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# Acting Indie

Industry, Aesthetics, and Performance

Cynthia Baron · Yannis Tzioumakis

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Palgrave Studies in Screen Industries  
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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introducing *Acting Indie*: Key Principles in Approaching a Field of Study

This book examines the multifaceted roles that performers have played in American independent cinema. Exploring industrial, aesthetic, and cultural factors, it maps varied but recurring patterns in performance styles, narrative design, and actors' participation. It analyzes actors' portrayals and films' presentation of performances to show how these elements contribute to meanings created by independent productions, critics' impressions about trends in the sector, and aesthetic choices that illuminate the possibilities of cinema.

*Acting Indie* aims to highlight actors and acting, but it never discusses performances in isolation. Locating the work of actors within specific industrial milieus, the book examines ways that performers sometimes shape independent filmmaking—through establishing their own production companies, branching out to writing, directing and producing, and by using their status as recognizable individuals to attract investment and bring visibility to independent productions. Analyzing films and performances in relation to aesthetic traditions, the book explores the influence of neo-naturalism, modernism, postmodernism, and Third Cinema. It investigates the increased importance of performance details in film narratives with limited external action, muted dramatic conflict, and passive, ambivalent, or multiple central characters. It discusses performance details (facial expressions, vocal inflections, and so on) in relation to other formal elements (framing choices, set design, and more). It considers narrative and casting choices that reflect the cultural-aesthetic developments that

have highlighted the need for nuanced representations of “ordinary” and marginalized people in American film.

Research by the Prague School (1926–1948) on composite performing art forms like cinema provides the foundation for the book’s cultural-aesthetic analyses, which view all formal elements as operating in dynamic, mutual interactions, and as reflecting the influence of identifiable cultural-aesthetic traditions (Mukařovský 1978; Quinn 1995; Baron and Carnicke 2008). Recognizing that audiences encounter what Prague scholars refer to as “sign-complexes” (a vocal inflection, a move of the head, a camera move, a musical motif), the book also draws on their insight that in most Western performing art forms, performers generally convey meaning by using recognizable physical and vocal displays of joy, fear, surprise, and so on. In addition, the Prague School’s useful distinctions among characters (in the story), actors (as laborers), and performance details (found in the film) guide the book’s discussions of screen performance. Thus, the book proposes that even when actors in the independent sector write screenplays or collaborate to develop scenes, an analytical distinction between the actor and the character in the specific fiction remains (Murphy 2019). Given this, when the book analyzes a performance it uses both the character’s and the actor’s name, sometimes representing the overlapping diegetic action of the character and the observable action of the actor by using the character/actor names.

At the same time, it acknowledges that actors use their instruments (their bodies and voices) to portray characters’ thoughts and feelings moment-by-moment. This aspect of performance becomes particularly relevant in independent productions with first-time or little-known actors whose physiognomies might suggest social identities rarely given prominence in mainstream films. Thus, in addition to examining the implications of stars appearing in independent films, the book looks closely at portrayals by first-time actors cast in films implicitly influenced by the avant-garde view that “the human body [is] a site of social and political struggle” (Hawkins 2005, 90).

Further, without suggesting that actors create characters out of thin air, *Acting Indie* identifies the task of building characterizations and executing performances as an actor’s job. In independent productions, this labor can have special significance, because the character-centered, loosely plotted narratives that often distinguish independent films make actors’ gestures, expressions, and physical appearance a salient part of the films that audiences encounter. These narratives can also place distinct demands on

actors, who might need to communicate characters' complex, ambiguous, and perhaps inchoate fears and aspirations through little more than subtle shifts of physical or vocal expression. For studies of American independent cinema, it is thus important to recognize that impressions and interpretations of independent productions' character-centered narratives reflect the impact of actors and acting to a significant degree.

Scholars have effectively analyzed American independent cinema in relation to cultural trends, technological developments, aspects of American culture, and the entertainment conglomerates that have controlled Hollywood cinema since the 1980s (Pribram 2002; King 2005; Tzioumakis 2012a; Perren 2012). Increasingly, scholars are also examining screen performances of various types and in different historical contexts (Baron 2016; Shingler 2018; Balcerzak 2018; Cantrell and Hogg 2018). *Acting Indie* brings together these two strands of research to look closely at acting companies, links between narrative demands and acting choices, indie stars, first-time actors, and Hollywood stars associated with American independent cinema as it has traversed the decades from the 1950s onwards.

Of course, independent film production goes back to the origins of the Hollywood film industry in the 1910s, against which it has often been defined, and throughout actors have been heavily involved in supporting it industrially, institutionally, and through their performances. Yet this book focuses more on the recent articulations of independent production that extend from the late 1950s to contemporary times. It was during this period that critics noted the emergence of several instances of an "independent cinema." They identified examples of clustered independent film production brought together by aesthetic experiments, consistent engagement with cultural politics, direct and indirect responses to social and economic problems, concerted or loosely structured efforts to counter Hollywood cinema, and developments in technology that allowed filmmaking to be practiced without a need for heavy investment and expensive equipment. All these factors affected independent filmmaking, which took disparate forms, including the "New American Cinema" of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the "downtown cinema" of the 1970s, the "L.A. Rebellion" movement of the late 1970s, and the studio sponsored "Hollywood Renaissance" of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In addition, various articulations of avant-garde cinema surrounding these movements in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s maintained a distance

from the commercial film industry, but in certain instances connected with a more mainstream American cinema. Further, different forms of exploitation filmmaking also meant that “independent” feature film production was expansive and not necessarily interested in progressive politics, aesthetic experimentation, and alternatives to the mainstream. Exploitation films of the era ranged from the youth-targeted AIP film cycles of the 1950s and 1960s to the Blaxploitation film cycle of the early/mid-1970s to sexploitation films and explicitly pornographic films after the abolition of the Production Code in the late 1960s. All of this diverse independent film production often generated a critical mass of films that constituted rather clearly defined independent cinemas, operating in mostly well-demarcated areas, including inside Hollywood as the example of the Hollywood Renaissance reveals. However, elements of these cinemas often interacted with each other, in sometimes unpredictable and unexpected ways.

For instance, despite being part of the New American Cinema milieu, John Cassavetes worked in commercial and industrial structures, including ones that emerged as part of the Hollywood Renaissance, such as the unit established by Universal in the 1970s with a view to producing films that would emulate the success of *Easy Rider* (Hopper, 1969) (Biskind 1999, 125–126). Taking a different route, Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper, Jack Nicholson, and many other actors and filmmakers were long-term fixtures of the Roger Corman/AIP exploitation film factory before *Easy Rider* helped them to create a bridge between that realm and the quality independent films associated with the Hollywood Renaissance.

Similarly, Andy Warhol’s *The Chelsea Girls* (1966) merged underground and mainstream cinema by receiving distribution in the commercial circuit, while landmark Hollywood Renaissance film *Midnight Cowboy* (Schlesinger, 1969) reached out to Warhol, with Factory regulars participating in *Midnight Cowboy*’s famous underground party scene (Needham 2018, 134–140). Pornographic films were screened in mainstream theatres, and actors like Marilyn Chambers appeared in films ranging from the pornographic *Behind the Green Door* (Mitchell and Mitchell, 1972) to auteur-led independent horror films like David Cronenberg’s *Rabid* (1977). Finally, the influence of Blaxploitation films of the early 1970s can be seen even in some L.A. Rebellion films that aimed to provide more realistic and politically progressive representations of black people, with *Welcome Home, Brother Charles* (Fanaka, 1976) blurring the boundaries between the two movements.



These and other instances of independent film cross-fertilization and contact with other types of film and media have influenced more contemporary expressions of independent cinema. Scholarly and critical accounts have highlighted the extent to which the Hollywood Renaissance represents an antecedent to contemporary American independent cinema (Biskind 2005, 1, 19; Levy 1999, 102). There are strong arguments for linking the two eras and seeing the two types of filmmaking as being in dialogue with one another. For instance, one can argue that when the studios put an end to the aesthetically daring productions that characterized the Hollywood Renaissance in the mid-1970s, they paved the way for the new low-budget independent cinema of the 1980s. This is because, in both instances, filmmakers wanted to make personal films without the pressures of commercialism. Not surprisingly, Hollywood Renaissance filmmakers Robert Altman, Martin Scorsese, and others were able to expand their creative work in the 1980s and 1990s with films handled by companies such as Fine Line Features and Miramax, which scholars associate with key developments in contemporary American independent cinema.

Other connections between earlier and more contemporary expressions of independent cinema include the use of explicit pornographic images in contemporary independent films such as *Ken Park* (Clark, 2002), *Brown Bunny* (Gallo, 2003), and *Shortbus* (Mitchell, 2006). These independent films continue to challenge mainstream norms while also complicating distinctions between quality and exploitation filmmaking. The links joining the different periods are also visible in films that examine racial injustice in America. For example, the New Black Cinema of Spike Lee and filmmakers like Matty Rich, the Hughes brothers, John Singleton and others in the early 1990s engaged with the L.A. Rebellion and Blaxploitation films of the 1970s both as a source of inspiration and as texts to be revisited and deconstructed (Lott 1998, 212).

*Acting Indie* recognizes the various forms of independent cinema, but focuses on a few clusters of independent film production and specific examples from them. These films are associated with “quality” independent feature filmmaking, which is produced primarily for the margins of the commercial film market, and more often than not engages with key values associated with independence, including aesthetic experimentation and alternative cultural politics. Thus, exploitation, Blaxploitation, avant-garde, documentary, pornography, and other expressions of independent filmmaking that do not easily fit the discursive formation of “quality”

independent cinema are beyond the scope of the book, though we do consider that they have sometimes influenced “quality” independent narrative filmmaking, as the above examples demonstrate.

The book builds on the authors’ respective areas of expertise in screen performance (Baron) and in American independent cinema (Tzioumakis), and it provides new insights into several areas of film and media studies. For instance, it makes the case for expanding studies that center on the role of the auteur filmmaker. Recognizing that independent film has rightly been seen as a director’s cinema, the case studies show that a director’s signature style can depend on and reflect the specific choices in the actors’ performances and the impressions created by the acting company associated with the director’s films.

The book contributes to star studies. It provides additional evidence that there are different types of stardom, that films make different uses of stars, and that institutional context leads audiences to approach star performances in different ways. American independent cinema tends to use stars (of different types) to limn complex characters and contribute to ensemble performances. This approach often differs from mainstream films that use audiences’ awareness of stars’ previous screen roles and publicity about their personal lives to establish characters quickly. Similarly, publicity about actors’ work in independent films tends to emphasize their interest in and dedication to the craft of acting rather than their appeal to wide audiences, as is the case with stars appearing in Hollywood films.

The book highlights the essential connection between performance and narrative design. Building on scholars’ recognition that independent films tend to give priority to character rather than plot (Hillier 2001, ix), its analyses show how the minute details of gesture and expression take on great import in films that tend to avoid spectacular conflict and strong forward momentum. The book also shows how both narrative and performance choices are influenced by larger aesthetic traditions. For instance, films influenced by Third Cinema interventions set aside ostensive distinctions between realist and modernist aesthetics as they create performance-sound-image collages that render both the humanity of individuals and the realities of a social group’s fraught collective history. In another thread running through contemporary American independent cinema, films influenced by nineteenth-century naturalistic traditions, amended by twentieth and twenty-first century perspectives of identity, feature character interactions that depict dense, shifting, and sometimes ambiguous character motivations and responses.

One aspect of the book’s analysis of performance and neo-naturalist traditions involves attention to the naturalistic performances in the many independent films now shot in digital formats. The introduction of affordable digital video technology in the 1990s paved the way for films that re-imagined independent filmmaking and fostered renewed explorations in screen performance. As the independent sector moved into the late-indiewood era in the twenty-first century, established auteurs continued their innovative work in studio-backed productions. At the same time, the sophistication of digital technology led to an increasing number of more “immediate” performances that fit with the DIY aesthetic of independent filmmakers’ digital productions and digital exhibition strategies.

In summary, *Acting Indie* reframes American independent cinema through its research on actors’ contributions both in front of the camera and behind the scenes. It identifies industrial, aesthetic, cultural, and technological influences on performances in American independent cinema. It analyzes the evolving institutional and economic arrangements that have affected casting decisions and performances in the independent sector. It shows how acting figures into the cultural associations that have made American independent cinema more or less distinct from mainstream cinema along with exploitation and other types of “independent” filmmaking that have influenced “quality” American independent cinema.

## BOOK STRUCTURE

The book has six parts; each one has two chapters. “Locating Independence and Performance in American Cinema” examines definitions of American independent cinema and offers an overview of actors’ historical role in independent filmmaking (Chapter 2); it shares considerations about performance, aesthetics, casting, and narrative design that are crucial to studying performance in American independent films (Chapter 3). “In Hollywood and Off Hollywood: Key Material and Aesthetic Foundations” explores disparate areas of independent filmmaking, showing that some industrial and cultural-aesthetic influences come from inside Hollywood, specifically the films of the Hollywood Renaissance (Chapter 4). It shows that others come from outside of Hollywood, in particular the social and artistic upheavals in the 1960s and 1970s that fostered an emphasis on personal expression, cultural identity,

and authentic performance (Chapter 5). Together, these four chapters explore foundational matters that show how American independent cinema and questions of the actor's performance can be approached historically and critically. In addition, they examine industrial and aesthetic developments that come to impact more contemporary iterations of American independent cinema—the subject of the remaining chapters.

Subsequent sections focus on industrial, aesthetic, and cultural developments from the 1980s onward. “Contemporary American Independent Cinema 1: From Neo-Naturalism to Modernism and Postmodernism” includes Chapters 6 and 7. “Contemporary American Independent Cinema 2: Stardom and Diversity of Performance in the Indie Era” has Chapters 8 and 9. “Contemporary American Independent Cinema 3: Indie-Hollywood Stars and Varied Performances in the Indiewood Era” includes Chapters 10 and 11. “Material and Aesthetic Trajectories: From the Present to the Future” has Chapters 12 and 13.

In each instance, the first chapter explores actors' involvement in discursive, industrial, institutional, and organizational developments as they pertain to the emergence and evolution of particular iterations of American independent cinema at specific historical moments. These chapters start with a case study that acts as a guide to key points and as a reference for questions about actors' performances. Throughout, the second chapter complements this work by examining films and performances in relation to cultural-aesthetic questions. The analyses and case studies illustrate important cultural-aesthetic developments in American independent cinema that sometimes exist beyond dominant discourses and practices as outlined in each section's first chapter. Moving between chapters on dominant discourses and material practices, and chapters that examine dominant, residual, and emergent cultural-aesthetic trends (Williams 1977, 121–127), the book aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced account of American independent cinema. It also acknowledges the difficulties of efforts to periodize the history of the sector comprehensively, despite adopting a periodization model that enables the distinction between some periods that are fairly clearly demarcated.

Specifically, Chapter 2, “Actors and the Eras of American Independent Cinema,” commences with a literature review of the scholarship on American independent cinema, and it demonstrates that despite the blossoming of the field in the past twenty-five years, there is very little research on questions of acting and performance. The authors attribute

this lack of academic interest to scholars often seeing performance as part of a film's *mise-en-scène*, which directors ostensibly control. With American independent cinema having been approached primarily through the prism of auteurism, questions about actors' performances and their roles in supporting independent cinema through fundraising, championing small films, and even producing many pictures have been largely overlooked. The chapter discusses examples of actors who have been at the center of independent filmmaking's different expressions throughout its history. These examples range from the early years of American cinema and the establishment of United Artists by star-actors such as Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks to the ways actors and acting styles define recent expressions of independent film, such as mumblecore. The chapter also clarifies how the book defines the different historical expressions of American independent cinema.

Chapter 3, "Acting and Aesthetics in American Independent Cinema," outlines pertinent aesthetic, narrative, and cultural considerations. It identifies performance as one aspect of independent films influenced by aesthetic traditions ranging from naturalism to postmodernism. It describes performance details (a giddy laugh, a tilt of the head) as elements that combine with other stylistic and narrative choices to convey tangible impressions about characters and stories. The chapter identifies the distinction between questions about acting versus those concerning films' presentation of performance, which can involve both seamless and stylized audio-visual strategies. Inquiries about acting consider the observable qualities in performers' physical and vocal expression, and their implicit underlying dramatic actions (coaxing, warning), which are distinct from "stage business" (making a drink). Matters related to performance also include the inferences different audiences might make based on performers' physical appearance, previous performances, and public visibility. Building on scholarship that illustrates independent films' departures from classical narration, the discussion shows that performances are a crucial component of independent films because their narratives tend to emphasize character rather than plot, and reflection rather than suspense. The chapter highlights independent films' use of first-time actors, which directs audience attention to performers' physical/vocal expression and physiognomies, which can carry specific cultural connotations.

Focusing on the mid-1960s to mid-1970s, Chapter 4, "Independent Film Production and Performance in the Hollywood Renaissance,"

considers performances in films that reflect a vision of independent cinema with complex links between independent production companies and major studios, and with an approach to narrative and visual style that often questions dominant representation and its conventions. The chapter features a detailed case study of BBS, one of the era's most celebrated independent production companies, and the ways its practices encouraged collaboration between actors and directors. It examines the BBS-produced/Columbia-distributed *Five Easy Pieces* (Rafelson, 1970), focusing on the role that the film's star, Jack Nicholson, played in the production process. It provides an overview of actors' involvement in filmmaking during the period, paying particular attention to the ways they became hyphenates and/or contributed materially to the production process. It looks at the extent to which influences from exploitation film and art cinema found their way into Hollywood cinema through actors and their companies. It shows how actors affected the themes in the era's films, encouraged genre experimentation, and fostered a new realism that depended on new stars and new approaches to performance.

Chapter 5, "Acting Experiments on the Coasts in the 1960s and 1970s," examines cultural and aesthetic traditions that would become central to subsequent independent film performances. The era's vision of the body and performance as sites of political struggle would influence several threads of American independent cinema in the years to come. The chapter thus analyzes selected east coast films influenced by developments in punk music, performance art, hip-hop culture, and art cinema. It examines productions by west coast filmmakers working at UCLA in particular and Los Angeles in general, which was home to some of the earliest contributions by minority filmmakers. Inspired by the era's focus on civil rights and social/cultural identity, UCLA fostered efforts for self-authored Indigenous productions; its students and faculty were successful in creating film/media productions by and for African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinx Americans. Los Angeles was also home to avant-garde artists whose work broke ground for independent women filmmakers and those who would later create New Queer Cinema. The chapter analyzes *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (Greaves, 1968), selected films by John Cassavetes, *Killer of Sheep* (Burnett, 1978), and *Bush Mama* (Gerima, 1979).

Chapter 6, "Neo-Naturalism, Regional Film, Quality Cinema," examines the first period in contemporary American independent cinema, which extends from the late 1970s to the late 1980s, before a number

of changes started moving the sector increasingly closer to Hollywood cinema and the films of the majors. The chapter emphasizes the industrial and institutional developments that allowed a critical mass of independent films to assert themselves in an otherwise inhospitable marketplace in the early 1980s. It also highlights the key agents that supported independent filmmaking in the ensuing years. These include federal government funding bodies, independent distribution companies, and organizations formed to support filmmaking outside the Hollywood majors and their classics divisions. The chapter's main case study is *Heartland* (Pearce, 1979), one of the best-known films from that period. The discussion analyzes the ways in which the filmmakers utilize naturalism as an aesthetic approach that permeates all aspects of the film, including the actors' performances. It puts forward the argument that many filmmakers employed this aesthetic in order to be eligible for grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, which was interested in funding projects that lent themselves to naturalistic representation.

Chapter 7, "Key Expressions in the Independent Cinema Era," builds on discussions in the preceding chapters to show that a range of aesthetic traditions influenced performances in the independent cinema era (and beyond). It considers the neo-naturalistic and more visibly modernist and postmodern acting styles in films by directors such as Lizzie Borden, Joel and Ethan Coen, Jim Jarmusch, Spike Lee, Gregory Nava, Luis Valdez, Wayne Wang, and Billy Woodberry, who all contributed to the independent cinema era. Providing a complement to Chapter 6's discussion of naturalism, the chapter also analyzes the influence of European art cinema and ways that minimalist performances and shifting registers of performance can convey characters' social identities. Analyzing another point on the spectrum, the chapter looks at postmodern performances that suggest a continuing interest in Hollywood Renaissance experiments with genre and exploitation. The chapter compares and contrasts *Matewan* (Sayles, 1987) and *House of Games* (Mamet, 1987). It analyzes the interplay among narrative, stylistic, and performance choices in *Chan Is Missing* (Wang, 1982), *Born in Flames* (Borden, 1983), *Stranger Than Paradise* (Jarmusch, 1984), *Do the Right Thing* (S. Lee, 1989), *Blood Simple* (Coen brothers, 1984), and other films of the era.

Chapter 8, "Stardom and the Indie Film Industry," discusses the "indie cinema" that dominated the American independent film scene from the late 1980s until the mid/late-1990s as both a fairly clearly demarcated period in the history of contemporary American

independent cinema and a distinct expression of filmmaking. The era reflects changes in the sector, including the introduction of a new wave of specialty film divisions by the Hollywood studios and the establishment of new independent distributors eager to locate and financially exploit commercially promising independent films, which created the context for an increasingly popularized and commercialized American independent cinema. This popularization was also founded on the films' increasing use of commercial elements, especially the presence of recognizable stars. The chapter uses *sex, lies, and videotape* (Soderbergh, 1989) as a case study before focusing on how indie film stardom was cultivated in this period. Specifically, it discusses the transition of former teen film stars from Hollywood to independent cinema and the textual and industrial implications of this transition, paying particular attention to the case of James Spader. The chapter finishes with an overview of other types of indie stardom.

Chapter 9, "A Diversity of Performances Under the Indie Label," examines two films that illuminate indie cinema's range of performance experiments, Julie Dash's 1991 oral history epic *Daughters of the Dust* and Hal Hartley's droll three-part study of desire, uncertainty, and identity in *Flirt* (1995). The chapter also shows how performances reflect the culture's focus on identity politics, even in films that use genre conventions and Hollywood stars. It thus analyzes performances in Kasi Lemmons's 1997 reworking of gothic and noir formulas in *Eve's Bayou*, as well as the inventive pairing of actors in Spike Lee's *He Got Game* (1998), which features Hollywood star Denzel Washington and basketball legend/first-time actor Ray Allen. Looking at performances in *Gas Food Lodging* (Anders, 1992) and *My Family* (Nava, 1995), the chapter traces filmmakers' sustained interest in the experiences of marginalized characters. Exploring the sometimes-critiqued iterations of New Queer Cinema in the late 1990s, Chapter 9 considers performances in *High Art* (Cholodenko, 1998) and *Boys Don't Cry* (Peirce, 1999). Despite the fact that some of these titles were released in the subsequent indiewood phase of contemporary American independent cinema, the analysis suggests that their aesthetic and performance choices fall under the indie label.

Chapter 10, "Hollywood Studio Specialty Film Divisions and Indie-Hollywood Stars," discusses developments that took place from the mid-1990s onwards and helped to usher American independent cinema into its indiewood phase. It focuses on ways that Hollywood and



independent cinema continued to converge, especially when the major entertainment conglomerates started introducing specialty film divisions to control more effectively the increasingly lucrative independent film market. These divisions, together with other well-capitalized companies, often invested huge funds in the production and marketing of their films, which enabled them to lure major stars. In turn, a number of Hollywood stars, frequently through their own film production companies, used this opportunity to pursue passion projects that allowed them to stretch their acting skills, take artistic risks, and be taken more seriously by critics and peers. In addition, many stars who had risen through the indie cinema ranks made the leap to indiewood stardom, to the extent that they were increasingly finding work in Hollywood productions, further blurring the borders between mainstream and independent cinema. The chapter's main case studies are *Good Will Hunting* (Van Sant, 1997) and John Travolta in *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994).

Chapter 11, “The Richness of Twenty-First Century Performances,” considers indiewood era acting in terms of its continuity and contrast with earlier eras, as it analyzes the interplay among casting, performance details, filmic strategies, narrative design, and aesthetic traditions. Linking *Happiness* (Solondz, 1998) to avant-garde productions in the 1970s and *Magnolia* (P.T. Anderson, 1999) to Hollywood Renaissance approaches, it shows that analysis of performance can sharpen insights into smart cinema and films that feature both ironic distance and sincerity. The chapter also considers films released while indiewood dominated American independent cinema, but which do not fit the indiewood model and align instead with earlier modes of independent and indie cinema. Analyzing *Elephant* (Van Sant, 2003), *Man Push Cart* (Bahrani, 2005), and *Old Joy* (Reichardt, 2006), it explores the continuing influence of neo-naturalism and independent films’ use of first-time actors. It considers the sustained influence of multicultural perspectives in *Skins* (Eyre, 2002) and *Never Forever* (Kim, 2009), and the indiewood productions with Hollywood stars that reveal the evolving legacy of New Queer Cinema in the acclaimed performances of Julianne Moore and Dennis Quaid in *Far From Heaven* (Haynes, 2002) and Charlize Theron in *Monster* (Jenkins, 2003).

Chapter 12, “Beyond Indiewood: American Independent Cinema in the Digital Age,” examines contemporary trends in American independent cinema beyond the dominant indiewood practices. The critically successful low-budget digitally made film, *Frozen River* (Hunt, 2008),

acts as an entry point for a brief overview of developments in the sector revolving around the increasing adoption of digital technology. The focal point is digital independent film's increasing distance from theatrical releases and its embrace of alternative forms of distribution, which allows costs to remain at very low levels and enables a huge volume of production. Given the limited costs, digital films tend to rely on intensely collaborative filmmaking practices with actors often assuming various roles in the production process. The chapter provides a brief examination of this trend by focusing on mumblecore. With the label suggesting that it took its name partly through an aspect of the actors' performance (dialogue delivery), the chapter examines what this means for the actor hyphenates and their multifaceted roles in independent filmmaking. The chapter ends with the observation that indiewood is moving increasingly closer to Hollywood, which suggests that low budget digitally produced and distributed films might soon become the dominant paradigm in the independent sector.

Chapter 13, "Continuing Explorations in Independent Screen Performance," analyzes evolving cultural-aesthetic innovations that reflect independent films' changing relationships with Hollywood and sustained connections with progressive cultural politics. It discusses performances in acclaimed films ranging from *Boyhood* (Linklater, 2014) to *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (W. Anderson, 2014) to *The Master* (P.T. Anderson, 2012), and sees different types of independent film stardom in the careers of Philip Seymour Hoffman and Edward James Olmos. It also analyzes performances in Ava DuVernay's *Middle of Nowhere* (2012), which illuminates the interior life of a young black woman, Andrew Ahn's *Spa Night* (2016), which combines a look at the Korean community in Los Angeles with a queer coming-of-age story, and Chloé Zhao's naturalistic character study, *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* (2015), set on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The chapter proposes that performances in American independent cinema will continue to reflect the influence of multiple aesthetic traditions, that independent filmmaking will remain a field for inquiries into the politics of representation, and that the interplay among performance details, music, setting, framing, and other formal elements will be an ongoing area of research in studies of American independent cinema.

Together, these chapters explore the dominant developments in independent, indie, indiewood, and late-indiewood cinema alongside the threads of aesthetic practice that might be primary in one era but

emergent or residual in another. Balancing evidence of change and continuity, the book's multidimensional approach to the history of American independent cinema aims to offer a genealogy of industrial practices, aesthetics traditions, and factors ranging from narrative design to casting decisions. In doing so, *Acting Indie* seeks to show how actors and acting have contributed to American independent cinema over the decades.

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SECTION I

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Locating Independence and Performance in  
American Cinema



## Actors and the Eras of American Independent Cinema

Since the 1990s, few topics in the field of film studies have attracted more scholarly attention than the so-called “American independent cinema.” The increasing popularization and commercialization of certain high-quality, low-budget narrative films produced and distributed predominantly outside of Hollywood in the 1980s, together with the studios’ investment in the sector through a number of initiatives starting in the 1990s, have led observers to see this kind of cinema moving “from the margins to the mainstream” (Holmlund and Wyatt 2005). Films such as *sex, lies, and videotape* (Soderbergh, 1989), *Metropolitan* (Stillman, 1990), *My Own Private Idaho* (Van Sant, 1991), and *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino, 1992) garnered critical and often commercial success. Combined with developments that helped to create a strong industrial and institutional infrastructure that could support an increasing number of productions, the films’ success brought visibility to the sector. This was especially the case once the press, audiences, and industry began applying the label “indie film” to productions that shared particular characteristics, sometimes irrespective of whether produced away from the Hollywood majors or under their direct or indirect aegis. The indie label helped this collection of films to develop a brand identity, establish a niche within the rapidly converging global media industry, and secure a prominent position in American popular culture.

Given this, scholars have dedicated considerable time to examining American independent cinema. While contemporary (post-1980)