole or dominant centre of gravity of the film. Incest is just one ingredient in a blackly comic mix of dysfunctional family relationships. To include mother-son incest at all is likely to be a marker of independent status; to make it seem relatively natural, and to deny it a full melodramatic treatment, is to enter into the realm of queering the family context in which it occurs.

Its potential to overlap into qualities celebrated by some variants of indie cinema more generally might be one reason for the success queer cinema has enjoyed at the heart of the independent landscape in recent decades. A closer fit exists in some important respects between the core attributes of queer and indie cinemas than is found in the relationship between black independent film, for example, and the kind of filmmaking for which the term 'indie' has come to stand since the 1980s. The emphasis of queer cinema on transgression, specifically in the arena of sex and gender, gives it, almost by default, a commercial advantage in the independent sector. Sexual transgression can be sold as 'cool' and fashionable, to the particular niche audiences attracted by indie cinema. Sexual transgression, generally, is more subject to *commodification* than material that raises questions perceived as more socially intractable and 'political'. Issues of gender and gender transgression *are* essentially political in nature – entailing differential power relationships and embedded social constructions founded in inequality – but are less often experienced as such. The issues raised by

queer cinema tend to be defined primarily as questions of culture and identity – rather than of politics and economy – that lend themselves more easily to niche-marketable quirky, individual-character-centred indie frameworks.³⁵ The separation of cultural dimensions from their political and economic contexts is a distinct characteristic of contemporary ‘late’ capitalism more generally, according to Rosemary Hennessy, a situation that enables the former to be commodified in the form of individual ‘lifestyle’ and consumption choices (including consumption of media) that appear divorced from their material ground. The material ground itself, including fundamental inequalities of class, race and gender, lends itself far less well to such treatment; attempts at its understanding tend (with the exception of the work of Spike Lee, up to a point) to encourage more dour and less niche-marketable entertaining approaches such as those found in the films of the LA School.

A substantial overlap exists between significant sectors of gay/lesbian or queer cultures and some of the specific target markets of indie cinema, reinforcing the mutual relationship between the two. A more prominent part of gay/lesbian culture falls into the regions of cultural-taste hierarchy occupied by independent cinema than is probably the case for society in general, and particularly for groups such as black Americans and others subjected to racially or ethnically defined inequality. The non-heterosexual population is divided, like the population in general, along lines such as race/ethnicity, gender and class. But organized gay and lesbian movements, and gay and lesbian culture, have been dominated by middle-class sectors of the population, a class bias that militates against more radical analysis of political and economic context and that encourages the consumption of particular kinds of cultural products.³⁶ The most influential components of gay and lesbian society are more likely than average to possess the cultural capital and/or aspiration associated with the consumption of products such as indie cinema, a culturally aware, educated, middle-class sector increasingly targeted in commodity culture since the 1990s.³⁷ A useful way of understanding this situation further is offered by Richard Dyer, in an analysis based on the earlier shaping of gay male culture in Britain. Gay culture, for Dyer, has a disproportionate tendency to lean towards art and expressive culture

as alternative realms that have historically seemed hospitable to gay sensibilities. Working-class aspects of gay culture, he suggests, have generally been occluded from the formulations that have proved dominant and lasting, the tastes of a particular metropolitan gay milieu tending to be constructed as that of gay culture itself, to which others subsequently aspire, reinforcing ‘the notion that this culture, very narrowly rooted in social terms, is what gays turn to spontaneously’.³⁸ In its wilful difference from the mainstream, New Queer Cinema, and indie cinema more generally, is a culturally elitist form, if not as much so as works of the avant-garde; as Dyer suggests, the same can be said of some of the defining characteristics of dominant constructions of queerness in gay subculture: distanced and ‘superior’ qualities such as irony, decadence, fashion and ‘attitude’.³⁹

Wider uses of the term ‘queer’ are valuable, both generally and in reference to independent cinema, in their ability to open up a range of aspects of non-normative or transgressive culture. There is a danger of a loss of specificity, however, that operates at more than one level. Using ‘queer’ or ‘queering’ to designate other forms of making-strange can have an appropriative effect, denying the specific conjunction of a range of non-heterosexual gender orientations. It can also have the same effect within the realm of non-heterosexuality. As an umbrella term, it suggests commonalities between gay, lesbian, bisexual and other orientations, and has been criticized for failing to attend to real differences among and between such communities. What goes under the name of queer culture, or queer cinema, has generally been dominated by the perspective of gay males, a replication within same-sex cultures of the gender inequalities of the wider society. It has also been overwhelmingly white, with a few notable exceptions. These include two documentary milestones in the first wave of 1990s queer cinema – Marlon Riggs’ *Tongues Untied* (1990), an assertion of black gay male sexuality through a mixture including poetry recitation and personal testimony, and Jennie Livingston’s *Paris is Burning* (1990), a portrait (albeit by a white filmmaker) of the complex gender, racial and class dynamics underlying the aspirations of participants in New York black and Latino drag balls – and Cheryl Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), an example of an even more rare phenomenon, black lesbian cinema. *The Watermelon Woman* is a

self-reflective work, in which Dunye herself plays a filmmaker tracing the history of a black woman performer from the racist Hollywood of the 1930s. New Queer Cinema includes a number of significant contributions by lesbian filmmakers such as Dunye, Rose Troche and Lisa Cholodenko, but these have generally been marginalized. The form of New Queer Cinema celebrated in the 1990s was dominated by figurations of male desire and, as Amy Taubin suggested at the time, films such as *Swoon* and *The Living End* have more in common with male-violence indie films such as *Reservoir Dogs* and *Laws of Gravity* than with a queer/feminist perspective.⁴⁰ A major exception to this tendency is the work of Todd Haynes, the themes of which, as Anat Pick says, 'are emphatically inclusive of, even exclusive to, women', especially in *Superstar*, *Safe* and *Far From Heaven* (2002).⁴¹

The lesbian component of New Queer Cinema was launched with the release of Troche's *Go Fish*, a hit at Sundance, in 1994. A number of other features followed, including Maria Maggenti's romantic comedy *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love* (1995) and Cholodenko's *High Art* (1999). The latter is a lesbian-oriented illustration of Dyer's point about the attraction of queer culture to 'decadent' arty milieux, in this case that of the photographer Lucy (Ally Sheedy) into whose heroin-fuelled downtown apartment-community is attracted the young, previously straight Syd (Radha Mitchell). *High Art* is another example that refuses a simple 'positive images' approach. It has a downbeat ending and gives a portrait of lesbian relationships that are more than one-dimensional, and in some cases painful, although it risks lapsing into stereotype in its association of lesbianism with an exotic and seductive *demi-monde*. Despite the attention gained by individual features such as *Go Fish* and *High Art*, lesbian filmmakers, like women more generally, usually find it hard to gain finance and/or distribution. More radical or outspoken lesbian- or feminist-oriented queer production has tended to be restricted to the commercial margins, often to production in video rather than higher-budgeted film, including the avant-garde work of Barbara Hammer and Sadie Benning.

The wider notion of 'queer' need not be surrendered, however, as Alexander Doty suggests, as long as recognition is given to each of the specific territories it contains: from 'straight' usages, for acts of making-

strange that have no immediately non-heterosexual component, to broad conjunctions of non-heterosexuality and specific cultural and political locations such as 'gay', 'lesbian' and 'bisexual', in independent cinema and beyond.⁴² More general and specific impressions of queerness can be merged, or one can modulate with the other, as is the case, for example, in *Chuck and Buck*. From the start, a suggestion is given of a homoerotic dimension to the attachment of the childlike adult Buck to his former best friend, Chuck. Buck's hand reaches down towards Chuck's groin, wandering off-limits during a hug between the two when they meet at the funeral of Buck's mother. It turns out later that the pair indulged in sexual activity as children ('Chuck and Buck, suck and fuck') but the impression of discomfort generated by the film is more pervasive than can be accounted for simply by the opening up of a queer/gay fissure in the successful/suburban/heterosexual life of Chuck. Chuck eventually agrees to one night of sex with Buck, in return for being left alone, a sequence that carries a hint of awakening his emotional investment in the relationship, and the respite it offers from the demands of his job as a record company executive. But the inappropriate nature of Buck's fixation is located more in its painful and embarrassingly non-adult qualities than in the specifically sexual dimension. The use of a naïve-but-honest childlike perspective to highlight the superficiality of particular constructions of adult normality is itself a familiar trope, but articulated here in a manner that is unusually unsettling.

The trajectory of New Queer Cinema has been very much that of the indie sector as a whole since the early 1990s: a period of initial innovation followed by consolidation, expansion, crossover success closer to the mainstream and, as a result, expressions of concern about a loss of radical edge. The volume of queer/gay/lesbian production increased throughout the decade, along with a rapid expansion in the number and scale of gay and lesbian film festivals. This was part of a more general expansion in the presence of gay and lesbian material in popular culture, including television shows ranging from *Will and Grace* to *Six Feet Under*, an increased visibility bought, as Hennessy suggests, at the price of increased commodification. The result, for Rich, among other commentators, was a dilution of quality, accompanied by a movement away from difficult, experimental or edgy work in

favour of material more likely to gain box-office success.⁴³ According to Rich, writing in 2000, New Queer Cinema:

has become so successful as to have dispersed itself in any number of elsewhere. Lacking the concentrated creative presence and focused community responsiveness of the past, the New Queer Cinema has become just another niche market, another product line pitched at one particular type of discerning consumer.⁴⁴

Queer cinema has, without doubt, become more firmly institutionalized, including a presence in the more mainstream parts of the indie sector and, on occasion, in Hollywood itself. A dialectic continues to exist, however, between more and less radical currents. If New Queer Cinema itself was, originally, an attempt to reclaim non-heterosexual difference and dissidence, in the face of the project of positive-image-based assimilation, its own commercialization has stimulated further anti-assimilationist forays, including fringe movements such as Queercore (of which *Frisk* might be taken to be an example) and queer punk.⁴⁵ Even within films that have enjoyed more prominent success, different degrees of 'queerness' can be detected, as can be seen in a comparison of two of the higher-profile examples of the late 1990s, *Gods and Monsters* (1998) and *Boys Don't Cry* (1999).

Neither has particularly queer antecedents, in terms of the filmmakers, although Christine Vachon, producer of transgressive indie features including *Poison* and *Happiness*, co-produced *Boys Don't Cry*, distributed by Fox Searchlight. The style of each is relatively slick and conventional on modest budgets (\$3.5 million for *Gods and Monsters*, \$2 million for *Boys Don't Cry*). Each offers a framework that operates effectively to contain the queer dimension, although this seems more strongly the case with *Gods and Monsters*, a portrait of the last days of the gay Hollywood director James Whale. The characterization of Whale is untroubling to familiar/dominant constructions of male homosexuality. In a mannered performance by Ian McKellen, a prominent gay rights activist himself, Whale offers a very 'safe' gay image: a mischievous theatrical old queer, playing on gay-coded qualities of 'distinction' and traits of upper-class 'Englishness', an example of the kind of class-aspirational, culture-oriented gay background described by Dyer. The

wealthy ex-Hollywood milieu in which the film unfolds is one in which 'decadent' and 'excessive' behaviour might be expected, rather than appearing particularly transgressive, even if it is said to have been considered scandalous at the time.

The opposite is the case for *Boys Don't Cry*, the texture of which comes from a bored-youth, neon-lit, white 'trailer trash' Nebraska, in which the out-of-place gender ambiguity of the central character, Brandon Teena/Teena Brandon (Hilary Swank), proves a source of violent provocation. Brandon is presented as a young woman, physiologically, who passes as a man, is attracted to other women and seems to have plans for surgical gender realignment. 'I'm not a dyke,' Brandon insists. At times, particularly in the latter stages, the film plays with suggestions that Brandon's physiology may itself be ambiguous, although that proves not to be the case. Either way, the film queers conventional constructions of gender identity much more than *Gods and Monsters*. Brandon's lover Lana (Chloe Sevigny) maintains her attachment, physically and emotionally, despite indications that she is aware of his/her status before the forced revelation of the physiologically reductive 'truth'. The possibility of accepting so non-conventional a relationship is admitted; a relationship the ambiguity of which, the film suggests, is a greater threat to the prevailing gender economy than a simple and more easily accommodated case of lesbianism. Assertion of strictly physiologically defined conventional sex/gender boundaries is equated, literally, with violent assault, stripping and rape, followed by murder. The 'containing' narrative framework, in this case, is the format of 'doomed love', the potential of which to universalize in the name of commercialization is implied in Kimberly Peirce's invocation of *Romeo and Juliet* as one of the frames of reference for the film.⁴⁶ Doomed love, that is, with the particularly indie-marketable atmospherics of a going-nowhere, wasted-lives 'road' movie format, in which impressions of verisimilitude are mixed with estranging stylized time-lapse touches of the hyper-real.

Boys Don't Cry demonstrated the crossover potential of a film that retains a distinctly queer and unsettling dimension, including an angry attack on the violent policing of gender boundaries, even if this is blended with more familiar ingredients. It achieved the very high profile of a best actress Oscar award, among many others, for

Hilary Swank, if not any great box-office performance (a US gross of \$11.5 million, respectable for the budget). The centrality of Swank's performance to the reception of the film is particularly important to its queer status, given its location at the heart of the issues of gender ambiguity confronted by the film. The spectacle of Swank's act of male drag is in many respects 'convincing', creating a plausible impression of 'maleness', but one in which a sufficient mix of signifiers is present to maintain the *frisson* provided by a destabilizing sense of androgyny. As far as the likely experience of the viewer is concerned, *Boys Don't Cry* is an example of the slippage that often occurs between distanced awareness of star/actor performing and absorption into the world of the fictional narrative. The two can work against each other, but in this case the 'quality' of Swank's performance, as validated by awards committees, seems to strengthen the impression created by the diegesis.

The dialectical relationship that exists between more or less radical/alternative gay/lesbian/queer-oriented material can be explored further by looking briefly at some examples of uses made of one of the most familiar mainstream genre frameworks: romantic comedy. Gay- or lesbian-oriented romantic comedy is a good example of the use of existing formats within which to offer alternative perspectives, a strategy examined in detail in the previous chapter. In some cases, such as *Go Fish*, romantic comedy is given a distinctly indie/alternative quality, beyond the fact that the relationships on which it focuses are lesbian or gay. In others, the conventions of the form are played more or less 'straight', 'difference' being restricted to the shift from heterosexual to homosexual romance. The former is designed to appeal to both a gay/lesbian-specific and a broader indie niche audience. The latter is based on the assumption that alterity in one dimension – gender orientation – does not necessarily create a demand for products marked as particularly 'alternative' in others.

Go Fish clearly has the stamp of 'indie' movie, in its grainy, low-budget black-and-white photography, harsh sound quality, the use of a number of 'arty' expressive devices, and in the fact that it was the first lesbian-themed feature associated with the queer boom of the 1990s. Sequences of associative abstract imagery – spinning tops, hands, falling paper, a light going out; much of this shot against plain black backgrounds – recur throughout the film, along with other expressive

effects that mark an injection of avant-garde experimentalism into the narrative texture. A group of four women's heads shot from above functions as a self-conscious running commentary on the status of the central plot thread, the developing relationship between Max (co-screenwriter Guinevere Turner) and Ely (V.S. Brodie). Much investment is put into the creation of an impression of the distinctive metropolitan lesbian milieu in which the action unfolds. While attending to such specifics, however, the basic structure of *Go Fish* remains rooted in mainstream romantic comedy convention: the romantic bringing together, eventually, after various delays, of two initially unlikely-seeming partners: the brash young Max and the older and more reserved Ely. The difference between more and less indie/alternative treatments of such material can be seen in a comparison between *Go Fish* and *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love*. The familiar romantic comedy dynamic of differences-overcome-through-love is played up more strongly in the latter, a fact that increases the conventional nature of the production. The differences between 17-year-olds Randy (Laurel Holloman) and Evie (Nicole Ari Parker) are exaggerated (rebellious, butch, white, rock-oriented tomboy lesbian from poor background vs. rich, black, 'sophisticated', so-far-straight, classical music oriented Range Rover driver), to a point that makes their union a far more Hollywood-style magical fantasy than seems the case in *Go Fish*, an impression underlined by the absence of any other formal departures from the classical style.

A mix of milieu-specific and familiar-conventional features is also found in mainstream-style, gay-male-oriented romantic comedies such as *Jeffrey* (1995) and *Trick* (1999). In *Jeffrey*, a light, witty approach, including direct address to camera and other frame-breaking diversions, is given a darker, AIDS-era dimension in the revelation that Steve (Michael T. Weiss), the character romantically pursuing the reluctant title figure (Steven Webber), is HIV positive. The gay-specific spin of *Trick* lies in the fact that the will-it-happen/won't-it-happen relationship around which it revolves is reduced to the temporal dimensions of a one-night stand, following a wordless subway pickup of musical-comedy writer Gabriel (Christian Campbell) by go-go boy Mark (John Paul Pitoc). Both films obey basic romantic narrative conventions such as the presence of 'blocking' factors, or characters,

that serve to frustrate the development of romance, as is also the case in *The Incredibly True Adventures*, but they are given specific resonance. In *Jeffrey*, the principal blockage is Steve's HIV status, and Jeffrey's attitude, only the latter of which can be overcome. In *Trick*, the problem is more pragmatic: the lack of a space in which to fuck, in a subculture based on gratification that cannot easily be delayed.

Anyone looking for an example from the domain of romantic comedy with which to argue the blunting of New Queer Cinema's edge might look no further than Gregg Araki's entry in the format, *Splendor* (1999), a much softer confection than his previous films. *Splendor*, a designer-stylish and snappily written homage to the screwball comedy of the 1930s and 1940s, celebrates an unconventional three-way relationship between early 20s Veronica (Kathleen Robertson) and the two men with whom she falls in love, Abel (Johnathan Schaech) and Zed (Matt Kessler). In traditional romantic comedy style, Veronica leaves the two in favour of a more reliable suitor after becoming pregnant but follows her heart in the end, pursuing what the film marks as the emotionally appropriate course and settling down with Abel, Zed and what turn out to be twins. In some respects, the dynamic is akin to that of *The Doom Generation*, in which the two male leads are rivals for the girl. *Splendor* is uncharacteristically coy by Araki's standards, however, in its treatment of the relationship between Abel and Zed. In *The Doom Generation*, it is clear from the start that a strong homoerotic charge exists, and is to be developed, between Jordan and Xavier (also played by Johnathan Schaech). Similar *potential* exists in *Splendor* but is not realized in any explicit fashion. Abel and Zed share a kiss during one of their early meetings, but only in a 'dare' game played with Veronica. They embrace, Zed in tears, upset at the apparent loss of Veronica, towards the end. They live together in her apartment for the latter portion of the film, but no suggestion is given of any sexual relationship at this stage, or any clear impression that their three-way encounters with Veronica involved direct physical intercourse between the two. Potential exists to read this into the film, but the absence of anything more suggests a retreat by Araki from the more provocative nature of his earlier productions, in favour of a concoction more easily marketed to crossover audiences.

New Queer Cinema was certainly not 'new' by the late 1990s and

early 2000s, but even if such a movement inevitably loses some of its freshness and impact over time, evidence exists for a continuing queer legacy, alongside less provocative lesbian- and gay-oriented production. The highly offbeat *Being John Malkovich* (1999), from the Indiewood zone (production and distribution involving then Universal affiliates Gramercy Pictures and USA Films), is nominated by Rich as a notable heir, its characters 'deeply implicated in the whole project of gender positioning'; specifically Lotte (Cameron Diaz), who immediately decides she is a transsexual, and then finds herself attracted to another woman, after being projected into the mind of the fictional version of Malkovich.⁴⁷ Features such as *Chuck and Buck* demonstrate the indie sector's continued potential for generating gay/lesbian and more diffuse impressions of queerness, and it would be a bold prediction to imagine that Araki had abandoned more provocative material with *Splendor*, his next project at the time of writing being an adaptation of Scott Heim's novel *Mysterious Skin*.

Left of Centre

In the case of New Queer Cinema, some kind of connection between indie cinema as an institution and an identifiable subject-specific culture/subculture has been important to the establishment of its sustained presence in the independent sector. The same might be said of elements of black independent filmmaking that have drawn on ghetto/youth/rap subculture, although the playing up of such components has, in this case, often led closer to the strategies of the mainstream. What about independent filmmaking of a left-oriented slant? Like the radical end of black cinema, it is harder to make a connection of this kind, between a definable cultural-political niche audience and the broader contours of the indie scene. If the dominant audience of much indie cinema is middle-class, educated and more than usually arts-oriented, as seems likely to be the case, this is less likely to be the core constituency of those concerned with issues such as socialism, class politics, socio-economic inequality and exploitation. This is far from an absolute distinction, of course, and the audience for indie cinema is likely to include plenty of left-leaning recruits from the middle classes, among others. But it might help to explain

the paucity of films that can really be said to embody a leftist spirit in anything like the same way that many products of New Queer Cinema are distinctively and assertively queer. Questions of class politics and economy lend themselves far less well to dominant indie frameworks, as suggested above, especially at the level of exploring causal factors rather than symptoms – not that the causes of homophobia or other gender insecurities have been subject to much consideration in New Queer Cinema either.

Independent cinema remains primarily an individual-centred cinema (with some exceptions suggested above, especially work associated with the LA School), a quality it shares with the Hollywood mainstream and that limits its capacity to present radical alternatives to dominant American ideologies, in which conceptions of the freedom of the individual play such a central role in belying the impact of socio-economic determinations. This is apparent in the extent to which the formal innovations explored earlier in this book are so often motivated as expressions of individual consciousness. A central dynamic in much American indie cinema of recent decades revolves around notions of quirkiness, especially quirkiness of character, that run against the grain of a socialist or Marxist perspective. Critique of dominant ideologies tends to come in forms that are implicit more than explicit, in which the reassuring fantasies of Hollywood are undermined from within – the absence of neat reconciliations, the creation of moral ambiguity instead of clear-cut impressions of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ – rather than being replaced by any politically radical alternative.

A more obviously socialist alternative has existed historically in independent cinema, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, a period in which socialism itself was a significant current in American politics. A number of low-budget features were produced by radical groups such as the Labor Film Service in the 1920s, screened primarily at union meetings.⁴⁸ The Depression of the 1930s saw the appearance of *Our Daily Bread* (1934), a hymn to the values of collective production in which unemployed workers group together to run a cooperative farm. Another landmark in socialist-oriented production is *Salt of the Earth* (1954), co-produced by the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, which revolves around a strike at a zinc mine in New Mexico. A striking characteristic of *Salt of the Earth* is the central

role given to women, not just in supporting the strike but in making their own demands on the company in whose properties they live; a similar dimension is to the fore in Barbara Kopple’s documentary *Harlan County, USA* (1976), a sympathetic portrait of a strike over the right to union recognition in the Kentucky coalfield.

The nearest to this kind of material visited in the independent feature movement of more recent decades is *Matewan* (1987), written and directed by John Sayles, the most consistently social-issues oriented of contemporary indie filmmakers. *Matewan* returns to the 1920s history of violent conflict between capital and labour, focusing on a strike in a coal-mining community in West Virginia. A number of points of similarity with predecessors such as *Our Daily Bread* and *Salt of the Earth* can be identified, in terms of both the left-oriented nature of the material and the way this is combined with the use of more dominant-conventional narrative devices. *Matewan* is clearly pro-worker, anti-company, although in a distanced, heightened and clear-cut historical context in which it is no great task to provoke sympathy for the forces of organized labour – a relatively ‘easy’ option, compared with the difficulties that might be experienced in achieving the same impression for most American viewers in a contemporary setting, especially given the use of brownish-yellow tints and gauzy effects that give the film a distinctly ‘period’ feel. *Matewan* presents a number of divisions between the workers, principally between ‘native’ local mine union members and black and recent-immigrant Italian recruits brought in by the company in an attempt to divide-and-rule, a dynamic based on real historical accounts of the period. A number of conventional fictional devices are imposed on the material, however, rendering it into a more familiar and melodramatic form. Much the same is the case in *Our Daily Bread* and *Salt of the Earth*, each of which builds its more political resonances around the often-troubled relationship between a central man-and-wife couple.

The catalyzing factor in bringing about unity in *Matewan* is the arrival of the union official Joe Kenehan (Chris Cooper), in some respects a typical American movie ‘outsider’ figure, who argues against the violent response the company seeks to provoke from the workers. Attention to the political dimension of the film, the specific nature of the conflict as one between labour and capital, is often displaced by

generic resonances and the employment of melodrama. The 'bad guys', especially the lead hired thug, are irredeemably nasty, at a personal level. A highly melodramatic device involving allegations of sexual assault against a naïve widow is used at one point to put Kenehan under suspicion; melodramatic use is also made of another 'innocent' but more committed figure, a youth who manages to wrap an encoded message into a sermon to save Kenehan in the nick of time. *Matewan* owes a good deal to the Western tradition – the loner-with-a-past who comes into town, a climactic shoot-out in the main street, the generic resonances of which are played up in posters and video-cover artwork – although with some significant departures. These include the fact that Kenehan's disavowal of violence is maintained (unlike the classic Western protagonist, the former gunfighter who reluctantly picks up his weapon in defence of an embattled community) and that he dies unceremoniously off-screen in the end. In terms of narrative and formal strategies, departures from the mainstream are relatively minor: the bottom line of the film is to rely on very conventional patterns of emotional manipulation, probably considered a necessity in any attempt to put relatively radical material into any substantial form of commercial circulation.

A similar pattern is found in most of Sayles' work, including the ensemble pieces *City of Hope* (1991) and *Sunshine State* (2002) in which he deals most explicitly in areas of political controversy. In *City of Hope*, Sayles presents a much more complex and multi-layered set of competing interests, a function of turning from the relatively black-and-white issues of *Matewan* to the context of contemporary urban politics. The stance of the film is essentially liberal rather than radical, in its commitment to an emphasis on complexity and ambiguity, qualities more characteristic of commercial-indie cinema than indications of clear-cut commitment to a single cause. A black community group is shown to be prone to ritual oversimplification in its fight against injustice, too readily taking advantage of incidents that might promote its cause, without regard to the specific facts of the case (specifically, a malicious allegation of sexual molestation). The film revolves around the personal dilemmas faced by a small number of individuals at the centre of its web of tensions and allegiances, deploying a multi-strand narrative of the kind examined in Chapter 2 to depict a network of

overlapping relationships, a dimension emphasized visually by Sayles' use of transitions in which the focus often moves from one thread to another within the same shot. The strength of the film is its refusal to admit the possibility of simplistic solutions to deeply ingrained problems. There is no unambiguously heroic individual action of the kind often deployed in Hollywood as an emotional displacement of irresolvable social issues. The end is distinctly downbeat, but without the abandonment of any prospect for meaningful action. One of the central characters is left bleeding, probably to death. Another, a black city councilman, decides to play to the crowd in relation to the alleged molestation, against his instincts, but quickly shifts the emphasis towards an intervention in the more substantial issue facing a inner-city black community threatened with displacement from its home. A similar issue is central to *Sunshine State*, in which an exclusive beach-resort development threatens a black community in Florida. A mixture of responses to the prospect is explored, mostly but not exclusively negative, along with an array of individual-character subplots, although in this case the *deus ex machina* device of the discovery of an important archaeological site creates an arbitrary resolution in which the development is abandoned.

The strategy adopted by John Sayles – a commercial necessity, to a large extent, even if also a personal preference – is to use typically indie variants on mainstream practice to make points that have specifically social-political resonances: multi-strand and/or low-key narrative structures, along with different attitudes towards genre (the use of genre resonances in *Matewan*; their deflation, primarily, in an example such as *The Brother From Another Planet* [1984], in which a mute black alien lands up in Harlem). Alternative material is conveyed through devices that remain largely, if not entirely, familiar-conventional, a position that would be located, in broader left-aesthetic theory, closer to that of Georg Lukács than Bertolt Brecht. In a series of debates among Marxist theorists, Lukács favoured the use of existing 'realist' fictional devices – principally those associated with the nineteenth-century novel – to produce a detailed picture of the surface texture of existence through which the 'underlying essence' could shine.⁴⁹ Brecht's theatre is associated with a formally more radical strategy, in which devices would be used to distance or 'alienate' the viewer

from the fiction, to make clear its constructed nature and to create a more critical-analytical position for the spectator – an approach taken up most notably in film by Jean-Luc Godard and also manifested implicitly, to some extent, in some of the examples of New Queer Cinema cited above. In the work of Sayles, as in most American indie cinema, the viewer is encouraged into a position of close proximity with rather than distance from central characters, a distinctive feature of his ensemble works being the larger-than-usual number of characters who are presented either sympathetically or not entirely unsympathetically. Features that seek to keep the viewer at greater distance from central figures are notably thin on the ground, a striking exception being the mock-documentary *Bob Roberts* (1992), a political satire directed by and starring Tim Robbins as a blandly odious right-wing candidate for the US Senate.

It is the use of documentary-style convention that enables such distance to be kept from the central character of *Bob Roberts*. The title figure is seen only as viewed by the fictional filmmakers, which is, by definition, a more distanced perspective than that associated with the dominant fictional conventions – mainstream and indie, in many cases – through which we are presented with the illusion of a more intimate connection to character. An indication of the difficulty that can result from the more direct and positive presentation of political material is found in the impact on the film of a number of sequences in which we are presented with the opinions of Roberts' electoral opponent, Brickley Paiste (Gore Vidal). Paiste's interventions are entirely to the point, a critique of American foreign policy in the lead-up to the Gulf war of 1991. The material is precisely the kind of riposte to dominant perceptions that might be expected from a politically oriented independent production, but it sits a little awkwardly in the film, shifting its sharply satiric edge into a direction that seems overly sanctimonious, even for the viewer who agrees with the sentiment expressed. The reason for this may be that Paiste's comments are addressed more directly to the viewer than is usually the case, his arguments being put to the filmmaker in 'interview' segments in which he faces almost to camera. The effect is to upset the fictional balance and shift the mode of address, creating an impression of 'preaching' to the viewer rather than integrating the material more

effectively into a diegetic universe, *from which* the viewer could draw the appropriate conclusions.

If *Bob Roberts* uses mock documentary to create an impression of satirical distance, documentary itself is a form in which it is generally possible to create a more analytical framework than is usually found in narrative fiction. As far as aspirations towards theatrical distribution/exhibition are concerned, documentary filmmaking is more or less coterminous with the independent sector. Even in the indie scene, the number of documentaries that get far beyond the festival circuit is minimal, only rare examples achieving significant breakout status. Documentary in general is beyond the scope of this book, for reasons of space, except for its influence on fictional forms, as considered in earlier chapters. It is one of the major sources of more directly social-issues-oriented independent production, however, and will be considered briefly in that context. In addition to Kopple's *Harlan County, USA*, past examples include the blacklisted drama/documentary mix *Native Land* (1942), an angry outburst against state-sponsored oppression of American workers who fight for their rights, the films of Richard Leacock and Frederick Wiseman in the 1960s, and the work of Emile de Antonio. De Antonio was an influential figure in the creation of the infrastructure of the 'New American Cinema' of the late 1950s and early 1960s, performing roles including the distribution of the Beat cult film *Pull My Daisy* (1959) and the more general promotion and support of the movement.⁵⁰ De Antonio's own films – including *Point of Order* (1963), a compilation of footage from the televised Army-McCarthy hearings, *In the Year of the Pig* (1968), a pointed deconstruction of American policy in Vietnam, and the portrait of Nixon given by *Millhouse: A White Comedy* (1971) – were potent interventions in the politics of their time, combining a radical stance with formal innovations such as the abandonment of conventional narrative devices in *Point of Order* and the use of dissonant sound effects in *In the Year of the Pig*.

Documentary offers a number of modes of expression different from those used in both mainstream and independent narrative-oriented features, although points of overlap can also be identified. Documentary offers greater scope for investigation of causal factors involved in social phenomena. It is free, in principle, from the individual-character-

centred nexus of most fiction-feature production, although many documentaries choose to orient themselves around central (real-life) characters and share some qualities with their fictional counterparts, a factor that helps to explain some of the more prominent successes. The unexpected box-office success of *Hoop Dreams* (1994), for example, a US gross of \$7.8 million for a 170-minute non-fiction feature, was owed largely to the fact that its epic account of youthful aspiration to basketball stardom is focused closely around the compelling story of two individuals, the black Chicago-area teenagers Arthur Agee and William Gates. Although a work of non-fiction, shot over a period of several years, the film has many narrative qualities in common with those of fiction, principally a rollercoaster of dramatic ups-and-downs, successes and disappointments, in the lives of the two principals, at both the larger scale of ongoing life-events and in the close-up detail of numerous heightened key moments in which one player or the other holds the last-seconds fate of a basketball match in his hands. In the process, *Hoop Dreams* offers a vivid portrait of life in the black ghetto, including shortcomings in the welfare system and an implicit indictment of the way black basketball talent is exploited by white-dominated schools, colleges and universities. It is through an initial focus on individuals that this is achieved, however, and what emerge are symptoms rather than causes.

De Antonio's films offer a mixture of approaches. The basis of *Point of Order* and *Millhouse: A White Comedy* in the compilation of existing footage leaves the viewer to draw any wider conclusions from material focused on the players involved in individual-centred drama. Both are assembled to create specific impressions, but these are left implicit. *In the Year of the Pig* is more explicit and analytical in approach, using a mixture of stock footage (including the claims of administration spokesman) and its own interviews with commentators who provide a deeper context in which to understand the imperialist nature of American policy in Vietnam. In its more didactic approach, and in the use of strategies such as montage sequences in which the official line is juxtaposed with images supporting the case presented by the film, *In the Year of the Pig* has more in common than most of de Antonio's films with the work of Michael Moore, the most high-profile exponent of politically oriented non-fiction in contemporary indie cinema.

Moore's films depart from the norm for relatively high-profile independent features by focusing attention directly onto contentious socio-economic issues. The impact of the global corporate strategy of relocating jobs from America to low-wage economies overseas forms a central thread of Moore's first feature, *Roger & Me* (1989), and *The Big One* (1998), in which the focus is not just on effects but also on the strategy itself and its motivation: profit. In *The Big One*, Moore highlights the existence of 'welfare for corporations', the use of taxpayers' dollars to support private business operations, to counter more prevalent claims about the supposed burden of limited social welfare for working people. The post-war history of American foreign policy, from the installation of the Shah in Iran to the provision of aid and training to latterly demonized figures such as Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, is sketched from a radical perspective during a montage sequence in *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), to the ironic accompaniment of Louis Armstrong's 'What a Wonderful World'. The theme of profit is also revisited in the film, which identifies a nexus between the cultivation of fear at home and the culture of consumerism. This is unusually radical material for anything other than marginal American media production, even if it does not dig very deeply into the underlying nature of the capitalist system of which these are manifestations. Any more general analysis tends to take second place to routines centred on exchanges with individuals. A good example is a sequence in *The Big One* in which Moore confronts the chairman of Nike, Philip Knight, and suggests that corporations such as his could settle for slightly less large profits in order to keep some jobs in the USA. The point seems well made as far as it goes: that there is not an absolute opposition between maximum exploitation and corporate failure; that some middle ground might be possible. To put the emphasis on individual moral choice and culpability, however, in a classically liberal-reformist manner, is to distract attention from overriding imperatives that result from the structural characteristics of US-centred global capitalism.

Moore is effectively tied into this level of engagement by a rhetorical strategy characteristic of all three films, the basis of which is the confrontation of individuals with the up-front Moore personality. The dynamic is Moore vs. Knight, the latter trying his best to play

along as far as he can, to remain 'cool' under the pressure exerted by Moore rather than opting for the avoidance tactic used by the chairman of General Motors in *Roger & Me*. In this context, Moore can josh and probe and can pitch a number of options (he tries to persuade Knight to open a shoe factory in Flint, Michigan, the city hit by the closure of the GM plant documented in *Roger & Me*; he offers Knight free tickets to accompany him to inspect the factories used by Nike under an oppressive regime in Indonesia; he challenges Knight to a race; he eventually gets Knight to agree to match his own promise to donate \$10,000 to the Flint school system). But this form of confrontation does not encourage any real examination of the factors that prevent Knight from suddenly agreeing to some individual-centred change of heart. Moore's is a style of documentary invested heavily in the presence of the filmmaker, both as active participant and commentator and as a figure whose individual history is often inserted into the narrative. The success of Moore's films in the commercially difficult arena of theatrically released non-fiction (most notably the \$21 million US gross for *Bowling for Columbine*) can be explained largely by his personal style and presence, including a strong vein of ironic comedy and self-deprecation. The formula is one that permits the quirky character-centred style associated with many independent fiction features to be carried into the realm of social-issues-oriented non-fiction. It is notable, however, that the Moore personality plays a reduced role, even if it is still present, in his more overtly political and contentious – and, unusually, even more commercially successful – *Fahrenheit 911*, which out-grossed *Bowling for Columbine* several-fold in the months preceding the 2004 presidential election. Engagement with pressing social-political issues is also carried out at the less commercial, 'guerrilla' filmmaking end of the spectrum, by activists from groups such as anti-war and anti-globalization alliances, a form circulated outside mainstream-indie channels of distribution that has benefited from the advent of more easily accessible DV technology.

Independent cinema, in general, in its more institutionalized forms, is stronger at offering alternative visions through the creation of unsettling or ambiguous impressions than it is at conducting more explicit inquiries into social, economic or political territory.

The former lends itself to a particular niche-audience form of art/entertainment production, just as much concerned with explorations of individual experience as the mainstream in most cases but oriented towards a more complex rendition of the qualities of contemporary life. *Happiness*, for example, confronts the viewer with paedophilia in a manner in which specifics are not ducked or elided, as might be expected to be the case in a studio production. When Bill Maplewood is questioned on the sofa by his young son, neither he nor the viewer is easily let off the hook. Maplewood is repeatedly asked to elaborate, to explain exactly what he did and why. Numerous opportunities to cut discreetly away, leaving the rest to the viewer's imagination, are spurned in a claustrophobic three-and-a-half minute sequence that could not remotely be contemplated in a conventional Hollywood production. An absence of simplistic, melodramatic moral condemnation is characteristic of many of the more challenging independent films examined in this book.

Independent films are far more likely than Hollywood productions to confront us with uncomfortable or prickly central characters and less likely to offer fantastical reconciliatory dynamics in which such characteristics are washed magically away. Alexander Payne's *Citizen Ruth* (1996), for example, offers both a gutsy treatment of the deeply contentious issue of abortion rights and an essentially selfish hard-drinking, glue-sniffing and drug-taking pregnant title character (Laura Dern), who is not softened or sentimentalized during the course of the narrative, even if the dynamic remains conventionally individualist (the film pitches Ruth against what are depicted as organized camps on either side of the issue, although the pro-choice lobby is presented in a relatively more positive light). A similarly shallow-seeming and self-serving character is presented in Payne's *About Schmidt* (2002), a portrait of the hollowness of the existence of the recently retired, widowed and penny-pinching Warren Schmidt (Jack Nicholson). *About Schmidt* does offer something of a more conventionally cathartic, reconciliatory ending, in the emotion that results when Schmidt receives a painting from an African child he has sponsored through a charity, an outlet for his own feelings – in letters to the child that provide a voice-over commentary throughout the film – that constitutes a genuinely unselfish commitment to the needs

of another. The device has much in common with those typical of Hollywood films, in which an emphasis on local reconciliatory detail creates an emotionally rhetorical impression that tends to displace larger unresolved issues. In this case, however, the balance remains more ambiguous. An impression is left, as in a number of other indie films, of an existence that is somewhat desolate, despite the trippingly droll surface tone of much of the film, a denial of the myth/ideology of the American Dream that remains potent even if it offers no effective prescription for change.

Coda

Merging with the Mainstream, or Staying Indie?

The lines between the independent sector and Hollywood are in many places blurred, the difference between one and the other being sometimes radical, sometimes far less clear-cut. Hollywood has certainly learned some lessons from the independent sphere in the past decade. The indie sector has also been shaped by Hollywood, not always to its advantage, both in being embraced institutionally in some parts and in adopting – sometimes being forced to adopt – some of its strategies, such as the emphasis on breakout hits. For plenty of filmmakers, independence has been a one-way stepping stone to Hollywood. Some have remained resolutely independent over a period of decades, notable examples including John Sayles and Jim Jarmusch. Others have moved between the two, sometimes abruptly, sometimes more fluently. The best example of the latter is the recent career of Steven Soderbergh, which can be taken, briefly, as emblematic of the state of the relationship today between Hollywood and the independent sector.

After the breakthrough success of *sex, lies, and videotape*, which remains a milestone in the development of the indie sector as we know it today, Soderbergh's career underwent a series of rapid