

*American Independent
Cinema*

Rites of Passage and the Crisis Image

Anna Backman Rogers

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Introduction

A CINEMA OF CRISIS; A CINEMA OF THE THRESHOLD

American independent cinema is certainly a cinema *in* crisis, but it is also a cinema *of* crisis.¹ A great deal of useful scholarship has been carried out on the notion of independence and the definition of indie cinema as a hybrid industry ('indiewood'). This study partakes of that conversation, but from the perspective of the aesthetics and poetics of crisis that figure or visualise notions of ambiguity and the in-between. In contrast to a scholar such as Geoff King (2013), who has recently defined the crisis of indie cinema in industrial terms, the cinema of crisis delineated here is one that explores the difficulty or impossibility of progression through extended moments of liminality and threshold. Nominally, this might seem like a study of narrative structure or classical modes of storytelling, since all narrative film, to a certain extent, can be said to be about a moment of crisis. However, in a cinema of crisis, the concept of a plot is subservient to the investigation of what it means to exist in a moment of threshold within the context of a rite of passage; this moment may usher in transformation, or it may lead to stasis and not offer any form of resolution. What the viewer sees on screen are bodies that may halt, falter, freeze and become-surface, or evolve, mutate, dissolve and merge: these are bodies in crisis because they are either atrophying or *becoming-other*.

To be clear, this is not an ethnographic study; the subject of this book is how certain American independent films appropriate ritual as a kind of power of the false in order to throw into crisis images – such as the cliché – that pertain to truth via collective comprehension. In his study of genre, Steve Neale (2000) has outlined how certain images and sound tracks can function ritualistically and ideologically; cinema, according to Neale, both creates a horizon of expectations for an audience and also draws upon existing stratifications and categories in order to shore up established identities and modes of thought. When these visual and sonic rituals are retranslated as the signifiers of breakdown and failure, this indicates a crisis of understanding on a much deeper level. In this study, then, I consider how particular cinematic clichés, as a form of cultural shorthand, can be used ritualistically either to

facilitate uncritical assimilation or to create a ‘thought of the outside’ that challenges established modes of seeing and thinking; in conjunction with this, I address how moments of liminality and threshold can be employed to show both potential emergence and impossibility within narrative film. Above all, a cinema of crisis is one that engages directly with its own cinematic history and inheritance via specific clichés; American independent cinema draws upon both American cinema of the 1970s and the various waves of European filmmaking, but recuperates these tropes to the point of often being obsolete. A cinema of crisis is a cinema of exhaustion; it is not merely a citational or joyful cinema in the manner of Quentin Tarantino or Wes Anderson, as it does not utilise parody or pastiche, but rather produces its own form of radical or cerebral critique.

Crisis is delineated on a number of levels here. It functions as a marker of a specific time period that is ritually significant: adolescence, death and life-crisis; it refers to the way in which film can undo or rework images through a process of ‘putting into crisis’; and it helps to characterise film as the medium of crisis – being as change and irresolvable states of ambiguity. Above all, it designates a protracted state of threshold and of being ‘betwixt and between’ (Turner 1995: 95). As such, the state of liminality is read here not as the defined and finite period of time and space of an actual ritual, but as a moment of profound crisis from which it may or may not be possible to progress. That is: passage is not always conceivable. Within an American context, crisis has become synonymous with the events of 9/11 and the global financial crisis, and, although this is certainly relevant to my project, crisis is read as a more widespread exhaustion with neoliberalism and its attendant values, consumerism and Christianity, for which there is no resolution. I outline the ways in which identification and certain anthropological or ritualistic ways of understanding malfunction within the context of narrative cinema. My contention is that moments of extreme crisis, such as 9/11 and the global financial crisis, reveal the radical failure of prevalent American concepts such as prosperity and happiness. Certain American independent films, in this case *The Virgin Suicides*, *Elephant*, *Dead Man*, *Last Days*, *Somewhere* and *Broken Flowers*, are not only representations of crisis but also constitute a vital response to and critique of contemporary American crisis within the relatively mainstream setting of indie cinema – which, as ‘indiewood’, is a liminal art form in itself.

Film, as the medium that captures space and time, is ideally suited to exploring themes of crisis, transition and transformation. Simply put, the varied components that form the body of a film (colour, light, darkness, texture, sound) alter continually. On film, bodies become protean forms in a world that is itself in a state of flux: a *becoming-other*. Film is able to present

this *becoming-other* or process of metamorphosis so well precisely because of its innately fluid qualities. Moreover, film characters are able to incarnate ambiguity and mutability as they are *made* to be stable or unstable through the manner in which they are filmed or contextualised. Often, a substantial part of screen time is devoted to making a character believable through the narrative situation and the attribution of personal characteristics or personal history/narrative, so that the film viewer can identify with this character as a believable person in a recognisable setting. If, however, we view cinema as the art form *par excellence* of 'being' as 'change', the 'protagonist', as a body on screen, is an unstable entity that evolves through space and time. Film characters throw into crisis the idea of the enduring, consistent self through their inherent changeability. The cinematic body and world, then, is already *in and of crisis*.

KEY CONCEPTS

This study of American independent film is mainly Deleuzian in its approach and takes its cue from Deleuze's explication of crisis as the breakdown of action within the movement-image cinema and its transition to a cinema of the time-image;² within this, the anthropological work of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner on rites of passage is used, with particular reference to the concepts of liminality and the threshold. The confluence of Deleuze's reinterpetive philosophy and social anthropology is an incongruous one, especially given the fact that Deleuze and Guattari would have been critical of the norms and hierarchical structures which are the central focus of such studies; however, these categories of understanding are used only in reference to the notion of passage. The anthropological terms of ritual, threshold and liminality allow me to define how such moments give rise to potentiality but also atrophy and stasis. These concepts are especially crucial for reading cinematic representations of ambiguity and irresolvability, transition and inertia.

Crisis

In his seminal work of 1908, *Les Rites de passage*, the Belgian anthropologist Arnold van Gennep labels the recurrent activities that surround an individual's 'life crises' (1960: vii) as 'rites of passage' (1960: vii).³ He broadly categorises these life-crises as 'birth, social puberty, marriage . . . and death' (1960: 3). Crisis has a specific meaning within an anthropological context; it designates a turning-point within an individual's life when old values and identities are left behind in order to receive new attributes. Crisis denotes a state of *becoming-other*; the ritual subject goes through a period of instability in which he/she is subjected to various trials and his/her former self is effaced.

This intensive period of change that van Gennep calls liminality helps to prepare the ritual subject for his/her future role in life. Any rite of passage is a tightly controlled process that proceeds through an established pattern that has three parts: separation, liminality and reintegration; within this process, liminality is a period of radical change that is not navigated easily. As Catherine Bell (1997: 37) notes in her analysis of van Gennep's theory, '[t]hese [social] changes can occur smoothly and meaningfully as part of a larger, embracing, and reassuring pattern only by means of their orchestration as rites of passage'. These rites are invoked as a way of helping both the neophyte, or ritual participant, and the wider community to negotiate collectively a stage that could be potentially disruptive to the social order, and to recognise which stage of the process has been reached. As such, the rite of passage is a social structure which helps to ease movement of the ritual subject from one stage to another. Liminality is a state of extreme ambiguity and tribulation, but within a processual context it is resolved. In contrast to this, I examine situations (fictive ones) in which this process is thrown into crisis, in which resolution is difficult or unattainable and obscurity prevails.

Deleuze's definition of crisis centres on moments in which our collective rituals for 'making sense' break down and where movement or progress becomes impossible. His adumbration of the visual symptoms that define how this kind of moment is related in modern cinema is pertinent to mapping out the aesthetics of a cinema of crisis and liminality. For Deleuze, this crisis of the movement-image, or more specifically the action-image, was a result of the aftermath of the Second World War, the post-war landscape and the population's inability to make sense of what had been encountered in this world: 'the post-war period has greatly increased the situations which we no longer know how to react to, in spaces which we no longer know how to describe' (Deleuze 2005b: xi). This crisis is shown through a number of visual 'symptoms': 'the form of the trip/ballad, the multiplication of clichés, the events that hardly concern those they happen to, in short, the slackening of the sensory-motor connections' (2005b: 3). In the cinema of action, characters are immersed in situations to which they know how to respond automatically and, consequently, resolution is a common trope of this kind of cinema. An answer is provided to the problem posed at the film's opening. The cinema of time does not do this. According to Deleuze, the cinema of time is born out of a situation of crisis; therefore, the cinema of time is a cinema of crisis. In the visual symptoms that Deleuze believes define the breakdown of the action-image, we can see the start of a failure to make sense, to comprehend and to act. The breakdown of certain chains of images signifies a collapse in the ritual schemas we employ to facilitate understanding and agency. That is, the situation addressed exceeds the visual and narrative containers we

use unthinkingly, resulting in a failure to create meaning and to move on. Fundamentally, a cinema of time signals towards the need for genuinely new ways of thinking about and seeing situations of crisis.⁴

One of the reasons Deleuze is so dismissive of American cinema (specifically that of the 1970s) is that he believes it produces mere symptoms of the breakdown of action-image, but does not give birth to anything positive as a result of this (namely a cinema of thought). For Deleuze (2005b: 3), these aspects of the breakdown of the movement-image in post-war cinema do not constitute a sufficient condition for the birth of the 'new image', since they are mere visual indicators of the modern malaise. Instead, images detached from any sensory-motor or narrative motivation, which Deleuze calls 'opsigns' (2005b: 325), enable the transition between the cinema of action and the cinema of time. The protagonist responds to these purely optical images, which are unfettered from narrative purpose, with contemplation rather than action because they cannot be readily assimilated and understood.⁵ In contrast to Deleuze, I argue that the breakdown of the action-image and its concomitant visual symptoms can function as a vital form of critique and help to open up processes of thought. In signalling the failure of mechanisms that facilitate understanding and adjustment, images of crisis and breakdown gesture outside or beyond themselves and intimate the necessity for radically different approaches to both representation and modes of comprehension. Moreover, an explicit cinema of crisis and breakdown does not preclude Deleuzian images of time such as the crystal image, the chronosign and the powers of the false; rather, it moves between situations of complete collapse to the potential development of a cinema of thought. Indeed, one could argue that in his characterisation of a cinema of time, Deleuze was always describing a cinema to come. An American cinema of crisis is one that draws upon its own heritage; critics are not wrong, therefore, to suggest a direct lineage between the cinema of the 1970s (as exemplified in the cinema of Scorsese, Altman and Ford Coppola) and the films of contemporary 'indiewood'. However, the films examined here employ these tropes as clichés or hollow visual rituals: in place of what Deleuze views as parody and paranoia in the cinema of the 1970s, a contemporary cinema of crisis presents exhaustion and the obsolete as a form of extreme failure. This kind of cinema suggests an overwhelming breakdown in ritualised modes of thought: ritual is used as an empty device. There is often no progress, but instead a protracted moment of liminality figured as both immobility and potentiality.

Liminality and Threshold Spaces

In studying the significance of ritual activity during times of life-crisis, van Gennep was the first anthropologist to note that the translation in status brought about through the rite of passage could also be mapped out spatially; that is, a person's separation from a social group, the resulting state of liminality, and his/her reincorporation into another social group is effected by moving through designated ritually significant zones or geographical areas. As a liminal entity, one is between two worlds; it is this aspect of the liminal person's experience and the state of liminality more generally that Victor Turner develops in his analysis of van Gennep's model.

Turner (1995: 95) characterises liminality as a period of ambiguity and humility for the neophyte: '[i]t is as though they [the ritual subjects] are becoming reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life'. Liminal personae, by their very nature, are ambiguous entities; during this period, personal characteristics and the markings of individuality disappear, so that the neophyte becomes a blank slate upon which a community inscribes itself. The neophyte is a 'passenger' (Turner 1995: 94) in the liminal phase because he/she travels between one state and another; the liminal entity is also described as being 'betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial' (Turner 1995: 95). Liminal personae do not fit into any conventional category within organised society, as they exist outside of the normally rigid, codified norms of hierarchical order and, in accordance with this, Turner (1995: 96) adopts the term 'communitas' to describe relations between neophytes in this liminal period.⁶ Liminality also plays an important part in reinforcing the generic human bond that pre-exists hierarchy and status; thus, liminal entities are often treated as sacred beings who exist apart from secular society because of their humility and their expressiveness of the universal human condition. Like liminal entities, liminal zones are areas that are inherently 'betwixt and between' (van Gennep 1960: 95) societal and structured locations. Van Gennep notes that liminal personae tend to occupy regions of ambiguity where it is difficult to find one's coordinates, such as uninhabited forests: '[t]he neutral zones are ordinarily deserts, marshes, and most frequently virgin forests' (1960: 18). However, more commonplace areas, such as doorways and corridors, can also serve as settings for liminality. Thresholds have a heightened importance in a ritualised context as they demarcate the boundary between two areas: to stand on a threshold is to exist in a space that is in itself intrinsically between two areas and stages in life. Thresholds are particularly important in van Gennep's theory, as the act of crossing over

one is ceremonially significant because it designates a change in status of the ritual participant and his/her separation from one world and incorporation into another. Van Gennep (1960: 20) notes that to cross a threshold is 'to unite oneself with a new world'; indeed, in leaving his/her former society and entering into a liminal zone, the neophyte loses his/her former status and attributes and becomes an ambiguous figure who is subjected to trials and ordeals in preparation for his/her ensuing social role or status.

If cinematic bodies – as a confluence of lightness, darkness and movement – are ambiguous figures that are in a state of continual flux, they can throw into crisis the modes of representation or understanding that are commonly brought to bear on the image in order to render it stable. A body in crisis that is betwixt and between classifications therefore reveals the ontological instability of the image and, by extension, of categories of being. In a cinema of crisis, this state of ambiguity or uncertainty is apparent in manifold ways. The notion of the threshold is particularly germane to a number of major American cinematic genres such as the teen pic, the Western and the road movie. Typically, the act of crossing a threshold results in a period of transition that is resolved via a neat conclusion that enables the protagonist to reintegrate. As such, narrative and cinematic norms and conventions – as a form of visual ritual – reaffirm hierarchical systems and structures. Images of sustained and extended liminality, however, can function as a form of critique because they demonstrate the failure to contain and assuage crisis. Within the context of cinematic genre, this is especially interesting given that forms, such as the Western, have become one of the most clichéd and readily employed ways of creating and shoring up narratives of national identity. Images of being betwixt and between show the impossibility of containing ambiguity and the false nature of representations that pertain to being exhaustive and definitive. One crucial way in which the notion of the threshold can be visually inscribed within a film is through subversive use of the interstice; as the point between the end of one image and the beginning of another it rarely extends beyond its function, but when it is made apparent in and of itself it serves to bring into being what is usually obscured or kept out of representation: that is, it brings ambiguity to the surface. This may be the darkness in between the images of light, or it may be a way of separating out two images so that their logical coherence is destabilised. In essence, a film such as *Dead Man*, offers multiple moments of threshold through the use of the dark interstice that often prevents the images being enchained in a rational way; progression is hindered, and this is especially important within a film that partakes of the Western genre, which is predicated on the pushing back of the frontier and the expansion of civilisation as a form of enlightenment. The interstice, in this case, serves to prevent teleological movement. The interstice as a visual

threshold can also signify the absence of meaning or prevent images from being read critically by introducing a blank space or void. In *The Virgin Suicides*, images run out on themselves and leave a blank screen in their wake. Here, the interstice suggests a radical collapse of meaning and the failure of certain rituals to aid the recuperation and restoration of a lost object or state of being.

In particular, films (such as *The Virgin Suicides*) that move between the Deleuzian movement and time-image regimes continually thwart attempts to understand and to categorise what we see. By pulling images that work towards making narrative sense back into the mode of the purely optical and sonic, the time-image renders unstable and problematises narratives that appeal to our most basic need to understand and resolve the inexplicable or indefinite. Moreover, in failing to integrate these kind of images into a meaningful and coherent narrative, the excessive nature of the cinematic image is rendered clear: it remains as an image of crisis and irresolvability. Likewise, the Deleuzian crystalline image blurs the boundary between the real and the imaginary, the virtual and the actual, so that they become indecipherable. When this kind of image characterises an entire diegetic world (as in *Dead Man* and *Last Days*), the film itself invokes a state of opacity and ambiguity that demands that the viewer question the nature of truthful representation. In such a case, the protagonist's body – as a figure of perpetual metamorphosis – becomes a vessel through which the state of liminality or betwixt and between is mediated; we do not identify with a set of traits or characteristics, but rather with the ways in which the cinematic medium *works* on us. As such, these kind of films can immerse the viewer in a quasi-liminal experience that initiates alteration and change; indeed, the very setting of the cinema could be viewed as a liminal space for this purpose. While this experience may disperse once the viewer has left the cinema, it is retained and has the potential to be reanimated within the filmic world. The image of crisis as an image of liminality has the power to create moments of suspension that prevent habitual processes of critical assimilation from functioning. This kind of image is the antithesis of the cliché.

Cliché

The cliché, in Deleuzian terms, is primarily a 'sensory-motor image of the thing' (Deleuze 2005: 19) that is constituted either by calculated addition or by subtraction from the thing itself in order to aid action. Alison Smith (1998: 52) writes more generally of clichés that 'they are easy to read, their meaning is obvious . . . such instant reading could be a form of instant possession'. The cliché does not promote thought or evoke mystery; its aim is precisely the opposite of this; we always recognise these images and know how to

assimilate them automatically. Through a process of simplification and reduction, the cliché denies ambiguity, because it suggests that nothing escapes comprehension. Deleuze, drawing on Bergson, notes: ‘we do not perceive the thing or the image in its entirety, we always perceive less of it, we perceive only what we are interested in perceiving, or rather what it is in our interests to perceive’ (2005b: 19). The cliché allows for ease of action and it gains its meaning from *collective* employment. For Deleuze, the cliché is synonymous with both the cinema of the action-image and that of the time-image. In the former, the cliché is used as a kind of visual shorthand in order to facilitate narrative development, but in the latter it is the proliferation of stock images that is a sign of the birth of the modern cinema. Deleuze states that it should be the aim of cinema to produce images that break through the cliché; the purely optical image emerges as a result of the visionary status of the cinematic protagonist who is in a state of crisis, but it also turns the cinematic spectator into a kind of visionary or pure seer. If the cliché keeps the viewer from really seeing and, according to Deleuze, from really thinking, the importance and power of the purely visual image, as something that can counteract the cliché, should not be underestimated. Deleuze (2005b: 20) writes that ‘there is no knowing how far a real image may lead’. The purely optical image is the exact opposite of the cliché – its rarity in terms of composition does not aid or precipitate action. Rather, it causes the mind to extend into the annals of memory as a way of making sense of what confronts us:

the optical . . . image in attentive recognition does not extend into movement, but enters into relation with a ‘recollection-image’ that it calls up . . . what would enter into relation would be the real and the imaginary, the physical and the mental, the objective and the subjective, description and narration, *the actual and the virtual*. (Deleuze 2005b: 44)

This is to say that the purely optical image helps to enrich the relation between the actual and the virtual, the past and the present and the real and the hallucinatory by creating crystalline cinematic worlds. What is most vital and curious about this process for Deleuze, however, is the failure to find a recollection-image that would make sense of an actual or current situation: ‘[i]n short, it is not the recollection-image or attentive recognition which gives us the proper equivalent of the optical-sound image, it is rather the disturbances of memory and failures of recognition’ (2005b: 52).⁷

The cliché can designate many things visually and sonically; in its most simple form it is a specific shot, such as a close-up of a female face. It also refers to the way in which images can be made to work in tandem to create highly determined readings – the conjunction of the use of slow motion with a recognisable musical score, for instance. In other words, the cliché can

refer to styles of framing, lighting, particular costumes or characterisation, cinematographic or even acting styles. Above all, the cliché at its most powerful aids the creation of a system of iconography as a collection of images that are easily read as a form of shorthand between the filmmaker and the film viewer. Genre, therefore, can also function as a kind of cliché. American cinema especially is redolent with clichés and independent cinema has its own subset of clichés that it draws upon. Fittingly, advertising often recuperates cinematic forms in order to market products to a particular demographic. The cliché can work in such a way that we do not have to *think* about what we see, but merely assimilate it. It does not pose difficulty for the viewer, in that it eases the connection between cause and effect. I examine the ways in which the cliché is used to denote exhaustion and, by extension, how the cliché as a form of visual ritual is undone. Films such as *Somewhere* and *Broken Flowers* fit in precisely with Deleuze's delineation of a cinema of breakdown. Centring on characters who fail to *act*, we see their world as a set of clichés through the protagonist's eyes. Both of these films constitute a *mise-en-scène* of apathy, boredom and repetition in which progress is seemingly impossible or continually frustrated. If the cliché is what keeps us from thinking and aids action, here it stutters and fails so that time seeps in as duration. Along with the characters who are forced into a kind of thinking and feeling, the film viewer encounters the film experientially. It is precisely the deliberate use of and subversion of the cliché which facilitates this.

Ritual

There is a wealth of scholarship on the purpose and meaning of ritual activity, but it has a very specific function in a rite of passage. Ritual action helps to enforce order within this period by signposting the different stages of this transition for the neophyte and his/her community. Of course, these rituals are not merely a set of rules that need to be obeyed, but are culturally meaningful to the society that enforces them. Ritual is not only a social act that helps to signal a change in status; it helps to *bring about* this change in status. These acts are subscribed to and imposed by the community that has invented them. Catherine Bell (1997) notes that there are a number of more general characteristics of ritual activity that often prevent it from being questioned by a community. Firstly, ritual possesses a 'timeless' or 'traditional' aspect (Bell 1997: 145); it is common that the neophyte feels that he/she is engaging with a cultural history that pre-existed him/her and will outlast him/her. Even when a certain ritual is relatively new, a considerable effort is made to hide its creative origins by surrounding these actions in pomp and ceremony, so as to imply that it is, in fact, an established or ancient rite. Ritual

is a very formal activity that is governed by a system of rules (Bell 1997: 153) and these regulations should be followed without deviation. Finally, ritual activity is often invested with mystery through the use of esoteric actions and symbols (Bell 1997: 155); the ritual participant may not know why he/she has to perform a particular series of actions or what a particular symbol or object means within a ceremony, but he/she recognises that these actions are implemented by an order that exists above and beyond him/her, namely certain figures such as priests within the community, and that, in engaging with ritual, he/she is partaking in something bigger than him-/herself. Ritual involves the individual within a higher order of things, whether it is a religious or societal order, and helps to establish a person within a community.

The subject of this book is fiction filmmaking. Some of the films I explore feature various ritual ceremonies prominently (*The Virgin Suicides*, *Dead Man*, *Last Days*, *Broken Flowers*), but I am concerned with the ways in which these films create and employ visual and narrative tropes as a form of ritual in order to represent a state of obsolescence and impossibility, potentiality and change or emergence. More often than not, forms of visual ritual are presented as empty and hollow: a representation that extends beyond critique to call for inventive and creative ways of engaging with crisis. A film such as *Elephant* makes clear that the imposition of a rite of passage is both pernicious and doomed to fail. Furthermore, *The Virgin Suicides*, for instance, compounds and builds upon Deleuze's critique of American cinema of the 1970s by appropriating its aesthetic and inserting infantilised and sinister images into its collectively understood and now nostalgic iconography. One of the key ways film can engage with visual ritual is through the cliché. If the deliberate use of the clichéd image signals a complete breakdown in our collective ways of understanding and making sense, this suggests that the iconography we utilise as ready-made aids to comprehension and action also does not work. The crisis image, then, is one that renders apparent the ineffectiveness of conventional attempts to make sense and to explain – this is especially true of a film such as *Elephant*. If the cliché – as a form of readily employed visual ritual – is impotent, the chain of signification that is the impetus and framework for narrative filmmaking also begins to malfunction. Although this ushers in a fundamental crisis of meaning, it also concomitantly demands that the viewer engage with these images as precisely obsolete and exhausted forms. If passage becomes impossible and we cannot transfer meaning from one image to the next in a wholly logical fashion, a suspension is effected between cause and effect. This amounts to a cerebral commitment on the part of the viewer to the cinematic representation – that is, he must think beyond the images towards a thought of the outside.

Thought of the Outside

The cinema of time has important ramifications for thought. Whereas the cinema of the movement-image, or more specifically narrative ‘action-based’ cinema, is constructed around a question that is given at the film’s beginning and answered by its conclusion, the cinema of the time-image poses a problem for thought through its very form. Images in the cinema of time are organised so as to counteract our habitual ways of thinking; irrational cuts, blank spaces, voids and discrepancies between sound and visual tracks converge so as to throw into crisis the viewer’s relation to concepts such as truth and falsity. According to Deleuze, these visual and sonic markers are the by-products of a presentation of time that is not subordinate to movement on screen. ‘The pure force of time . . . puts truth into crisis’ (Deleuze 2005b: 126) and, in the process of doing so, reveals the provisional and manufactured nature of many accepted truths. The cinema of the time-image poses a problem to the viewer because time no longer appears in a scientific or chronological form. Rather, time appears in dispersed ‘sheets of the past’ or simultaneous ‘peaks of the present’ (2005b: 95) that destabilise the viewer’s sense of order and complicate our relationship with established or preconceived ideas. The irrational cuts, disordered spaces and discontinuities of the time-image put thought into relation with that which is impossible: that which cannot be thought (or is yet to be thought), but with which we must engage nonetheless. This can be effected through the concept of the *powers of the false*, which Deleuze develops after Nietzsche; this is a kind of image – or series of images – that throws representations that pertain to truthhood into crisis. It amounts to a process of undoing the cliché and opening up thought by allowing time to infiltrate the image via myriad false continuities and investing the human body with time as duration. This kind of image relates to a *becoming-other*, for it reveals the provisional and creative aspects of truth; performance and reality become indecipherable, so that there is no place from which we can discern or apply concepts such as real and imaginary, true and false, right and wrong.

Elephant, for instance, is a film that puts the viewer into contact with a thought of the outside; by introducing voids, discrepancies and discontinuities into a representation of tragic real-life events, it offers up an alternative way to think through imaging the inexplicable. Controversially, it does not assuage our need to understand and contain the use of extreme violence; while the film addresses directly the seemingly possible and common explanations for the massacre, its very form intimates a deeper level of crisis that is secreted within the everyday – notably the educational system. In making violence part of the quotidian, the film does not allow the viewer to place blame on any one specific cause or person as aberrant. Rather, it demands that we recognise

and think the disquieting possibility that this is an intrinsic part of *our* world. In its critique, *Elephant* suggests that the imposition of a rite of passage onto adolescence is not only ineffectual, it is also harmful. Furthermore, forms of violence and control reap effects that cannot be contained by conventional terms of thought or pre-existing structures. The philosophical problem the film poses, then, is how to think through that which we refuse to think and do not want to see in our everyday world. Above all, this kind of film aims at a representation of reality that exceeds the boundaries of tidy explanations and narrative tropes: there is no ‘right’ explanation to be found.

Deterritorialisation and Becoming

Among the texts that Deleuze co-authored with Felix Guattari are *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988); these two studies are now viewed as key reference points within the broad category of post-structuralism. Against the Freudian tenet that desire is destructive, Deleuze and Guattari reinterpret it as a natural, positive and creative force at the heart of all forms of life. Within this study, *deterritorialisation* and *becoming* are two major, co-dependent concepts. The authors write that ‘in a becoming one is deterritorialized’ (1988: 291). Deterritorialisation involves a radical move away from hierarchical structures, established or dominant categories, concepts, objects and world-views. Through deterritorialisation, one moves closer to a state of *becoming* in which ossified identities and structures are undone by fluidity and changeability. *Becoming* is a process that is enabled through proximity, by two entities drawing close to each other and exchanging parts. We are involved every day in a near-invisible *becoming* with our environment, but the positive or negative repercussions of this relationship can be either heightened or sealed off depending on our outlook or ‘openness’ to its possibilities or potentialities. I argue that, while becoming and liminality are not equivalent, the latter can aid the former because it throws the neophyte or ritual subject into a state where boundaries are opened up and exhaustive definitions are undermined or discarded. As a stage within which old habits and hierarchies are eschewed in favour of a loosely structured community, liminality can facilitate connection between people and their environment. The process of grinding down the neophyte’s identity in order to create a blank slate upon which new identities are inscribed is reminiscent of the process of metamorphosis that is so intrinsic to Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of becoming.

Becoming is achieved through a series of stages that all start from the point of *becoming-woman*. For Deleuze and Guattari, this does not literally mean becoming or imitating a woman; *becoming-woman* is becoming *minor* in opposition to *major* or hegemonic entities or beings that structure and

order society. 'Man' is a major entity, and therefore its only opposition can be a *becoming-woman* – a literal movement away from established principles and ideals, which creates possibilities for fluid interactions and unforeseen connections to be made in order to subvert major principles or institutions. This allows one to move away from 'major' modes of being and stable identities towards a minoritarian becoming. Patricia Pisters (2003: 107) notes that 'becoming-woman is in the first instance a procedure that allows one to live freely; otherwise one is paralyzed'. In breaking with any dominant entity, one becomes more open to moving towards a flow of intensities and, through relations of proximity, mixing and exchanging 'particles' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 275) with the world. Taken together, these three concepts enable a fundamental de-centring of the self. Of course, in anthropological terms, liminality gives way eventually to reintegration – that is, the becoming it enables is eventually sealed off as a new identity is inscribed and assumed. By way of contrast, for Deleuze and Guattari, *becoming* is without end: a permanent state of openness, which can allow for either positive or negative/repetitious formations.

Last Days and *Dead Man* both recast dying as a process of becoming and metamorphosis. The liminal space is visualised as a ground against which the protagonists merge in and out. Long-takes, superimpositions, fades into darkness and extensive use of the interstice converge so as to create a viscerally animated environment. The cinematic world or setting is as important a feature as the central characters and the formal choices which govern the relation of the narrative work against resolution and towards dissolution. In both cases the liminal space gives way to a kind of reintegration into another life stage, which is figured as an after-life. However, this is not a representation of the transcendental and is resolutely secular; rather, liminality perhaps extends out into death as an infinite process of becoming-other. *Somewhere* and *Broken Flowers*, by way of contrast, deal with situations of liminality in which the possibility of becoming is stifled by suffocating repetition resulting in stasis and complete breakdown. The use of matches on action, dead time, cyclical structures and motifs and the narrative cliché of the mid-life crisis help to create a diegetic world in which progression seems unlikely. In both cases, a way out of this period of liminality is hinted at, but not fully realised. The narrative trope of the mid-life crisis is employed in order to show the ways in which crisis can subsume a whole life.

A LIMINAL CINEMA

Recent American independent cinema, as at once an alternative and adjunct to the mainstream, appropriates and reinterprets the coordinates and tropes

of 'art' cinema, and this process of recuperation can be delineated as a crisis-image.⁸ Hollywood cinema, in its classical mode, is 'action' cinema *par excellence*: it follows a neat trajectory from crisis to resolution through the actions of the main character and the diegetic space that this character's movements create. This kind of cinema is also definitively a narrative cinema in which everything is organised logically so as to eradicate any scope for ambiguity or opacity. As a mode of storytelling that passes its technique off as 'invisible', it rarely, if ever, draws attention towards its construction as the result of manifold choices.⁹ Close viewing of these American independent films would suggest that, by way of contrast, this cinema is one of action and narration in crisis. I am addressing 'narrative' cinema here, but also the difficulty of relating this narrative and how this is prioritised over the cause-and-effect structure common to most classical modes of storytelling. Disruption is extended beyond the mere situation of the main protagonist towards the construction of the narrative itself and the viewer's cognitive reaction in response to what he/she experiences. These films travel between the staging of action, or the possibility of acting, and the complete breakdown of this central structure. I would argue that as a mode of art cinema, American independent film, as evinced in what follows, is neither simply a subversion of classical cinema nor an anodyne version of European art-house cinema, but a cinema that engages directly with its classical inheritance; what it stages is the impossibility of addressing specific forms of crisis within an established, or culturally accepted, language and the conterminous need to create a different or 'alternative' cinematic language. This is why so many of the narrative worlds we are confronted with in American independent cinema are at once familiar and estranging – the films of David Lynch, which are composed out of generic tropes such as archetypes and settings, are a clear example. Just as the very notion of independence cannot be separated from the Hollywood system that co-opts and sustains it, its aesthetics and poetics are generated out of a pervasive cultural shorthand. American independent film does not simply adopt traits of art cinema associated with European filmmaking: it transfigures, redeploys and creates its own set of images that at once draw on and undermine its own historical iconography. I argue that current trends in American independent cinema suggest both engagement with forms of cultural cliché and established film genres and the simultaneous creation of a new mode of seeing and thinking.¹⁰ The particular corpus of films I examine, made between 1994 and 2004, coheres on two levels. First, it conforms to King's notion of an 'indiewood' model of cinema (2005) that is funded and distributed by 'major minors';¹¹ second, it adheres formally to the notion of a crisis image. My delineation of the aesthetics and poetics of indie filmmaking as a cinema of crisis exists alongside and in conversation with analyses

such as those of King (2005), Sconce (in Williams and Hammond 2006), Newman (2008) and Perkins (2012). From the perspective of form that puts representation *of* crisis *into* crisis, this study offers a complementary approach to reading indie cinema.

Chapter 1, on Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* and Gus Van Sant's *Elephant*, addresses the life-crisis of adolescence. Both films present liminality as a process of dissolution by translating the passage from childhood to adulthood as the interim between life and death. I argue that what is made apparent through the images in both films is the latent violence of this rite of passage that fashions individuals into 'roles' in preparation for adult society. These characters, as adolescents, are inherently in a state of crisis in the anthropological sense of the term; on screen, they are presented formally as *figures of crisis* through the use not only of the archetype but also of flattened, hollowed-out and stereotypical images; these images draw attention to the 'thinness' of their own construction so that the viewer's attention is continually directed towards what is *not seen* and *what is not heard*. Coppola, in her presentation of a variety of beautiful and iconographic images, suggests a disavowal of reality: something, in Deleuzian terms, 'intolerable' (2005b: 19) in the image that cannot be faced. Van Sant presents the everyday in such a way as to render the ordinary or banal sinister. In both films, these themes are visually transcribed onto the bodies of the young protagonists which are exposed to an indefinable harm or threat as they appear on screen as figures of dissolution and disintegration. The images themselves break down and disperse so that crisis is present not merely on a narrative level, but also on a formal one. In *The Virgin Suicides*, the liminal state of adolescence is evoked through images that hover between dream and reality, while the use of clichéd images can be linked directly to the coping mechanisms invoked to deal with trauma. In terms of characterisation, it is impossible to capture the Lisbon girls: they are at once stereotypical figures (or the 'dream girls' of their era) and mysterious, liminal creatures that elude all forms of categorisation. The hollow nature of the images contained within *The Virgin Suicides* can also be directly attributed to the crisis of selfhood that the female protagonists suffer: there is no possibility of existence outside of these prefabricated roles for them, which results in self-annihilation. This is a film in which gender is played out or exhausted. Van Sant's characters are constantly in transition and they occupy inherently liminal spaces such as corridors and doorways. The cliché is also used here as a way of signalling a cinematic world of crisis. The abject violence that concludes the film breaks through the 'surface' layer of the image; this is the reality that has been concealed within these images from the outset of the film. If *Elephant* has any message at all, it is as an indictment of the education system that is presented as rife with control, hierarchy

and hypocrisy: violence is approbated if it is part of maintaining systemic or institutional maintenance. Anonymity prevails over individuality, so that these students seem like tribal subjects, all of whom in the end are subjected to the same level of violence. More disconcertingly, the inner world of these protagonists is presented as being as empty and hollowed out as the clichéd images that are invoked to typify them. *The Virgin Suicides* and *Elephant* offer devastating portraits of adolescence as an impossible-to-complete passage.

Chapter 2 explores Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* and Gus Van Sant's *Last Days*, which centre on characters who are dying. In both of these films, the passage from life to death is recast as a process of *becoming* enabled through the state of liminality. These characters (both of whom are named Blake) are in crisis, and this is made manifest in their very bodies. I argue that the films present two bodies of crisis; indeed, the characters function more like vessels through which we see the processes of becoming and metamorphosis occur. Ultimately, the cinematic representations of death/dissolution are potentially creative or emergent ones: the concept of transcendence is subverted so that the dying or decaying body is rendered immanent within the world. Death, then, is not an end in itself, it is merely another stage that leads to further transformation and *becoming-other*. Matching this crisis of the body is the diegetic/generic world of decomposition (dissolving images), decay and regrowth. By using the Western and the biopic (and 'acid' film) respectively, Jarmusch and Van Sant do not merely offer the viewer a cinematic world of crisis. In *Dead Man* and *Last Days*, the questioning of identity is extended to the cinematic language: that is, the ways in which we create and uphold truths or patterns of thought. Jarmusch in particular counteracts the vision of 'truth' that the Western has historically perpetuated by calling generic images into question and opening them out onto purely optical visions/scenarios. Jarmusch uses the powers of the false to deconstruct the Western and its particular version of 'truth'. Van Sant, on the other hand, undermines established modes of presenting the notion of a self as a coherent and abiding entity (as given in the classic biopic), in direct contrast to how the 'story' of Kurt Cobain might have been told. He films his subject as a body undergoing a ritualistic process of death and rebirth. In both cases, 'the point is less to tell a story than to develop and transform bodily attitudes' (Deleuze 2005b: 186).

Chapter 3 investigates representations of mid-life crisis. In Sofia Coppola's *Somewhere* and Jim Jarmusch's *Broken Flowers*, the male protagonists are faced with choices that force them to question the ways in which identity and one's relation to the world are defined. This plays on and feeds into contemporary cinema that deals with the subject of 'masculinity in crisis'. This chapter focuses on how the use of emptied-out, anonymous space functions as a context within which to explore masculine identity (as a form of cliché or

archetype). The films are made up of multiple disparate places that can only be connected via forms of transportation (car, aeroplane, etc.). As such, the diegetic setting strongly reflects Marc Augé's work on the concept of 'non-place' as the space which functions like 'immense parentheses' (Augé 1995: 111) and within which people are 'always and never at home' (109). This chapter contends that *non-place* affords *non-identity* and that the diegetic space functions as a waiting room in which visual tropes of stasis and repetition play out. Both films draw on cyclical structures in order to break through to an 'outside' that poses a world of possibility beyond the pervasive cliché of the mid-life crisis. In turn, this movement is related to choice: of choosing to choose. As such, non-place is a liminal space through which the main characters are *passengers*, ambiguous figures who seemingly cease to exist (or do not know how to exist) outside of an identity imposed from elsewhere. The question of choice in both films relates to the importance of choosing to choose: of choosing to become something else. Time appears as duration, and I use the Deleuzian concept of the *chronosign/time as series* (2005b: 263) to illuminate how themes of ageing and mortality are foregrounded. Time registers in the body as 'tiredness and waiting' (Deleuze 2005b: 182), which is all the more extraordinary because it is brought to bear on the bodies of men whose very identities are deeply imbricate with appearance (as film stars, as seducers). The progression at stake is the (im)possibility of moving through or beyond the tiredness and waiting.

Notes

1. The abiding and predominant tendency of scholarly and critical approaches to American independent cinema is to characterise it as a cinema in crisis. In his seminal study of the American cinema of the late 1960s and early 1970s entitled *A Cinema of Loneliness*, Robert Kolker (1988: 6) states: '[t]hat small group of filmmakers who emerged . . . and were able to take brief advantage of the transitional state of the studios, using their talents in critical, self-conscious ways, examining the assumptions and forms of commercial narrative cinema, had a difficult task. They were without community or security. The corporate community that rapidly re-formed around them limited and compromised their small efforts . . . "studio interference" has merely changed its complexion and complexity.' Kolker's view here remains representative of the issues at the heart of debate over independent cinema. For instance, more recent studies, such as those of Gregg Merritt (1999) through to John Berra (2009), focus on the very definition of, and by extension the (im)possibility of, independence in a commercially driven business where economic factors, more often than not, take precedence over the romantic and utterly nebulous notions of artistic vision and integrity. Other scholars, such as Geoff King (2005, 2008) and Jason Wood (2004), employ

the encompassing and widely applicable term 'indiewood' in order to attend to the hybrid nature of what it means to be independent within the American film industry; indeed, it is quite clear from any account of its growth that independence is, at best, a highly relative term.

2. Deleuze's work on cinema, although now a well-established approach among scholars in the field of film studies, is pertinent in terms of reading this group of films as a cinema of crisis because he takes crisis as his starting point in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Deleuze wrote two books on cinema in the 1980s. The first, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (2005a), which came out in 1983, focuses mainly on classical cinema in which time is subordinated to movement so as to achieve the resolution of a plot. Deleuze distinguishes between different types of image, the most major of which is 'the action image' (2005a: 164); when scholars elaborate on the differences between Deleuze's description of the cinema of movement and the cinema of time, they tend to see the action-image as exemplary of the cinema of movement. This is not to say, however, that the two should be conflated; the action-image is a subset of the cinema of movement, but it is true that a cinema of time can be more easily defined against what it is not: a cinema of action. The second book, which first came out in 1985, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (2005b), centres on a kind of cinema that challenges the classical narrative form. However, what distinguishes Deleuze's analysis of both types of cinema from other theoretical approaches is his focus on the medium of film itself. Essentially, Deleuze's theories on cinema draw on what is integral to cinema; by contrast, other scholarly approaches use existing theories, such as psychoanalysis and feminism, and apply them to film. Deleuze, however, forms his theory from film. In his book on Deleuze, Reidar Due (2007: 159) notes: '[a] more intrinsic definition of Deleuze's work on cinema is that it attempts to articulate an aesthetics of film from the point of view of the film itself in abstraction from the conditions of film production and film reception.' Deleuze's philosophy of cinema demands that the film viewer should not see a film simply as a representation of or commentary on the world, but also as an art form in which bodies and environments are processual, evolving and mutating in space and time. Classical cinema, according to Deleuze, takes movement as its subject; although Deleuze incorporates into his study of movement on film non-classical films, such as the works of Dziga Vertov, Sergei Eisenstein and Abel Gance, in which movement derives from various forms of montage, his analysis focuses broadly on the visual components of narrative-based or 'action' films, such as those of D. W. Griffith. Generally speaking, in the cinema of movement-images are organised in a logical pattern so as to show both cause and effect, and the narrative can be mapped as a steady arc that moves from conflict through to resolution. Most importantly, time is experienced indirectly as the measure of movement and as the transition of an object from one place to another: '[m]ovement in its extension [is] the immediate given, and the whole which changes, that is, time, [is] indirect or mediate representation' (Deleuze 2005b: 265). Accordingly, diegetic space is arranged so as to afford the solution

of a given narrative problem and allow for ease of action. Time in the cinema of the movement-image appears in a chronological or scientific ‘measurable’ format. By contrast, the modern cinema forsakes this devotion to movement in favour of a direct exploration of time, memory and thought and evidences the rise of disparate and anonymous spaces through which characters wander seemingly unable to react to what surrounds them. One important consequence of this, for Deleuze, is the replacement of the active protagonist, who is associated with the cinema of movement, with the visionary or the ‘seer’ (Deleuze 2005b: 2).

3. A number of other ritual theorists have taken up van Gennep’s concept of liminality and developed it for their own purposes. Max Gluckman (1963) analyses rites of passage in terms of status reversal rituals in which social stratification is temporarily disrupted in order to secure its eventual stability. Edmund Leach characterises liminality as a tool for social control of boundaries between lands and individuals; liminality, according to Leach, aids relations between separate entities while also helping to ensure that the boundaries between these entities are kept secure. Mary Douglas analyses liminality in terms of boundaries between the socially accepted and the polluting or dangerous. Individuals or entities occupying a liminal zone are threatening to social order, she argues. For a more developed discussion of these scholars’ theories, see Rapport and Overing (2000: 230–2).
4. Although it would not be erroneous to argue that the potential emergence of a cinema of time within American independent film could be linked to the crisis in Iraq and Afghanistan and the global financial crisis, I do not believe that the emergence of a cinema of time is as culturally and historically located as Deleuze implies in his work. D. N. Rodowick has noted that ‘there is no historical break between the movement-image and the time-image, for the direct-image of time is an ever renewable possibility recurring throughout the history of cinema’ (Rodowick 2009: 108). There is still a proclivity for both kinds of cinema and it has always been the case that many films (such as *The Virgin Suicides*) move between the modes of movement and time. Furthermore, the existence of a cinema of time does not preclude the existence of a cinema of movement; indeed, the cinema of the movement-image is still the dominant mode of film-making.
5. Deleuze draws on Henri Bergson’s theories of memory in *Matter and Memory* (2004), particularly his ideas relating to attentive recognition, to develop this idea and show how these purely optical images can be linked so as to form complete images of time. Deleuze states that in our quotidian interactions with the world, we rely on *automatic recognition* to facilitate action. What was once unfamiliar is absorbed into the body through habit; we know our way around our environment because our bodies are able to draw on immediately accessible memories to remind us of how we went about achieving this in the past. Our being with and in the world is thus, to use the phenomenological term, *intentional*: our thoughts and actions are directed *towards* our environment. We negotiate our way through the

world via our body, its responsiveness to our surroundings and the way actions and reactions are corporeally embedded through habit. However, when something seems unfamiliar or unknown, the mind spirals back through ever deeper layers of memory in order to make sense of it. This process of *attentive recognition* reveals the true nature of memory: as coexisting sheets of the past from which we extract information. For Deleuze, the purely visual image, which is associated with the cinema of time, initiates an exploration of memory rather than aiding action. He goes on to show how these optical images can be linked with the processes of dream and memory, and finally how they can be related to images that reveal the foundation of time.

6. *Communitas* is 'an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders'. *Communitas* is an important part of society's structure, and some rituals are employed deliberately as a part of status-reversal ceremonies that remind those who are high in societal structure that they could not be so without the category of low status against which to define themselves: '[l]iminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed' (Turner 1995: 97).
7. Deleuze suggests that the impossibility of finding a recollection-image to make sense of the optical image in the present moment, when coupled with the protagonist's lack of physical movement, creates a situation in which the mind travels through 'the past in general' (Deleuze 2005b: 52) and sifts through dream and memory images, the corresponding signs of which he calls respectively *onirosigns* and *mnemosigns*. Deleuze (2005b: 44) remarks that, although films that explore dream and memory point towards the imbricate relation between the present and past and tend towards 'a point of indiscernibility' between the two, they rarely combine these polarities, so that it becomes impossible to decipher the difference between them. For Deleuze, the only true image of time is one that reveals the temporal nature of how memories are formed. Following Bergson's (2004) theory of memory, Deleuze states that memories are formed in the present moment; the present splits and doubles itself, so as to create a 'virtual memory-image' alongside an actual 'perception image' (Bogue 2003: 118). The foundation of time, as this continual splitting in the present moment, is made clear in such an image through the genuine indecipherability between 'the real and the imaginary . . . the present and the past . . . the actual and the virtual' (Deleuze 2005b: 68). Such an effect is a genuine property of the time-image; it is 'the objective characteristic of certain existing images which are by nature double' (2005b: 68). This uncertain status of the image, of being neither definitively real nor imaginary, of being neither certainly present nor past, is the definition of the modern image that Deleuze calls the crystal. In relation to what follows this introductory section, the ambiguity of dream, memory and crystal images is linked with the state of liminality, while the cliché is used throughout as a sign of crisis into which the purely optical image breaks. Deleuze develops the concept of the crystal image in order to show how entire films can be characterised as *crystalline*.

For him, the films of Max Ophüls, Federico Fellini, Jean Renoir and Luchino Visconti can be likened to the crystal in varying degrees of perfection, formation and disintegration. However, he also describes three further ways in which time can be expressed within cinematic form. Aside from in the crystal image, which blurs the boundary between the past and present and the virtual and the actual, time can also appear in 'sheets of the past', 'peaks of the present' (2005b: 95), or as a 'series' (2005b: 182). Deleuze labels these time-images *chronosigns* (2005b: 95); the difference between the crystal image and the chronosign is the overall effect of this combination of the virtual and the actual and the past and the present. Chronosigns combine these polarities too, but what is in play here is no longer the past and the present, but the true and the false. Chronosigns are images of time that throw 'truth' into crisis (2005: 126). For Deleuze, the films of Orson Welles, Alain Resnais, Michelangelo Antonioni, Shirley Clarke and John Cassavetes are consummate examples of this kind of cinema because they use time as a disruptive force that decentres the way we think ordinarily.

8. In his article 'The Art Cinema as Mode of Film Practice' (originally written in 1987 and reprinted in Bordwell 2008), David Bordwell identifies some of the key characteristics of an alternative, primarily European, cinema (lack of a cause-effect structure in narrative terms, psychological reaction rather than action and, above all, opacity) which he believes are being integrated into, or refashioned for, American film and its audience. He notes: 'If Hollywood is adopting traits of the art cinema, that process must be seen as not simple copying but complex transformation' (Bordwell 2008: 157).
9. See, by way of example, Robert Ray's extensive study of this system (1985).
10. While Bordwell and Kolker's work remains seminal in terms of its central focus on the formal qualities of independent cinema, more recent scholars have contributed usefully to the study of the aesthetics and poetics of 'indie' cinema. Indeed, Michael Newman (2008), Geoff King (2005, 2008), Jeffrey Sconce (in Williams and Hammond 2006), and Claire Perkins (2012) have identified further traits (in terms of both form and narrative) that are shared by many recent American indie films. Both Newman's and King's studies tend to focus on the industrial and sociological context of indie cinema as a phenomenon, whereas the work of Sconce (in Williams and Hammond 2006) and Perkins (2012), who develops Sconce's original thesis, on 'Smart cinema' provides a reading of independent film in terms of its politics and 'blank' style. It is to Sconce's assessment of the aesthetics and poetics of American independent film that I wish to turn briefly since its agenda is very much in line with my own. In his essay 'Smart Cinema' (in Williams and Hammond 2006) on the work of directors Quentin Tarantino and Todd Solondz, Sconce acknowledges the increasingly hybrid nature of American independent cinema and elaborates on some of its more salient features in terms of both form and content. He writes: '[n]ot quite "art" films in the sober Bergmanesque art house tradition, nor "Hollywood" films . . . nor "independent" films according to the DIY outsider credo, "Smart" films nevertheless share an aura of "intelligence" (or at least ironic distance) that dis-

tinguish them from the perceived “dross” . . . of the mainstream multiplex’ (in Williams and Hammond 2006: 430). This ‘aura of intelligence’ is manifest in a number of stylistic strategies that contribute to the cultivation of a ‘blank’ style at the centre of which is an indictment of the white, middle-class American family (Todd Solondz’s *Happiness* (1998) and Sam Mendes’ more mainstream film *American Beauty* (1999) being prime examples of this style). What is interesting about Sconce’s analysis is that he refuses to couch independence purely in terms of a cinema of the *auteur*, but rather delineates an overall emergent style within American independent cinema. He notes: ‘American Smart cinema should be seen as a shared set of stylistic, narrative and thematic elements deployed in differing configurations by individual films’ (in Williams and Hammond 2006: 432). Sconce’s approach demonstrates how it is possible to elaborate on and develop an aesthetics of cinema from the point of the industry it comes out of rather than as a result of the highly specific and personal vision of an *auteur*. As a theory that is definitively located within and defined by the politics of the moment of its inception, the *auteur* theory is of limited use when outlining the specificity of contemporary American independent cinema. Indeed, attempts to critique the use of the term ‘independent’ on the basis of a director’s faithfulness to his/her vision are altogether too vague. Now, more than ever, films produced with the American independent industry are exemplary of the fact that film is a collaborative art form, while the notion of the ‘*auteur*’ is being employed increasingly as a marketing strategy. Although the films analysed here are very different in scope from those in Sconce’s study of ‘Smart’ cinema, his analysis of shared formal and narrative strategies suggests a more fruitful or germane approach to the analysis of independent cinema’s form. Moreover, important though Kolker’s book remains as a study of the aesthetics of American independent film, its construction around ‘great’ cinematic *auteurs* limits the scope of its investigation. While I do not deny the ‘indie’ directors discussed here their agency and specificity. Although this book’s focus is on contemporary trends, it is not ahistorical; it is my contention that independent cinema cannot be defined or studied in isolation from its history and place within the wider remit of Hollywood filmmaking and the norms with which that industry is conterminous. Indeed, to suggest that independent cinema is, or ever was, free of the strictures and stratification of dominant mainstream film is at best erroneous and at worst naive.

11. That these films were produced during a period of profound change in which many of these companies were assimilated into larger corporations or dismantled and sold off (as Disney did with Miramax) reveals the scale of complexity, if not impossibility, of defining independence purely within industrial terms: there is a need, then, for an extensive exploration of the form of indie cinema and how this works on the film viewer. Independent film is deeply imbricate with the system it seeks to define itself against.