A stimulating new collection of essays that enriches greatly the constantly expanding literature on American independent cinema. Perkins and Verevis have gathered an impressive group of contributors whose thought-provoking discussion of often forgotten, though still important, films challenges existing canons while opening up new and exciting paths in American independent film research, which future studies are bound to follow. Highly recommended!

Yannis Tzioumakis, University of Liverpool

The terms ‘independent’ and ‘indie’ hold instant recognition and considerable cultural cachet in contemporary film and popular culture. As a brand of American filmmaking and a keynote of critical film discourse, indie denotes specific textual, industrial and reception practices that have been enthusiastically cultivated over the last two decades, underpinned by a canon of highly visible films such as *Juno*, *Memento*, and *Slacker* and by influential figures like Quentin Tarantino, Wes Anderson, Kevin Smith and Joel and Ethan Coen.

Looking beyond the directors and works that have branded indie discourse in the 1990s and 2000s, *US Independent Film After 1989: Possible Films* attends to a group of 20 texts that have not been so fully subsumed by existing critical and promotional rhetoric. Through individual studies of films including *All the Real Girls*, *The Exploding Girl*, *Laurel Canyon*, *Jesus’ Son*, *Old Joy*, *Primer* and *You Can Count on Me*, leading cinema scholars consider how notions of indie practice, poetics and politics can be opened up to account for a larger body of work than the dominant canon admits. With particular attention to female directors, this innovative and comprehensive book explores the central tenets of indie scholarship while simultaneously emphasising the classifying processes that can limit it.

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Cover image: *All the Real Girls*, 2003 © Jamine Prods/Jean Doumanian/The Kobal Collection

Cover design: Barrie Tullett
US Independent Film After 1989
For Jamie, and what is possible —CP

For two indie lovers, Zoi and Collis —CV
US Independent Film After 1989
Possible Films

Edited by Claire Perkins and Constantine Verevis
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In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the term ‘independent’ is a cornerstone of American film studies. Substantially detached from traditional economic definitions and through the rise of the neologism ‘indie’, the malleable concept has come to signify a brand or ‘genre’ of filmmaking, a taste culture, a speciality label for major film studios, a mode of discourse, and a resilient framework for auteurist study. Debate continues over the meaning and connotations of ‘independent’ in this critical landscape, with the keynote of the term understood in various ways, including as a ‘conception of quality’ different to conventional, classical Hollywood cinema (Staiger 2013: 21), a sensibility ‘both outside the Hollywood film industry and within it’ (Tzioumakis 2012: 1), and an ‘[aspiration] to hipness’ (Newman 2013: 71). Whether understood as an ‘operational category’ (King, Molloy and Tzioumakis 2013: 2), a ‘cultural formation’ (King 2014: 2), a ‘mode of practice’ (Staiger 2013: 23) or simply an ‘idea’ (Berra 2008: 11), indie is unanimously regarded as a concept relational to Hollywood: ‘what is at stake is a continuum, not an opposition’ (Holmlund and Wyatt 2005: 3).

US Independent Film After 1989: Possible Films takes this landscape as its theme, delineating 1989 as a watershed moment in which many of these critical concepts became dominant. As many histories of US independent cinema show, this is the moment in which the indie ethos is institutionalised, in and through key developments such as the unprecedented success of Steven Soderbergh’s Sex, Lies, and Videotape (1989), the attendant rise of the specialist ‘mini-major’ industry model following Disney’s acquisition of Miramax in 1993, and the consolidation of the Sundance Institute. Describing the late 1980s and early 1990s as the ‘classic’ indie breakthrough period that announced the arrival of a first generation of films and filmmakers, Geoff King temporalises this ‘Sundance–Miramax’ era of indie history by suggesting that a second generation emerges around twenty years later as ‘indie 2.0’
practically and discursively shaped by game-changing digital technologies at the levels of production, distribution, exhibition and reception. As another key marker in this history, 2010 is also the year in which Disney shuts down Miramax, foreshadowing the rapid closure of numerous other speciality divisions and symbolically drawing a line under the two decades in which indie is built up as a context: ‘an already-established and institutionalised category in which both to work and for work to be placed – positively or negatively – by critics and other commentators’ (King 2014: 5).

This volume takes a particular interest in how this twenty-year period has functioned to produce a recognisable canon of film work. The discursive construction of the sector has arisen out of the evaluations of industry, critics and audiences on what is and isn’t indie and why, leading to specific films and directors being repeatedly attended to for the significance and/or representativeness of their contributions. This process has significant overlap with the commodification of the indie ethos that has accompanied its institutionalisation, where properties receive popular validation when they are readily marketable in terms of a ‘niche’ quality. For some, this development marks a low point in American cinema. As Kent Jones wrote in Film Comment in 2004, the operation of indie in a world of corporate global entertainment necessitates a strategy of ‘the self-defined filmmaker’ who must ‘[wear] his or her sensibility like a suit of armour’ and ‘define themselves right out of the gate to such an extent that their reviews must almost write themselves’. Inhibiting the mobility with which filmmakers are able to move around within the studio system, Jones likens their brands or niches to ‘small patches of land endlessly worked and reworked within the vast, cutthroat tenant farming system that is modern American cinema’ (2004: 41).

Demonstrating the auteurist imperative that underpins the indie sector, as well as the gender bias that has historically shaped the discourse of authorship as a whole, this self-defining strategy has led to the formation of an indie canon governed primarily by the mythology of the white, male ‘maverick’ director. Films from a relatively small group of figures are regularly attended to in a sustained manner in critical and popular indie scholarship, not always because commentators are valuing their ‘greatness’, but because the work is representative of indie cinema as a cultural formation. Figures such as Quentin Tarantino, Joel and Ethan Coen, Wes Anderson, Todd Haynes, Jim Jarmusch, Charlie Kaufman, Paul Thomas Anderson, Hal Hartley, Todd Solondz and Kevin Smith have thus been consistently valued by both critics and audiences for singular and distinctive visions that resist conventions of genre, narrative and style, self-consciously demanding an engagement both emotional and intellectual. Others, such as Steven Soderbergh, Gus Van Sant and Richard Linklater are esteemed for an opposingly diverse vision that navigates the independent–mainstream continuum in its movement between low and high
budget, Hollywood work. From this group of writer/directors and more, films such as *Slacker* (Richard Linklater, 1991), *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), *Clerks* (Kevin Smith, 1994), *Fargo* (Joel Coen, 1996), *Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998), *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), *The Royal Tenenbaums* (Wes Anderson, 2001) and *Juno* (Jason Reitman, 2007) have been discussed for the ways in which they announce themselves as indie properties in their knowing appeal to audiences seeking an ‘alternative’ worldview and a ‘quality’ product, and in this way brand indie discourse as a recognisable sensibility.

Beyond this canon lie countless films that are regarded as significant to indie culture without so obviously demonstrating the indie ‘brand’, and it is to twenty such films that the contributors in this volume turn their attention. The aim of this approach is three-fold. First, the book seeks to enable sustained discussion on a group of films that mobilise themes and strategies that are central to this sector but have received limited critical attention during the period here categorised as a ‘first generation’ of indie production and discourse. A specific focus is taken on the work of female practitioners to acknowledge that – while there are numerous women working within the indie context – theirs is far from the dominant narrative. Second, each essay begins with a film rather than a topic or concept, aiming to allow the contours of the indie sensibility to arise out of this engagement, rather than as a predetermined idea that the film serves to illustrate. Only one film by any single filmmaker is included in the group of twenty to further support this goal. A third, related objective is to specifically contest the manner in which the dominant indie canon has been formulated: acknowledging that, as Adrian Martin has noted in a recent reflection on the process of canonisation, some films and filmmakers are important not so much for the richness or representativeness of their art, but for ‘the role they play, the significance they have, in a film spectator’s life’ (2014). In assembling a diverse range of authors who all have an investment in indie culture, the book seeks to allow the cultural significance of these under-theorised films to emerge in and through the individual perspective and experience of each. Limitations of space inevitably leads to the omission of more ‘possible films’ (and filmmakers) that would have enhanced the aims of the volume – titles such as *Nadja* (Michael Almereyda, 1994), *Tully* (Hilary Birmingham, 2000), *The Tao of Steve* (Jenniphr Goodman, 2000), *Love Liza* (Todd Louiso, 2002) and *P.S.* (Dylan Kidd, 2004).

The approach taken in this volume seeks to complement the wide range of existing scholarship on US independent and indie cinema in the post-1989 era, responding to what can be framed as three broad trends in this area. The first includes books that give an expansive overview and conceptualisation of independent film, dealing with a large variety of texts and topics in (necessarily) limited detail. This group includes directory-style volumes such as the two books edited by John Berra for the ‘Directory of World Cinema’
series – *American Independent* (2010) and *American Independent 2* (2013) – where films and directors are discussed in brief themed sections, and Jason Wood’s more obviously canonic *100 American Independent Films* (2004). It also includes books that collect together case studies on a range of films, directors, and topics such as Jim Hillier’s edited collection *American Independent Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader* (2001), Rona Murray’s guide *Studying American Independent Cinema* (2011), and Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt’s seminal collection *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream* (2005) which brings original work by theorist/practitioners such as Jonas Mekas and Jon Jost together with contemporary authors to examine the industrial and ideological evolution of the term. These books all take a broad angle on independent cinema, writing from the perspective of the post-1989 cultural phenomenon but taking a longer historical view on films, debates and ideas that led to and shaped this moment.

A second trend takes a primarily institutional view of independent film in America, cataloguing and analysing the industrial developments that underpin the powerful economic narrative of independence. This grouping includes the exhaustive work of Yannis Tzioumakis in *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (2006) and *Hollywood’s Indies: Classic Divisions, Specialty Labels and the American Film Market* (2012): the former attending to the operation of independents from the studio era through to the mid-2000s, the latter focusing on individual companies in play between 1980 and 2008 through the progressive categories of ‘independent’, ‘indie’, and ‘indiewood’. Alisa Perren focuses on the supremely influential role of Miramax in this later configuration in *Indie, Inc.: Miramax and the Transformation of Hollywood in the 1990s* (2012) and Peter Biskind attends to the specific individuals and personalities involved in *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance and the Rise of Independent Film* (2004).

The third and largest group of scholarship focuses squarely on indie cinema as a contemporary cultural formation, tracing the films, practitioners, and discursive practices that have given rise to this. Restricting focus for the most part to material and developments from the 1980s onwards, this work combines industrial, textual and audience analysis to examine indie as what Michael Newman terms ‘an American film culture’: ‘[comprising] not only movies but also institutions – distributors, exhibitors, festivals, and critical media – within which movies are circulated and experienced, and wherein an indie community shares expectations about their forms and meanings’ (2011: 1). In addition to Newman’s *Indie: An American Film Culture* (2011), this grouping includes Geoff King’s comprehensive tracking of the era across *American Independent Cinema* (2005), *Indiewood, USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema* (2009) and *Indie 2.0: Change and Continuity in Contemporary American Indie Film* (2014), and John Berra and Deidre E. Pribram’s coverage of slightly
earlier eras in, respectively, Declarations of Independence: American Cinema and the Partiality of Independent Production (2008) and Cinema and Culture: Independent Film in the United States, 1980–2001 (2002). It also includes J. J. Murphy’s specific attention to indie screenwriting in Me and You and Memento and Fargo: How Independent Screenplays Work (2007), the discussion of the niche indie sensibility of ‘smart’ cinema – a term coined by Jeffrey Sconce (2002) – in Claire Perkins’ American Smart Cinema (2012), the ethnomographically impelled work of Sherry B. Ortner in Not Hollywood: Independent Film at the Twilight of the American Dream (2013), and the diverse approaches of the contributors to American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond (2013), edited by King, Tzioumakis and Claire Molloy. This wing of indie scholarship also includes a number of director-focused studies that demonstrate the central place of authorship in the construction of indie as a cultural category, and specifically the notion of the male maverick auteur: James Mottram’s The Sundance Kids: How the Mavericks Took Back Hollywood (2006), Sharon Waxman’s Rebels on the Backlot: Six Maverick Directors and How They Conquered the Hollywood Studio System (2006), and Jesse Fox Mayshark’s Post-Pop Cinema: The Search for Meaning in New American Film (2007).2

This work has enabled a wide range of constructive ways of understanding ‘independent’ and ‘indie’ as an industrial, textual and critical category of contemporary American filmmaking shaped by institutions, economics, ideology, taste, audiences, authors, critics, genre, narrative, style and technology. All of these factors are mobilised by the contributors to this volume in their analyses of this range of under-theorised films. But what emerges as most significant is the way in which the contours of an alternate independence arise out of their description and discussion of how and why these films have not been absorbed by the rhetoric of Indiewood in the manner of the higher profile examples and figures discussed at length in the above body of scholarship. These films are positioned as being somewhat independent of this dominant indie canon, in a manner that – for some, like Buffalo ’66 (Vincent Gallo, 1998), Old Joy (Kelly Reichardt, 2006), Primer (Shane Carruth, 2004), Bubble (Steven Soderbergh, 2006) and You Can Count on Me (Kenneth Lonergan, 2000) – picks up on and extends the scattered discussion of them that already exists in existing scholarly and cinephile writing.3 Various points are advanced in the discussion of how others have not been attended to in any sustained way in indie scholarship, including that they have been overshadowed by the writer/director’s other work (Kicking and Screaming [Noah Baumbach, 1995], Laurel Canyon [Lisa Cholodenko, 2002], The Weight of Water [Kathryn Bigelow, 2002]), that they have a profile that lies elsewhere (Living in Oblivion [Tom DiCillo, 1995], Secretary [Steven Shainberg, 2002]) and that their attention to female subjectivity does not fit with the male identity politics of the dominant indie
tradition (Lovely & Amazing [Nicole Holofcener, 2001], Waitress [Adrienne Shelly, 2007], The Weight of Water, Secretary).

Contributors to this volume take a diverse range of approaches in describing the independent qualities of these films, and in doing so give rise to a variety of positions on indie as a cultural category. A convincing dimension of this approach lies with the close and careful textual analysis that the essays undertake in engaging with a single film, which in each case is understood to be ‘small’ in both its internal scale and in the mark it has left on the landscape of American indie cinema. The range of perspectives that are mobilised – the lines and contours of each essay – can be mapped in three ways: methodologically, institutionally and thematically.

A first way of mapping the essays is to identify how each falls into one of three broad methods. The first locates the film primarily in terms of its author and his or her indie profile, as demonstrated by Radha O’Meara on Bubble, Steven Rawle on Waitress, and R. Barton Palmer on The Weight of Water. The second approaches the film through a conception of indie as a form that hybridises and/or critiques other cinematic traditions and genres. This method is evident in Laura Rascaroli’s take on The Exploding Girl (Bradley Rust Gray, 2009) as a film that simultaneously channels and undermines the central principles of neo-realism, in Mark Berrettini’s discussion of the fusion of tropes from crime films, adventure narratives and women’s films in Frozen River (Courtney Hunt, 2008), and in Elena Gorfinkel’s argument that the queasy affect of Secretary derives from its hybridisation of art cinema, soft-core pornography, literary adaptation, romantic comedy and smart cinema. In some essays, this approach is extended into a discussion of how the hybrid format mounts or invites a critique on the category of indie itself. This occurs in Linda Badley’s examination of how Lovely & Amazing intersects the traditions of smart cinema, the chick flick and feminist counter-cinema in a manner that refuses to occupy a marketable indie ‘niche’ or brand, and in Hilary Radner’s employment of Rachel Getting Married (Jonathan Demme, 2008) to question exactly how ‘independent’ the values of this ‘smart-chick’ format are in relation to mainstream genres and ideologies. It is evident too in Patricia White’s analysis of how the politics of intersectionality that define Pariah (Dee Rees, 2011) dynamically inform contemporary indie culture, but simultaneously register the tensions that exist within this increasingly mainstreamed realm between community and commerce. A third method taken by contributors is to understand their chosen film in terms of indie cinema’s own discursive traditions or conventions. This approach is taken up in James MacDowell’s analysis of how Buffalo ’66 engages the indie convention of the ironic happy ending, and in John Berra’s identification of Living in Oblivion as the centrepiece of the mid-1990s cycle of indie productions that self-consciously dramatise the trials and tribulations of independent filmmaking. A
different line is taken in those analyses that locate their film primarily in terms of a common indie theme, including Constantine Verevis on drug subcultures in *Jesus’ Son* (Alison Maclean, 1999), Jaime Christley on mental instability in *Keane* (Lodge Kerrigan, 2004), Chad R. Newsom on post-collegiate youth in *Kicking and Screaming*, Jodi Brooks on retro music cultures in *Laurel Canyon*, and Jesse Fox Mayshark on developmentally arrested adults in *You Can Count on Me*. Other essays working under this broad method show the central place of genre as a framework for understanding how indie films challenge and critique classical story formats and conventions. This is evident in Claire Perkins’ discussion of *All the Real Girls* (David Gordon Green, 2003) as an indie romance (a construct also signalled in connection with *Buffalo ’66*, *Kicking and Screaming*, *Secretary* and *Waitress*), in E. Dawn Hall’s nomination of *Old Joy* as an indie road movie, and in Geoff King’s identification of *Primer* as indie science fiction grounded in the ‘micro budget sector’ of production that lies at the opposite end of the indie spectrum from commercial features.

A second map of the volume links the essays in terms of the institutional attention they pay to the indie character of their films. This is evident in the discussion of how the distribution and marketing strategies of companies including Focus Features, Fox Searchlight and Sony Classics targeted ‘smart’ and ‘alternative’ audiences for films including *Pariah*, *Waitress*, and *Rachel Getting Married*, and in how the identity of these and other works were paratextually shaped by critics and audiences through the mechanisms of festivals, reviews and awards. Unsurprisingly, the Sundance Institute figures significantly in this latter theme, with contributors specifically noting that *All the Real Girls*, *Pariah*, *Primer*, *Secretary*, *Waitress*, and *You Can Count on Me* all bear its imprimatur by way of an award, script development or prominent festival exhibition. Another key aspect of this institutional attention lies in how the essays together highlight a group of performers whose idiolects and personas have informed the post–1989 indie sensibility in various ways. This effect arises most obviously from the specific attention authors give to a range of indie stars, including: Zooey Deschanel in *All the Real Girls*; Samantha Morton, Holly Hunter and Miranda July in *Jesus’ Son*; James Spader and Maggie Gyllenhaal in *Secretary*; Adrienne Shelly in *Waitress*; and Laura Linney and Mark Ruffalo in *You Can Count on Me*. But it is palpable, too, in the way other key indie players are named throughout – Melissa Leo in *Frozen River*, Frances McDormand in *Laurel Canyon*, Catherine Keener in *Lovely & Amazing*, Steve Buscemi and James LeGros in *Living in Oblivion*, Sarah Polley in *The Weight of Water*, John Hawkes in *Winter’s Bone* – and in the allusion to the indie ‘turn’ of other stars with a more obviously mainstream image: Anne Hathaway in *Rachel Getting Married* and Jennifer Lawrence in *Winter’s Bone*.

A third and final map of the essays is the most substantial. This map emerges from the range of interrelated textual and contextual continuities that
cut across these methodological and institutional perspectives in each contributor’s ‘take’ on his or her film, producing a sense of the issues at stake in thinking about this realm of filmmaking in relation to mainstream Hollywood and other kinds of cinema. A first, prevailing theme is one with a long history in scholarship on independent film, which is the conception of indie as a space for the critique of social structures of class, race, gender and sexuality. This idea lies at the core of O’Meara’s argument that Bubble is ultimately a social problem film that highlights the ‘new poor’ who fail to function as useful consumers in society, and in Berrettini’s analysis of how the frozen, obstructing environment of Frozen River allegorises its characters’ struggles with racial and gender mobility. Friction with majoritarian categories of race, gender and sexuality is also taken up in White’s study on Pariah as a film that is to some extent ‘too black and too gay’ for the Sundance–Miramax brand of filmmaking, and in Hall’s angle on Old Joy as a film that examines and resists dominant constructions of masculinity in an America framed as a ‘fallen world’ in terms of its politics and natural environment. All of these essays point to the powerful interest that indie films take in ‘outsider’ figures who are marginalised by prevailing social and economic orders. This perspective informs Christley’s analysis of how Keane restricts its jittery point of view to that of the mentally ill protagonist struggling to integrate with society amongst the ‘misfit’ class of New York’s Port Authority bus terminal, and resonates too with the discussions of how the central characters of Buffalo ’66, Rachel Getting Married and Secretary deal with life outside of the correctional and rehabilitative institutions they leave at the beginning of each film (or, in the case of Jesus’ Son, find refuge at the very end).

The discussions of the dire economic conditions of Bubble, Frozen River and Keane point to another keynote of the essays: the topic of realism. This is a central theme in indie scholarship, where it underpins a broad understanding of the way in which independent filmmaking refuses the melodramatic, heightened representations of Hollywood in alternatively realist and/or ‘small’ stories. In different ways, this idea informs Geoff King’s examination of Primer as a film whose ‘indie rendition’ of science fiction draws on an exaggerated tendency toward the ordinary and the everyday that is highly unusual within the genre, and in Noel King’s discussion of Winter’s Bone as a neo-realist adaptation of Daniel Woodrell’s ‘country noir’ novel that uses authentic locations and non-professional actors to frame its tense and dangerous story. Rascaroli takes up the assumptions and expectations surrounding indie realism directly in relation to The Exploding Girl, demonstrating how its immersion of the spectator into the unexceptional life of its young protagonist is only deceptively naturalist, and in fact hints – through the ‘occluded gaze’ of the camera – at the abject disintegration of self with which the film culminates. The tradition of ‘light and portable cinema’ that Gray’s film is here linked to
is also referenced in relation to Bubble, Old Joy and Primer, where contributors comment on the ‘micro’ production scenarios of these films and the connection that this holds to a certain ‘authentic’ condition of independence.

In a number of essays the attention to ‘quiet’ drama is linked to a film’s location in regional or small town America which, as Mayshark observes in relation to You Can Count on Me, is a good ‘dramatic laboratory’ for foregrounding the bonds of family and history. This is the context for the reunion of the estranged adult siblings of Lonergan’s film, as well as the doomed love story of All the Real Girls, the alienated interaction of Bubble, the dysfunctional homecoming of Buffalo ’66, the harrowing existences of Frozen River and Winter’s Bone, and the marital breakdown of Waitress. Brooks shows how the effect also resonates in Laurel Canyon, where, as the site for the reunion of an ideologically opposed mother and son, the Canyon is ‘a world that seems to be running according to its own clock and rhythms’ in the middle of a high-pressure city.

Another theme that recurs across the essays relates to how various films engage the classical trope of transformation, which in Hollywood filmmaking governs the imperative for characters to grow and change across the course of a narrative. The manner in which indie films complicate the assumptions and expectations that attend the specific idea of love as a force for emotional transformation is the central line of investigation in each essay dealing with an ‘indie romance’. Perkins examines how All the Real Girls offers a self-conscious meditation on the melodramatic foundation of this idea through a flattened temporal structure that deploys the indie trope of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl, and MacDowell shows that Buffalo ’66 offers a similarly ambiguous line on whether transformation ‘happens’ by muting the patent inauthenticity that typically accompanies the indie convention of the ironic happy ending. The question also informs Gorfinkel’s investigation on whether Secretary’s investment in romance makes its sadomasochistic relationship a ‘therapeutic salve’ for the central female protagonist’s trauma and self-harm. The theme of transformation emerges in a different way in Verevis’ discussion of how the fractured and directionless journey of Jesus’ Son dramatises its narrator’s chemical addiction, demonstrating how a ‘cinema of addiction and intoxication’ can itself be transformative in delivering an experience beyond the routine of everyday life. Other essays comment on the opposite effect, showing how the endings of Keane, Kicking and Screaming and You Can Count on Me emphasise an untransformed, ongoing present-ness where characters struggle to grow or change.

The essays on these latter two films contextualise this effect in terms of the favoured indie theme of arrested development. Newsom identifies this subject as the anchor for the treatment of post-collegiate malaise in Kicking and Screaming, where the film diverts into extended flashback sequences at those
moments when the present seems unsatisfying and the future unattainable, and Mayshark contextualises You Can Count on Me in terms of a wave of indie productions concerned with a form of generational drift that defers maturity and authority, but argues that Lonergan locates his own ‘man-child’ in an atypically consequential world. A state of arrested maturity is also considered in connection with the ‘manic insecurity’ of Billy (Vincent Gallo) in Buffalo ’66, the drifting life of Kurt (Will Oldham) in Old Joy, the narcissistic Michelle (Catherine Keener) in Lovely & Amazing, and the stunted, traumatised Lee (Maggie Gyllenhaal) in Secretary.

The preoccupation with the past that defines these characters is addressed in a different way in the essays that locate the 1960s and 1970s as a specific reference point for their films. Brooks theorises the idea most explicitly in her claim that Laurel Canyon – a film set in the ‘afterlife’ of the region’s counter culture heyday – distinguishes itself from other indie films with a retro music sensibility through a unique ‘lacuscular’ aesthetic in which the image is itself made musical to reflect the Canyon as a force that connects past and present. The references to this period made in other essays link more directly to the tenet of indie scholarship that claims the contemporary era as a successor to the ‘golden age’ of the New Hollywood. This is evident in Perkins’ discussion of David Gordon Green’s reworking of the epic, natural environments of Terrence Malick in All the Real Girls, in Verevis’ identification of how Jesus’ Son recalls the unmotivated heroes and directionless journeys of the ‘anti-action’ films of the early 1970s, and in Radner’s recognition of how Rachel Getting Married consciously links its take on the wedding film to the cinema of Robert Altman.

The self-consciousness that these three films demonstrate in their attention to the past indicates the specific interest the collection takes in self-reflexivity as a knowing mode of indie expression. Berra shows how Living in Oblivion encodes Tom DiCillo’s experience on his previous film Johnny Suede (1991) as a way of mounting a broader critique on the canonisation of indie cinema in the 1990s, where films and directors such as those mentioned above – Quentin Tarantino, Kevin Smith and Steven Soderbergh – became cultural commodities as a result of their marketable personas and types of filmmaking. In a very different argument, Rawle explores the unintentional self-reflexivity of Waitress as a document about director Adrienne Shelly, whose tragic death shortly before the film’s premiere transformed critical reception into memorialisation and shaped its legacy as a ‘meta-movie’ about an important indie figure. The notion of meta-commentary is also present in Newsom’s discussion of how Kicking and Screaming self-consciously refers to its own slight scale through the interaction of the characters over their artistic pursuits, and in all of the essays that demonstrate how genre conventions are deliberately invoked, revised and critiqued – in All the Real Girls, Buffalo ’66,
The Exploding Girl, Frozen River, Old Joy, Primer, Rachel Getting Married and Secretary.

In a theme that is directly connected to this interest in destabilising classical tropes, numerous contributors attend to how the narrative structures of their films refuse strategies of exposition and continuity in favour of looser and more ambiguous formats. The approach is evident in Palmer’s examination of The Weight of Water as an ‘excessively fractured’ adaptation of Anita Shreve’s novel that registers Bigelow’s ‘transgressive’ resistance to the boundaries that separate accepted critical categories of mainstream and independent at the levels of practice and authorship. It is also apparent in King’s identification of how the complexity and ‘authenticity’ of Primer arises from the film’s lack of conventional plotting, and in other contributors’ descriptions of storylines that are ‘loose’ (All the Real Girls, Living in Oblivion), ‘diaphanous’ (The Exploding Girl), ‘circuitous’ (Jesus’ Son), ‘aqueous’ (Laurel Canyon) and ‘meandering’ (Lovely & Amazing) in their prioritisation of atmosphere over plot.

Several essays mobilise their arguments on a film’s resistance to established niches – both commercial and indie – to examine and question the ‘difference’ of an indie film that is directed by a woman and/or told from a female perspective. Radner demonstrates this line in coining the term ‘smart chick film’ to describe a work that is designed to appeal to smart film audiences while highlighting traditionally ‘female’ themes, but shows how Rachel Getting Married ultimately veers toward the more conservative values of ‘personal cinema’, while Badley takes up the case of Nicole Holofcener’s Lovely & Amazing – a director Radner locates squarely within the ‘smart chick’ category – to argue that her innovation and ‘complex marginalisation’ within the commercial-independent mainstream stems from the way this film frustrates the expectations of both chick flick and smart film audiences. Reichardt’s Old Joy is positioned by Hall as a female perspective on a male-dominated genre, which, as a claim that is often levelled at Bigelow, is one line taken up by Palmer to elucidate how commentators have struggled to unanimously locate the director as either an auteur or an independent. Berrettini frames Frozen River as an ‘adventure’ narrative where the quest concerns surviving as a single mother, and observes how this film – like Waitress and Winter’s Bone – sidesteps the nuclear family model at its end by not relying upon mainstream conventions of heteronormative closure. Secretary – adapted from a Mary Gaitskills story – does end with the ultimate heterosexual couple, but Gorfinkel shows how this is a ‘perverse normativity’, and suggests that it is perhaps the film’s ‘commitment to the risky truths of female subjectivity’ that have made it an elusive object for indie film history.

In Essential Cinema: On the Necessity of Film Canons, Jonathan Rosenbaum notes that, while the practice of canon formation has been implicitly rejected
by academic film discourse in the contemporary era, ‘canons have never left us; all that’s really happened is that we no longer acknowledge their existence . . . no longer play a conscious and active role in promoting them’ (2004: xiv). US Independent Film After 1989: Possible Films draws attention to how the operation of this process in the Sundance–Miramax era that comprises the first generation of indie discourse has given a high level of visibility to a narrow group of ‘self-defined’ indie films and filmmakers. In putting forward close analyses of twenty films that are proximate to but distinct from this well-known group, the volume self-consciously contributes to the process of indie canonisation, but with the aim of demonstrating how the parameters of this sensibility can be expanded in and through the sustained attention to a fresh set of films read side by side.

NOTES


2. Greg Merritt’s longer history of independent film also deploys the term ‘maverick’ in its title – Celluloid Mavericks: The History of American Independent Film – and it appears again as the name of the fifth section of Hillier’s collection, which attends to Robert Altman, Paul Thomas Anderson, Abel Ferrara, Spike Jonze, Harmony Korine, David Lynch and John Sayles. The canonisation of a number of the post-1989 figures has also been impelled by the appearance of individual volumes devoted to their work. Some examples include Edward Gallafent’s Quentin Tarantino, R. Barton Palmer’s Joel and Ethan Coen, Juan Antonio Suarez’s Jim Jarmusch, Mark Berrettini’s Hal Hartley and Steven Rawle’s Performance in the Cinema of Hal Hartley, Rob White’s Todd Haynes, Jason Sperb’s Blossoms and Blood: Postmodern Media Culture and the Films of Paul Thomas Anderson, Peter Kunze’s (ed.), The Films of Wes Anderson: Critical Essays on an Indiewood Icon, and David LaRocca’s (ed.), The Philosophy of Charlie Kaufman.

3. Buffalo ’66, Living in Oblivion and You Can Count on Me are included in capsule discussions in Wood’s 100 American Independent Films, Primer is attended to in Newman’s Indie: An American Film Culture, Bubble is considered in Mark Gallagher’s Another Steven Soderbergh Experience: Authorship and Contemporary Hollywood and Old Joy is discussed in King’s chapter on Kelly Reichardt in Indie 2.0: Change and Continuity in American Indie Film.

4. This idea is comprehensively covered by Newman in his chapter on ‘Indie Realism’ in Indie: An American Film Culture.

REFERENCES


