Martin Fradley

Not Hollywood: Independent Film at the Twilight of the American Dream. Sherry B. Ortner. Durham, NC: Duke UP., 2013. p/bk 331pp. ISBN 978-0-8223-5426-0. Price £16.99.

Although an increasingly contentious term, American "independent" film has attracted a significant body of critical work in recent years. Popular overviews like Peter Biskind's entertainingly polemical *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance and the Rise of Independent Film* (2004); anthologies such as *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream* (also 2004); and Claire Perkins' monograph *American Smart Cinema* (2012)[1] have all explored the (supposed) assimilation of a once vibrant and politically oppositional form of American filmmaking by the voracious neoliberal conglomerates that constitute the contemporary Hollywood film industry. Perhaps the most sustained interrogation of these developments has been carried about by British film scholar Geoff King in a significant trilogy of books published by I. B. Tauris: *American Independent Cinema* (2005); *Indiewood, USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema* (2009); and *Indie 2.0: Change and Continuity in Contemporary American Indie Film* (2013).

Joining this voluminous body of work is Sherry B. Ortner's *Not Hollywood: Independent Film at the Twilight of the American Dream*, a volume which implicitly places itself in methodological opposition to King's work. Ortner's central thesis is that contemporary "indie" filmmaking is distinguished by its sustained critical engagement with the ideological tyrannies of American culture in an age of neoliberal hegemony (the "twilight" of the title). Employing an ethnographic approach grounded in interpretive anthropology and cultural studies, Ortner argues that contemporary indies serve as a form of counter-cinema which tells stories that are "too violent, too sexually perverse, to depressing, too morally ambiguous, or perhaps simply too weird for Hollywood screens" (10). In this way, she contends, the indie scene offers a counter-hegemonic challenge not only to the ideological conservatism of mainstream American filmmaking, but also to dominant social, political and economic norms.

Ortner's empathetic approach means that *Not Hollywood* a useful counterbalance to the recently emergent critical consensus *vis-à-vis* the

1 Perkins' text was reviewed in *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* 38 (Fall 2013): 95-9.

neutered politics of a quasi-autonomous independent sector dominated by major studio subsidiaries such as Focus Features, Fox Searchlight and Paramount Classics. Whereas the default cynicism of Geoff King's *Indiewood, USA* presents "indie" as little more than a niche marketing concept, Ortner's passionate advocacy of "harsh realism" (29) as embodied by powerful and evocative films such as *Mysterious Skin* (2004), *No End In Sight* (2007) and *Frozen River* (2008) persuasively rebuts such sweeping accusations. Moreover, Ortner steps outside the methodologies employed by traditional film studies by adopting a Geertzian approach to indie as a discursive construct. Drawing upon interviews with directors and producers working within the American film industry, *Not Hollywood* examines the way creative personnel understand and define their work. Particularly interesting in this regard are, respectively, chapters dealing with the producers of indie movies and, elsewhere, the feminist politics of the indie-sphere. While the former offers valuable insights into the ways in which the university-educated background of many indie producers leads to the direct incorporation of contemporary critical theory in the creative process, the latter uses such films as *Thirteen* (2003) and *An Education* (2009) as a platform for a passionate avowal of indie cinema's broad critique of the ongoing realities of everyday sexism, misogyny and socio-sexual power imbalance. An intriguing chapter about the mundane day-to-day realities of feature filmmaking underscores Ortner's broad emphasis on the iniquities of working life under the socio-economic conditions of neoliberal capitalism. With interviewees repeatedly expressing boredom and frustration at the often grueling and mundane nature of working on a film set, *Not Hollywood* carefully deglamorises creative labor. In doing so, Ortner reiterates the way in which indie filmmaking offers a dark mirror to the glitteringly utopian promises of the American Dream.

Not Hollywood is not without its problems, however. Despite her focus on both industrial self-definition and indie as a discursive formation, too often Ortner's reliance on certain structuring binaries - Hollywood/ indie, mainstream/alternative, conservative/progressive - leads her to make sweeping generalizations that undermine the volume's basic argument. For example, her contention that "an independent film is defined to varying degrees and in varying ways as the antithesis of a Hollywood studio film" (4) leads her to make equally reductive rhetorical claims such as "one could say that Hollywood is to indies as male is to female" (177). Ortner sometimes

lacks critical distance when applying certain adjectives. Terms such as "dark", "offbeat", "risky" and "quirky" have become almost meaningless clichés in the discussion of indie cinema, yet *Not Hollywood* frequently mobilizes them without irony. (Some of the deadpan skepticism of a Geoff King, or the detailed critical nuance of Claire Perkins' work would not have gone amiss here.) Elsewhere, Ortner relies upon the widely-held belief that the pessimism and ironic distance of many indie films is symptomatic of a GenX sensibility. While *Not Hollywood* makes a strong case for this broad argument, there is a nagging sense that this particular demographic trope has long outlived its (limited) usefulness. Finally, while Ortner's work is exemplary in its discussion of films which engage with the realities of life at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum, this is structured by a careful avoidance of celebrated figures (Sofia Coppola, Wes Anderson, Noah Baumbach) whose work is characterized by casual affluence and the kind of elitist solipsism that has become ever more obnoxious in the wake of the 2008 economic meltdown.

Overall, *Not Hollywood* offers a detailed, often insightful and clearly-written overview of the pleasures, politics and broad cultural ethos of American indie filmmaking today. While I struggle to think of a more accessible introduction to this area of contemporary cinema, those of us already teaching and/or researching indie movies may well find that the book tells us frustratingly little that we didn't already know.

Works Cited

An Education. Dir. Lone Scherfig. Perf. Carey Mulligan, Peter Sarsgaard, Alfred Molina. BBC Films/ Finola Dwyer Productions, 2009. Film.

Biskind, Peter. *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance and the Rise of Independent Film*. New ed. London: Bloomsbury, 2005. Print.

Frozen River. Dir. Courtney Hunt. Perf. Melissa Leo, Misty Upham, Charlie McDermott. Cohen Media Group/ Harwood Hunt Productions, 2008. Film.

Holmlund, Christine, and Justin Wyatt, eds. *Contemporary American Independent Cinema: From the Margins to the Mainstream*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.

King, Geoff. *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond.* London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2005. Print.

------ . *Indie 2.0: Change and Continuity in Contemporary American Indie Film.* London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013. Print.

------ . *Indiewood USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema.* London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2009. Print.

Mysterious Skin. Dir. Gregg Araki. Perf. Brady Corbet, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Elizabeth Shue. Antidote Films/ Desperate Pictures, 2004. Film.

No End in Sight. Dir. Charles Ferguson. Perf. Campbell Scott, Gerard Burke, Ali Fadhil. Red Envelope Entertainment/ Representational Pictures, 2007. Film.

Perkins, Claire. *American Smart Cinema.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP., 2012. Print.

Thirteen. Dir. Catherine Hardwicke. Perf. Evan Rachel Wood, Holly Hunter, Nikki Read. Fox Searchlight Pictures/ Michael London Productions, 2003. Film.

Martin Fradley
Edge Hill University, UK