**Between ‘indiewood’ and ‘nowherewood’: American independent cinema in the twenty-first century**

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**Abstract**

The article will argue that American independent cinema became increasingly polarized in the first decade of the twenty-first century. On the one hand, ‘indiewood’, a very particular iteration of independent film-making that, for some critics, comprises ‘features associated with dominant, mainstream conventions and markers of “distinction” designed to appeal to more particular niche-audience constituencies’, continued to be the most commercially successful and visible expression of American independent cinema. On the other hand, however, a low-key, low-budget cinema practised primarily through the means of digital technology and exhibited mainly away from the theatres in various online and other digital platforms, became also a representative of American independent cinema, despite its relative absence from the Academy Awards and other platforms that provide recognition. Both these expressions of independent film-making in the United States have engaged with a variety of issues and subjects, though the wealth of resources at the film-makers’ disposal in the first case and the relative absence of financial and other support in the second means that each type of independent film-making has engaged with its subject matter in distinct ways. In this respect, the article will also provide examples through which indiewood and more clearly independent films have approached their topics, paying particular attention to openly political issues – in this case, the impact of the global financial crisis and the ways in which it has been handled by the films.

**Keywords**

American independent cinema

indie film

indiewood

digital film-making

political film

financial crisis

The 75th Academy Awards ceremony that took place on 23 March 2003 was widely perceived by the popular and trade press of the time as an illustrious occasion to celebrate yet another ‘year of the independents’ (Durbin 2003; Gentile and Edelman 2003). Three of the five nominated films for the prestigious Award for Best Picture were released by the specialty film divisions of the major studios, which have operated primarily in the independent, specialized or niche film markets (*Chicago* [Marshall, 2002] and *Gangs of New York* [Scorsese, 2002] by Disney’s Miramax and *The Pianist* [Polanski, 2002] by Universal’s Focus Features). The fourth one, *The Lord of the Rings: Two Towers* (Jackson, 2002) was released by another division of a conglomerated major, Time Warner’s New Line Cinema, and therefore was still classed as ‘independent’, despite the film’s otherwise major blockbuster status and New Line Cinema’s firm move to releasing mostly mainstream films since the early 1990s. Finally, *The Hours* (Daldry, 2002) was a film that was released in the United States by the major studio Paramount, though internationally this film was also handled by Miramax, as its richly literary narrative and slow pace made it sit much more comfortably with the independent film crowd than with the major studio productions. On the night, both the main and a host of other Academy Awards went to *Chicago*, validating one more time long-established American independent and world cinema film producer and distributor Miramax as the foremost force in specialty film, while also marking the company’s tenth anniversary under Disney’s corporate wing with yet another major success story.

Similar ‘year of the independents’ proclamations had taken place numerous times in earlier years, especially since the 1980s when a large number of authorized institutions that contribute discursively to definitions of American independent cinema had agreed that an American independent film movement grounded in several regions in the United States had engulfed the country.[[1]](#endnote-1) For instance, in 1986, the awards for Actor in a Leading Role for William Hurt in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (Babenko, 1985) and for Actress in a Leading Role for Geraldine Page in *A Trip to Bountiful* (Masterson, 1985), both released by Island Pictures, a small standalone distributor with no commercial ties to the conglomerate-owned major studios, had prompted the press of the time to start talking about the maturing of American independent cinema in the 1980s and its increasing crossover to the mainstream (Cook 1986). Eleven years later, in 1997, ‘independent’ films received a record 44 Academy Award nominations, with once again four out of the five films shortlisted for the coveted Award for Best Picture (*The English Patient* (Minghella, 1996), *Fargo* (Coen and Coen, 1996), *Secrets and Lies* (Leigh, 1996) and *Shine* (Hicks, 1996)) released by studio specialty film divisions and standalone companies, prompting another round of triumphant headlines and other ebullient expressions about the great success – and bright future – of independent film-making in the United States (Tzioumakis 2009: 30).

Under these circumstances, the proclamations that followed the 2003 Academy Awards were neither particularly unusual nor completely unexpected. Of course, the application of terms ‘independent’ and ‘independence’ in the early/mid-2000s seemed to be much more stretched compared to its application to the films of the mid-1990s and most certainly to the films of the 1980s. After all, could the second instalment of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy had any points of contact with *Fargo*, a dark comedy set in rural Minnesota in which a car salesman decides to have his wife kidnapped in order to use the ransom that he expects to be paid by his father-in-law to get out of deep financial troubles? Even more astonishingly, could *Two Towers* be perceived as a film belonging to the same category of films as *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, a slow-paced, low-key and low-budget picture that examined the evolving relationship between a homosexual man and a straight male political prisoner in a South American prison? To phrase these two questions in a different way, are conceptions of American independent cinema in the 2000s different from ones in the 1990s and even more radically so from ones in the 1980s?

The answer to these questions has been debated at length by American independent cinema scholars in the past twenty or so years when the field of American independent cinema studies blossomed with a large number of publications,[[2]](#endnote-2) focusing primarily on the more commercial ‘indie’ film that has dominated the sector from the late 1980s onwards, which has often been referred to as ‘the Sundance-Miramax era’ (Newman 2011: 1). This article, however, is not primarily interested in rehashing these debates or in contributing new approaches and angles, though it will provide summaries of certain developments. Instead, it is interested in exploring where American independent cinema has been heading to since the early-2000s when such high profile films as *Chicago* and the other Academy Awards nominated films mentioned in the opening paragraph claimed the label ‘independent’ and arguably stretched it to its very limit. Did American independent cinema and the companies associated with it mutate in such extreme ways that even ‘Indiewood’, a label that film critics and scholars have utilized (often in different ways) to discuss an increasing number of films that seem to bring Hollywood and the independent film sector together (King 2009; Roman 2001), seems to have insufficient exegetic power? [[3]](#endnote-3) And what about the introduction of digital technology in film production in the mid-1990s, which had promised to revolutionize independent film-making and democratize the film-making business (Zimmermann 2005: 248)? Where was that to be found in that particular ‘year of the independents’ and later years?

In exploring these questions, the article will argue that American independent cinema became increasingly polarized in the first decade of the twenty-first century. On the one hand, ‘Indiewood’, a very particular iteration of independent film-making that comprises ‘features associated with dominant, mainstream conventions and markers of “distinction” designed to appeal to more particular niche-audience constituencies’ (King 2009: 2), continued to be the most commercially successful and visible expression of American independent cinema (Tzioumakis 2012a: 11–12). On the other hand, however, a low-key, low-budget cinema practised primarily through the means of digital technology and exhibited mainly away from the theatres in various online and other digital platforms, became also a representative of American independent cinema, despite its relative absence from the Academy Awards and other platforms that provide widespread recognition. Both these expressions of independent film-making in the United States have engaged with a variety of issues and subjects, though the wealth of resources at the film-makers’ disposal in the first case and the relative absence of financial and other support in the second means that each type of independent film-making has engaged with its subject matter in distinct ways. In this respect, the article will also provide examples through which indiewood and more clearly independent films have approached their topics, paying particular attention to openly political issues – in this case, the impact of the global financial crisis and the ways in which it has been handled by the films. To reach this objective the rest of the article is divided into three sections.

The first section will focus on the concept of ‘independence’ in American cinema and will discuss the ways in which it emerged as an alternative to Hollywood cinema (at least in the late 1970s and 1980s) and why. It will focus primarily on independent cinema’s quest for a depiction of everyday realities that was often markedly different from the entertainment bound films of the major Hollywood studios. Having defined and discussed the concept of independence in some depth and how it was originally applied to the films of the 1980s, the article will then move to discuss in detail the recent polarization in contemporary American independent cinema. It will highlight in particular industrial, technological and aesthetic factors and explore the ways in which they have impacted on both the evolution of the dominant ‘indiewood’ film-making practices and the more ‘independent’ practices associated with the digital productions that have started to emerge at the turn of the twenty-first century. This will then be followed by a last section in which I will provide examples of the ways in which films on both sides of the current US independent film spectrum have engaged with a major contemporary political issue. As I will argue, despite their often strongly political pedigree, any radical representations of political issues in indiewood films have tended to be buried under their slick production values, their star-driven narratives and their location within often firm generic frameworks. This means that it is often left to the low-key, low-budget independent films to come up with the more progressive or hard-hitting representations, and the article will finish with a discussion of one such example.

**The Canonization of the American independent film movement of the late 1970s/early 1980s**

Commercial independent film production in the United States has been practised for more than 100 years and under a variety of guises, forms and shapes. Ever since there has been a concentrated, industrially organized basis that assumed (often problematically) the label ‘mainstream film production’ (for instance, the Motion Pictures Patent Company, the major studios, the companies to which the studios have evolved following the collapse of the studio system in the 1950s), there has always been unorganized, semi- or fully organized film production that has been considered ‘independent’, that is, different in a number of ways from the films of ‘the mainstream’. For instance, in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, there was a fully organized film production in the margins of the Hollywood film industry by the so called Poverty Row studios making, for the most part, extremely cheap and with little in terms of production values films that in no way could have been confused with the infinitely glossier films produced by the (mainstream) Hollywood studios. In the early 1950s, a highly political film such as *Salt of the Earth* (Biberman, 1954) that depicted the plight of Mexican American miners as they fought for wage parity and other rights was produced, among others, with the support of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers completely away from the Hollywood industry and was banned upon its release for its openly left politics.

A few years later, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a group of film-makers who came to be known collectively as the New American Cinema Group started making films in a semi-organized way with the express intention of establishing an anti-Hollywood aesthetic by ‘free[ing] themselves from the professionalism and over-technicality’ that characterized mainstream films (Mekas 2000: 74). At the same time, a large number of exploitation production and production-distribution companies such as American International Pictures and later New World Pictures continued the tradition of the no frills genre cinema that had been initiated in the previous decades by the Poverty Row studios, while a new breed of companies became associated with the increasingly sexually explicit films that would eventually create the porn film industry in the 1970s. There was also a much more scattered and scarce feature documentary production, with films such as *Gimme Shelter* (Maysles and Maysles, 1970) and *Harlan County, USA* (Kopple, 1976) achieving theatrical exhibition, while a number of films made in not industrially organized conditions such as *Pink Flamingos* (Waters, 1972) and *Eraserhead* (Lynch, 1976) were curious hybrids that mixed quality film-making with exploitation elements and became cult favourites, often featuring in midnight screenings in art theatres of large US cities.

All this incredibly diverse film production (and many other forms and shapes that for reasons of space cannot feature in this article) can be – and has been – considered ‘independent’ at different times and by different agents and institutions who have contributed towards definitions of independent film-making in the United States. For instance, if one accepts film historian Matthew Bernstein’s broad definition of ‘independence’ as ‘an umbrella term [that] connotes any production practice that is not under the aegis of a major studio of a given period’ (1993: 41) it is clear that all the above examples can be categorized as instances of American independent film production. Among other reasons, this is primarily because none of the above films, companies and industrial structures (where there were any) has had any direct links with the Hollywood studios’ film production and their own organizational strategies.

However, despite the often substantial attention that has been afforded by film scholars and other critics to some of the above examples of independent film-making in the United States (Merritt 2000, Tzioumakis 2006), the majority of academic work dedicated to American independent film has focused mainly on a period that extends from the late 1970s onwards that became widely accepted as the era of ‘contemporary American independent cinema’. The main reason for this emphasis was the emergence of a broadly coherent body of independent films, an ‘independent film movement’, comprised of ‘quality’ pictures that gradually started to stand out from the rest of the diverse independent film production that continued to take place at the same time. This movement included both narrative fiction films such as *Alambrista!* (Young, 1978), *Northern Lights* (Hanson and Nilsson, 1979), *Heartland* (Pearce, 1980), *Return of the Secaucus Seven* (Sayles, 1980) as well as feature documentaries such as *The Wobblies* (Shaffer and Bird, 1979) and *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (Field, 1980), all of which were released theatrically within the space of a few years, providing this particular type of independent film production with substantial levels of visibility.

This type of production shared certain element with the rest of the independent film production of the time, especially in terms of the low budgets of the films and the film-makers’ approach to their subjects that was characterized by a strict economy of means. However, it was also clearly distinct from other types of independent film production, especially exploitation, in terms of its almost complete lack of industrial organization, in terms of its geographical diversity (spread in numerous US regions, from the Deep South to the Pacific north-west) and, not surprisingly, in terms of its formal characteristics and thematic concerns. Writing in 1981, Annette Insdorf noted these films concerned themselves ‘with art grounded in ordinary experience rather than escapism’, were preoccupied with ‘intelligent dialogue’ that invited comparison with major European art films and were different from Hollywood films on a number of levels. This is because independent films tended to privilege engaging newcomers over experienced actors, ‘leisurely narrative over breakneck, television commercial-style pacing, reflection over action and a depiction of political realities over sex and violence’ (Insdorf 1981: 58).

With the majority of these demonstrating that they could offer alternative visions of social and political realities, and as production of independent feature films took off in the 1980s, it is not surprising that both popular and academic discourses of American independent cinema focused overwhelmingly on the contemporaneous study of the independent film sector. As these quality films of the late 1970s and the early 1980s coalesced into a cinema or a movement, they benefited from the support provided by popular and academic criticism.[[4]](#endnote-4) Perhaps more important, the films of the period benefited from the emergence of an industrial and institutional infrastructure that helped this cinema assert itself in an otherwise inhospitable theatrical marketplace. New theatrical film distributors, state and municipal film bureaus, public service broadcasters, the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, the studios’ classics divisions and major institutions such as the Independent Feature Project and the Sundance Film Institute were principal among other organizations and agencies that offered all kinds of support to independent film-makers.

As the involvement of public service broadcasters, state film bureaus and the two major federal funding bodies for the Arts and the Humanities suggests, American independent cinema in the 1980s was discursively constructed as a cinema of quality that *was* different from, if not oppositional to, Hollywood. Free from most of the constraints that characterized studio-based commercial film production, and in order to qualify for the substantial public funding that was on offer through the above agencies and organizations, many independent film-makers of the time chose to occupy themselves with subject matter that was often strongly political. And even though, as Levy has convincingly argued, the overall representation of politics was rarely radical or programmatically left wing (1999: 20) for a number of critics it was sufficiently strong to act as an antidote to the rise of the New Right (Andrew 1998: 36; Biskind 2005: 41), the major principles of which permeated mainstream cultural production at the time, especially Hollywood cinema. As I argued in my earlier work, a large number of the films from the period focused especially on voicing alternative views, representing minorities, examining social problems and uncovering hidden histories (Tzioumakis 2006: 209). It is at that point then when American independent film-making became widely perceived as a vehicle for the articulation of alternative voices and political positions, while other forms of independent film-making such as exploitation and avant-garde were pushed to the margin by critics, and Hollywood cinema continued to be seen as the carrier of dominant (conservative) ideologies.

**Indie, indiewood and beyond**

The above conceptualization of American independent cinema did not last for a long time. Despite its ‘us versus them’ rhetoric in relation to Hollywood, the truth of the matter is that Hollywood was never too far away from the independent sector. For instance, Hollywood studios provided funds towards the operating costs of the Sundance Film Institute right from the start (Greenberg 1984: 22), while industry professionals were habitually providing advice to independent film-makers about how to place their films in the market in events organized by the Independent Feature Project/West (Ventura 1981). Studio specialty film divisions such as United Artists Classics released a number of American independent pictures in the early 1980s, such as *The Chilly Scenes of Winter* (Micklin Silver, 1982) and *Lianna* (Sayles, 1983), while mini-major companies such as Orion Pictures were in the business of financing, producing and releasing commercial films such as *The Terminator* (Cameron, 1984) but also of small, offbeat productions that firmly fit in the independent sector such as playwright-film-maker David Mamet’s *House of Games* (1987). As a result, and as the 1980s were coming to a close, quality American independent cinema started becoming increasingly commercialized and finding often significant success at the box office. Indeed by 1989 even major studios such as Warner Bros. were occasionally testing the waters in the independent film market through the distribution of Michael Moore’s anti-corporate capitalism polemic documentary *Roger & Me* (Moore, 1989). Under these circumstances and with new forms of institutional and industrial support coming from a number of directions in the early 1990s, American independent cinema started becoming popularized and arguably shifting towards film-making that utilized an increasing number of commercial elements that were seen to be missing from the majority of the quality independent films of the 1980s.

As I have argued elsewhere (Tzioumakis 2012a: 8), these elements included but were not limited to the use of stars, with a number of former teen idols such as Matt Dillon and John Cusack, providing substantial visibility and increased audiences to otherwise low-key films such *Drugstore Cowboy* (Van Sant, 1989) and *The Grifters* (Frears, 1990), respectively; the increasing use of generic frameworks that often limited the potential for social critique given genre’s ideological workings; the targeting of niche audience demographics through the use of stories that were appealing to these audience constituencies (for instance, the film *Mi Vida Loca* [Anders, 1993] and its Latina star Salma Hayek were major selling points for the film’s core Latino/a audience demographic); and in a reversal of earlier practices that privileged the social realities of the time over sex and violence, independent films of that period started utilizing increasingly sex and violence as foundational aspects of their narratives, with films such as *Bad Lieutenant* (Ferrara, 1992) flirting strongly with exploitation fare through inclusion of scenes containing pronounced sexual violence.

These and other developments helped usher American independent cinema into a new phase in the early 1990s, with the label ‘indie’ becoming almost immediately popularized. It was this time when the Hollywood studios started moving even closer to the independent sector through the establishment of a second wave of specialty film divisions (Sony Pictures establishing Sony Pictures Classics in 1992) or via the corporate takeover of standalone production-distribution companies (Disney purchasing Miramax Films in 1993) with a view to have a permanent footing on the independent cinema market. Of course, low-key, low-budget independent films with none of these commercial elements and with rich kinship to the films of the earlier 1980s phase continued to be made and released away from the studios, many of which with strong political agendas. For instance, John Sayles’ *City of Hope* (Sayles, 1991) chronicles civic and other corruption in a story about commercial property development in a US city while the films that were collectively labelled New Queer Cinema for their revolutionary representation of identity politics, such as *Poison* (Haynes, 1991) and *Swoon* (Kalin, 1992) were also made in the early 1990s. But despite ample critical and the occasional commercial success, the indie cinema of the 1990s is now mostly remembered for much more popular films than *City of Hope* and *Swoon*, films that contained the commercial elements I sketched above.

From that point on the emergence of ‘indiewood’ was just a matter of time. Despite keeping its production cost at a relatively low $8 million (Molloy 2010: 30) (which of course was still a far cry from the often extremely low budgets of many of the independent films of the 1980s) *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994) boasted major Hollywood stars, a clever use of generic hybridity with appropriations from films noirs, crime films, gangster films, and often excessive doses of sex and violence, which nonetheless were represented in a cartoonish way that rendered them largely inoffensive for the film’s audience. With the Disney-backed Miramax pushing the film aggressively in the global market *Pulp Fiction* became wildly successful at the box office, selling tickets worth over $200 million globally. This level of success for a film that was ‘independent’ in principle impacted the sector as a whole, with Jim Hillier suggesting that it ‘repositioned the goalposts of American cinema blurring the boundary between mainstream Hollywood product and the independent fringe’ (2006: 255). From 1995 onwards, the Hollywood majors started entering the independent film market *en masse*, with Fox, Paramount, Universal and Warner all gradually establishing specialty film divisions with a view to produce and distribute their own brand of American independent film. With other entertainment conglomerates such as the USA Network also entering the market through the establishment of subsidiaries alongside new standalone companies (such as Newmarket and Lion’s Gate) that were infinitely better capitalized than the independent companies that traded in the market in the 1980s and early 1990s, American independent cinema started moving in the late 1990s towards increasingly expensive productions that habitually utilized major Hollywood stars and even stronger genre frameworks than earlier films, while also being accessible narratively and stylistically. *Good Will Hunting* (Van Sant, 1997), *Shakespeare in Love* (Madden, 1998) and *Traffic* (Soderbergh, 2000) were all characteristic early examples of indiewood films all of which made more than $150 million at the global theatrical box office while, as Geoff King suggested, even the major studios themselves started producing and distributed certain films that were influenced by the Indiewood model, citing, among others, *Fight Club* (Fincher, 1999), *Three Kings* (O.Russell, 1999) and *American Beauty* (Mendes, 1999) as key examples (2009: 191).

By 2003, the year that is the entry point for this article, indiewood had been long established as the dominant and most visible expression of American independent film-making, even though the two leading subsidiaries of the studios, Miramax and New Line Cinema, had already been moving to the production and distribution of ultra-expensive films such as *Gangs of New York* and *The Lord the Rings* trilogy, respectively; films that were independent only in name and only on the basis that the companies behind them were other than the Hollywood majors. From that point on, the other studio specialty film divisions and the few large standalone distributors focused to a great extent on the production and distribution of indiewood titles, looking for the big payoff; an ultra-commercially successful film that would offset their losses for underperforming titles: *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Gondry, 2004), *Sideways* (Payne, 2004), *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005), *Crash* (Haggis, 2005), *Babel* (Inarritu, 2006), *No Country for Old Men* (Coen and Coen, 2007), *Burn After Reading* (Coen and Coen, 2008), *The Hurt Locker* (Bigelow, 2008) *Inglourious Basterds* (Tarantino, 2009), *Black Swan* (Aronofski, 2010), *Midnight in Paris* (Allen, 2011), *The Descendants* (2011), *Django Unchained* (Tarantino, 2012), *12 Years of Slave* (McQueen, 2013) and several others. Even though not all of these films proved as commercially successful at the box office as the companies behind them might have wanted them to be, they nonetheless received huge critical acclaim, with four of the above indiewood titles receiving the Academy Award for Best Picture. As a result, and in this particular way, they continued the tradition that wanted independent films to be perceived as quality pictures that were championed by film critics and were providing prestige to the companies responsible for them. On the other hand, though, the increasingly large production and marketing costs for such films and the failure of several high profile indiewood films to recoup their costs, prompted many of the major studios to shutter their specialty film divisions. The ensuing consolidation has left the sector with only three studio specialty divisions (Sony Pictures Classics, Fox Searchlight and Focus Features) and a small number of large independent distributors. In this respect, indiewood pictures have continued to be made and are still dominating the sector, though their number has been decreasing. This is partly because they have been facing increasing competition from a constantly expanding body of low-budget independent films that find success away from the theatres.

Despite making its appearance in the early 1990s, digital film production started receiving critical attention in the independent film sector in the United States after films produced under the Dogme 95 banner such as the Danish *The Celebration* (Wintenberg, 1998) and *The Idiots* (von Trier, 1998) caused a stir with their unconventional film techniques, their controversial subject matter and their anti-mainstream cinema politics.[[5]](#endnote-5) Since the late 1990s digital independent film production took off in the sector with a number of initiatives established to support it. According to King, by 2003, 30 per cent of all feature films submitted to the Sundance Film Festival were shot in digital video (2005: 53), demonstrating clearly the potential of the technology to contribute towards a paradigm shift in American independent cinema. This was especially as new online and other distribution platforms for many of these films had started making their dissemination easier than in the past – a chronic problem for most low-budget independent films given their limited chances for theatrical distribution that was historically dominated by Hollywood studio films and the increasingly commercial indiewood productions. Writing two years later in what became a seminal essay on digital technology and independent film-making, Patricia R. Zimmermann argued that independent narrative film ‘need[ed] to be rethought as a form of cinema that moves across different platforms and through different audiences and economies, rather than the more static model of a feature-length film on celluloid that plays in theatres and film festivals’ (2005: 246), also pointing out that digital film was changing the fabric of the independent film sector which, like every other media sector, was experiencing the long term effects of media convergence.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Zimmermann’s argument became particularly evident a few years later when the mobility of exhibition and consumption of film and other media content increased exponentially, especially after the appearance and rapid market pervasiveness of tablets, smartphones and other mobile exhibition technologies. This opened many new doors for low-budget independent films. As Hayley Trowbridge has noted, during a short but transformative period numerous distribution-related trends have emerged including, but not limited to: the implementation of digital distribution practices (e.g. distributing film via hard drives and digital downloads) and marketing strategies (e.g. QR codes, viral campaigns); an increased visibility and viability of non-theatrical distribution models (especially online distribution through a number of outlets) and the utilization of new marketing avenues (especially through the use of social media); the entry of new companies and platforms into the distribution field (YouTube, Amazon, iTunes) and marketing arena (again the social media, especially Twitter and Facebook); and a general reinvigoration of DIY and grassroots distribution models and marketing strategies that have allowed an unprecedented number of film-makers disseminate their work to particular audiences (Trowbridge 2014). Of course, conventional distribution and marketing methods are far from becoming extinct, with the overall revenues from theatrical film distribution increasing steadily, from $9.3 billion in 2003 to $10.9 billion in 2013 in the United States alone.[[7]](#endnote-7) Still, all these new developments have been changing, on some occasions radically, the rules of the game both for Hollywood and independent film-makers. With the latter now able to locate directly audiences through social media and publicize their films to often very precisely calculated niche demographics, it is clear that this is a time when low-budget independent film-makers do not have to consider extremely expensive theatrical releases, especially as the number of people who watch films on new mobile exhibition technologies is constantly increasing.

Although not many of these films have crossed over to the mainstream in the same way that some of the indiewood titles mentioned earlier have, the low-budget digital independent film sub-sector has an increasing number of success stories, of films the beat the odds and in the process connected with substantial audiences through a variety of distribution methods and exhibition platforms, while also achieving respectable remuneration. For instance, *Tarnation* (Caouette, 2003), a film that reportedly cost just $300 to produce, and *Four Eyed Monsters* (Buice and Crumley, 2005) epitomized what Geoff King has called the ‘digital desktop aesthetic’, that is, they were created primarily with non-professional level equipment that provided these generally autobiographical films with a strong identity (2014: 216). Distributed in novel ways, both films attracted significant attention which translated into respectable commercial success (Tzioumakis 2012b), sufficient for the film-makers to continue making films. Furthermore, the now famous ‘mumblecore’ cycle of films, with titles such as *The Puffy Chair* (Duplass, 2005), *Mutual Appreciation* (Bujalski, 2005) and *Alexander the Last* (Swanberg, 2008), that took its name from the often inaudible way many of the characters in these films talk, consisted primarily of films that were not distributed in the theatres. Yet, these films developed a substantial following in other platforms in which they were released, demonstrating that for this type of independent film-making theatrical distribution and exhibition are anachronistic practices (Van Couvering 2007). Finally, digital independent film production has had significant success to showcase in the documentary feature genre, as a number of documentarians have used the recent advent of digital film-making not just to make films on a number of important subjects, but also to distribute them online and to encourage activism for the various causes their films have championed.

**Independent film politics**

At the core of this increasing polarization in recent American independent cinema lies also the ability of the films in the sector to engage with important issues in ways that are different from the Hollywood studio films. Generally speaking, at the fringe of the industry and without the constraints imposed by a corporate-driven system, independent film-makers have more opportunities to make different films, to engage with important themes and to offer alternative viewpoints on problems and issues that are central to the human condition. In the words of King, ‘an important aspect of any definition of independent cinema…is the space it offers – potentially, at least – for the expression of alternative social political and/or ideological perspectives’ (2005: 199). However, the extent to which this ‘space’ is populated by such perspectives is certainly questionable with King quick to add that this type of cinema is ‘certainly not immune to implication in the enforcement of dominant ideologies’ (2005: 199). I would like to finish this article with the examination of one recent indiewood film, *Nebraska* (Payne, 2013) and one low-budget digital independent film, *Frozen River* (Hunt, 2008) in order to explore the ways in which they have utilized this space for critique when dealing with one of the most significant global issues, the financial crisis of 2008. As my discussion will demonstrate, both categories of film have different ways of engaging with the topics and therefore are able to articulate different types of critiques.

*Nebraska* is the sixth feature length film by well-established, quintessentially indiewood film-maker Alexander Payne, whose writing and directing credits extend to high profile, multi-award winning films such as *Sideways* (2004) and *The Descendants* (2011). It tells the story of an adult man, David Grant (played by TV alumni Will Forte) and his almost catatonic father Woody (portrayed by veteran Hollywood star Bruce Dern). Woody, an ageing alcoholic who spends most of his time sat emotionless in his living room, decides to walk across the state to Lincoln, Nebraska to collect $1 million that he thought he won when he received a marketing notice through the post. Despite the efforts of his son and his wife to convince him that this is a scam and that he did not win anything, Woody insists, and David, who has issues of his own following a relationship break-up and a sales job with no prospects, decides to drive his father to his destination (thus situating the film firmly within the road movie genre) so that his father will see for himself that he did not win. On the way, they stop to see family members and old friends, all of whom in one way or another start laying claim on Woody’s uncollected fortune. Eventually they understand that Woody is delusional and ridicule him. Woody and David finally reach Lincoln, only to find out that indeed he had not won anything. In order to save his father’s pride, David exchanges his car with a used jeep in mint condition, which Woody drives in front of all the people who had ridiculed him, forcing them to believe that he did, in fact, won and causing their admiration and envy.

As is clear from this plot recount, *Nebraska* focuses on the nature of human relationships, in particular familial ones, and how they are tested on an everyday basis by a number of factors. Money is one of these factors, but even though it receives the most attention in the narrative, it is not necessarily over-determined. It is part of the overall milieu and contributes alongside other parameters to the issues the characters have to face in their everyday reality. Inability to communicate, alcoholism, bad parenting, illicit affairs, failed relationships, small town life (the blandness of which is pronounced considerably through the film’s striking black and white cinematography), are all providing obstacles to happiness and self-fulfilment. In this picture, one might be prompted to think, even money would not be able to improve the situation of these characters; had they had more of it, they would not know what to do with it. Instead, it is the *idea* of having extra money rather than having the money itself that is at the core of the film. Woody did not receive the million dollars he thought he had won but this did not matter as he was still able to show off in a mint condition-looking jeep in front of his envious relatives and old time friends.

However, this idea and the fact that it is represented as greed in all of Woody’s relatives and friends certainly can be read as critique of the ways in which greed (of financial institutions but also of everyday people who live in credit) brought the United States and the global economy to a state of collapse. With the subprime mortgage market aimed primarily at disadvantaged people who were normally excluded from primary markets, and with almost all the characters in the film represented as belonging to socially excluded or marginalized working-class groups with no hope of upward-class mobility, *Nebraska* makes that link all too clear. Furthermore, the easy access to substantial funds that the marketing organization promises through the fliers it sends to citizens that do not have realistic hopes of a better life makes its comparison to banks and other financial institutions inevitable. In the end, Woody, with the help of its long suffering son, manages to find a rare moment of happiness and pride, despite having been refused only a little earlier an amount of money that others were ready to kill for. In this respect, the film finishes with a tone of optimism, though the extent to which this happiness can be long term is certainly questionable, especially as the rest of the characters that comprise the microcosm of the film will remain ravaged by social exclusion, unemployment (for the young) and ageing, and unable to reverse their fate.

*Frozen River*, on the other hand, was the first feature film for writer director Courtney Hunt, which was completed following a twelve-year development period until it secured its $1 million budget from a number of investors (Lyons 2014: 202–05). Featuring no stars, no clear generic frameworks and with a story with no elements appealing to a particular demographic, the film found a distributor only after its production was completed and just prior to its premiere at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival (Lyons 2014: 206). And while *Nebraska* also had a long development period that can be traced back to 2003, after 2007 it was developed within Paramount’s specialty film divisions and eventually Paramount itself when its divisions were shuttered (Pond 2014). In other words *Nebraska* was developed with a main financer and distributor attached to it. *Frozen River* enjoyed no such relationship with a studio.

The film tells the story of a destitute white woman, Ray (Melissa Leo), who in her effort to support her family as a single mother resorts to smuggling illegal immigrants via the US Canadian borders together with a native Indian woman, Lila (Misty Upham), who has been separated from her own child. Driven from a desire to provide for their respective children, despite the different circumstances that characterize each woman’s plight, Ray and Lila defy the law, the extremely cold weather and the dangers involved in people trafficking, and focus on amassing enough cash to be able to achieve their objectives: for Ray, buying a new trailer home for her family; for Lila, to take back her son from her mother in law and raise him herself. They both get close to their objectives but when the last smuggling job does not go according to plan, Ray is arrested and put into prison while Lila and her son move in with Ray’s children so that she looks after them. The film finishes with the new trailer home for Ray’s family on its way, which suggests a slight possibility for some future happiness for all characters involved.

From the very beginning the film has set out to show the extreme levels of hardship in Ray’s life. A close-up on Ray’s face, which appears wrinkled, rough-looking and with visible signs of exhaustion pictures convincingly the harshness of her situation. This is followed by a series of shots of the environment within which she lives, an environment characterized by mud, slosh, grey skies, small ugly buildings and trailers, and an increasing volume of snow that covers everything. Within this environment, in which the prospects of improving one’s life seem unlikely, Ray, a working-class woman who works in a discount products store tries in vain to make ends meet. As Sherry B. Ortner has suggested, *Frozen River* (and a few other films with similar storylines that were released around the same time) can be read specifically as a film ‘about the implications of the contemporary neo-liberal economy […] for poor women’ (2013: 190). ‘A bad economy’, Ortner continues, ‘is bad for everyone, but women/mothers face additional disadvantages, including both lower wages and usually greater responsibilities for child care and support’ (2013: 190). Not being able to get a promotion in her work or claim back the money her husband gambled before he left her and the children, and with the whole environment around her not providing a single image of optimism, Ray does not have any other option but to accept an invitation to be involved in immigrant smuggling. ‘Desperation knows no borders’, as the film’s tagline states, cleverly summarizing the film’s storyline in one sentence.

While an environment ravaged by poverty, unemployment and the spectre of downward class mobility was certainly also present in *Nebraska*, *Frozen River* differs both in terms of the extent to which it is interested in the causes for the present situation and the way it presents them. While *Nebraska* points to greed as a product of the complex personal and social relationships between the characters as the core reason for what happens in the narrative, *Frozen River* focuses on more specific political causes, including: management’s refusal to reward labour for its work (Ray was promised promotion within six months but two years later she is still denied by her store manager); an immigration problem that suggests that working class jobs for US citizens are increasingly under threat by illegal labour; the difficulties in obtaining affordable housing (both protagonists live in trailers); and the complete lack of community and/or state support for people who desperately need it (Ray does not have anyone to count for any help, monetary or otherwise). All these causes create a bleak environment where economic betterment is simply not possible within the limits of the law, hence the protagonist’s decision to break it.

However, it is how these causes (and the environment they create) are portrayed that gives this film more power than an indiewood film. While in *Nebraska* the striking black and white cinematography successfully captures the bland existence of small town and rural America within deteriorating social circumstances, it also represents a strong aesthetic choice that the film’s spectator is invited both to understand its symbolic character and to admire its prosaic beauty. *Frozen River*, on the other hand, avoids such a stylization, opting instead for the harsh realism that is produced by the film’s digital cinematography, alongside other stylistic choices such as costume and make up. This approach was welcomed by the critical establishment in the late 2000s, which, tired of many Indiewood films’ suspected ‘manufactured quirkiness’, praised the use of this ‘low key social realism’ as American independent film’s return to its origins in the films of the 1980s (King 2014: 169–70) that, as I mentioned earlier, were characterized by a strong emphasis on political issues. One could argue then that *Frozen River*, as a low-budget example of contemporary American independent cinema that avoids the aestheticization of bigger budget indiewood films, is able to critique the economic crisis in more direct ways than *Nebraska*.

**Conclusion**

The evolution of contemporary American independent cinema in the past 35 or so years has been nothing short of dramatic. From feature films that were sometimes self-funded and even self-distributed to commercially designed films financed, produced and distributed by the Hollywood studios’ specialty film labels and even the studios themselves; from alternative films with often strong political focus to accessible indiewood productions many of which not interested in mounting (political) critique; from small artisanal-like production and distribution to a heavily institutionalized sector; from regional activity to a national film movement. With such dramatic evolution, it is not surprising that even the concept of ‘independence’ itself has been questioned – often severely – by institutions that contribute to discourses surrounding its definition (Tzioumakis 2012a: 14). With indiewood films habitually using major Hollywood stars, generic frameworks, and dealing with commercially appealing subject matter, it is these expressions of independent film-making that have attracted the most criticism for being ‘independent’ films only in name and for not remaining true to contemporary American independent cinema’s initial mission to provide representations that are absent from Hollywood and mainstream media at large. And if indiewood films do engage with political subject matter, as *Nebraska* does, this is often buried under more ‘obvious’ elements that receive critics and audiences’ attention, in this case Hollywood veteran star Bruce Dern’s comeback and distinguished performance, which became the focal point for many of the reviews in popular press to the detriment of the film’s political statement.[[8]](#endnote-8)

In this respect, it is not surprising that critics tend to look for signs of critical engagement with important world issues in the low-budget sub-sector of American independent cinema. Free from the constraints of stardom and the pressures of turning in a mass appeal film, low-budget productions have a better chance of exploiting the space for the expression of alternative perspectives that many audiences have come to expect from independent films. And even though, these perspectives are often presented in allegorical ways, in many instances, as in the case of *Frozen River*, they take direct forms and examine the causes of particular issues in an unflinching manner. In this respect, these films continue the tradition of the independent film movement of the 1980s that attracted critical and popular interest in American independent cinema in the first place.

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Notes

1. See for instance the Collective Editorial of the journal *American Film* (1981: 57), one of the earliest recognitions of contemporary American independent cinema as a ‘movement’, a label that was also adopted by later studies and accounts of the sector (Biskind 2005: 17). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Key studies include: Levy (1999), King (2005, 2009, 2014), Newman (2011), Perren (2012), Tzioumakis (2006 and 2012a). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The term indiewood has been used in slightly different ways by scholars. For King, ‘Indiewood’ (with a capital I) is an industrial/institutional phenomenon in the 1990s and 2000s that has produced a number of films with particular textual qualities that stem both from the mainstream and the independent sector (2009: 1–4). For Tzioumakis, ‘indiewood’ (with lower case i) is a period in the history of contemporary American independent cinema that starts from the mid-/late-1990s in which the dominant expression of film-making is characterized by many of the elements identified by King (2012a: 10–12). In this article, I use my own approach to indiewood but whenever I quote from King I use the capitalized version. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For more information on the ways in which academics offered support to American independent cinema through debates, conferences and writing on the subject see Tzioumakis (2011: 106). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For more on Dogme 95 see Roman (2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For more on media convergence and its effect on American independent cinema see Tzioumakis (2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The figures were taken from Box Office Mojo via <http://boxofficemojo.com/yearly/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For instance, the review of the film in *The Guardian* focuses by and large on Dern’s comeback, paying little attention to any other issues (Kermode 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)