

Proto-Indie

1960s "Half-Way" Cinema

Janet Staiger

By 1968, a vibrant alternative film scene indicated that something new in American film was developing. Referring to *Greetings* (1968, Brian De Palma), *Faces* (1968, John Cassavetes), and *Chafed Elbows* (1966, Robert Downey, Sr), Charles Hirsch claimed that these films "showed people in the business that there is a financial potential in movies of this kind – films which say what they want to say" (quoted in Brode 2001, 28).¹ These films, considered "half way between commercial cinema and the Underground" (Brode 2001, 25), bear striking similarities to what is now familiarly labeled American "indie cinema,"² most likely because contemporary indie filmmakers have looked back to these films as models but also because commercial cinema remains strongly conventionalized within the classical Hollywood mode and as the ongoing nemesis to the indies. Indeed, what Hirsch and others were arguing was that these films offered an authentic expression directed towards an audience willing to engage emotionally and intellectually in their content.

While the post-1989 period has witnessed a proliferation of indie cinema, I would argue that it is a third wave, with the 1960s and then the late 1970s through 1980s as its two predecessors. Each wave, moreover, has significant similarities, in part because waves of film practices feed off particular social, cultural, political, economic, institutional, and aesthetic circumstances: here, the three waves exist within the material and discursive circumstances of the United States and Hollywood cinema. Although I shall make some distinctions among these waves, they all depart from Hollywood conventions in related ways, having "a different conception of quality" for a "good" film and addressing their audiences as "social beings or cinéphiles" (Staiger 2013, 21, 23-4).

While I have considered American indie cinema as a film practice³ (Staiger 2013, 22-23), Michael Newman has discussed it as a "film culture." For Newman, a culture

"includes texts, institutions, and audiences. Indie audiences share viewing strategies for thinking about and engaging with the texts – they have in common knowledge and competence – which are products of indie community networks" (Newman 2011, 11). Although small differences exist between these notions – a focus on the films versus on the social environment – and small variations exist in what might be included as dynamics of indie cinema as a consequence, both approaches recognize that historical circumstances facilitate the production of multiple instances of films that have common features and that generate environments that gather audiences to watch. It is also important in both approaches to distinguish particular material sites that support and spread the word about what is going on.⁴ For the three waves of indie cinema, these sites include public notice in daily and weekly publications, awards at film festivals, supportive film organizations and film journals, film training, and venues of distribution and exhibition. Although the specific sites change over the three waves of indie cinema, historians can point to a collection of such sites for every wave. Before discussing the first wave, I want to review what scholars generally conclude about indie cinema in order to establish the first wave as a valid part of the lineage of a much longer film practice.

The Second and Third Waves of Indie Cinema

Descriptions of American indie cinema differ, but a survey of many commentators yields this list.

- Themes involve subjects not covered by commercial Hollywood entertainment (Insdorf 1981/2005, 29–30, Levy 1999, 55, Allen 2003, 148–163, Hawkins 2005, 89–90, King 2005, 10, 197–260, Berra 2008, 76, Newman 2011, 2–3, 15, 221–246, King 2013, 46–51, Ortner 2013, 3–4, 29–90).
 - Such themes may include "taboo," shocking, sexual, or violent features. Not surprisingly, then, the term "edgy" is often used (Thompson 1999, 341, Sconce 2002, 349–351,⁵ Allen 2003, 148–163, Ortner 2013, 56–90, 121–148). José B. Capino makes the useful observation that indie cinema is like Off-Broadway: "poised to cross over into mainstream venues whenever the opportunity arises." Indie films are unlike Off-Off-Broadway, which is akin to the underground or experimental cinema, whose objective is "their radical disavowal of the mainstream's most cherished conventions" (2005, 158).
 - Part of the thematic difference includes the use of a tone of criticizing (a part of) society, which also implies a message – having something to say. Jeffrey Sconce describes some of these films as "extremely politicized and even rather moralistic" (2002, 352). Some films seem fatalistic (Sconce 2002, 363–364). Other films may start ironic but move to sentimentality (MacDowell 2013, 54–64).

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- Unlike the tight, linear, causally driven Hollywood film, indie cinema emplots its story in an episodic or even convoluted order (Sconce 2002, 362, King 2005, 63–104, Berra 2008, 12, Newman 2011, 15, 141–217).
 - Causality is also often not motivated (or at least does not derive from goal-oriented protagonists). Rather, events happen by chance or (more of an anathema to Hollywood cinema) by coincidence or synchronicity (Sconce 2002, 363, King 2005, 66–84).
 - Episodic, non-motivated causality may also create the sense of a slow or deliberate pace (Insdorf 1981/2005, 29–30, Sconce 2002, 359, Gallagher 2013, 39).
 - Narrative ambiguity develops, either within or at the end of the narrative (Thompson 1999, 40, Sconce 2002, 359–361, King 2005, 73–84, Ortner 2013, 54–55).
 - The experience may start to feel like a game (Newman 2011, 141–217).
- Characters who inhabit indie cinema seem different from the Hollywood population (Levy 1999, 55, Carson 2005, 125, Hawkins 2005, 89, King 2005, 75–81, Newman 2011, 15, 87–137, 235–240, Gallagher 2013, 39, MacDowell 2013). They are variously described as “off-beat” (Levy 1999, 55), “real,” “ordinary,” and, a recent favorite, “quirky” (Hawkins 2005, 89, Newman 2011, 44, MacDowell 2013).
 - Since characters (more than action) drive indies, who they are becomes central to the experience. A primary way to establish this is through “abundance of dialogue” (Insdorf 1981/2005, 30, also Thompson 1999, 340, Gallagher 2013, 39). Such dialogue scenes also create verisimilitude and often stylistic flourishes (King 2005, 82–83).
 - Use of an “improvisational” style of acting is common (Jenkins 1995, 115, Carson 2005, 125, King 2005, 10, 76, Berra 2008, 12, Murphy 2010).
- Indie cinema also enhances its divergence from Hollywood via stylistic differences.
 - Use of direct cinema/cinéma vérité documentary-style shooting is one variant (Allen 2003, 163–164, King 2005, 107–137). Michael Allen describes this very well: “unsteady hand-held camerawork, unmodified direct sound, and a reluctance to edit”; “edgy framing that threatens continually to lose the character [...] grainy texture to the film stock and natural lighting conditions” (2003, 163–164).
 - Indie filmmakers have highly prized location shooting (or a sense that the location is not “generic” but relevant to the theme or characters) (Insdorf 1981/2005, 30, Jenkins 1995, 115, Carson 2005, 125, King 2005, 113, Berra 2008, 12).
 - Self-conscious experimentation with film form and style promotes a further sense of these films having something to express (for the post-1945 development of this association, see Staiger 1992, 178–195; for indie cinema, see Jenkins 1995, 115, Thompson 1999, 340, Sconce 2002, 360, Hawkins 2005, 89–90, King 2005, 10, 83–101, 137–164, Newman 2011, 15, 141–217).
 - Many of the experiments with style are borrowings from European art cinema as American indie cinema supplants it (Insdorf 1981/2005, 30, Jenkins 1995, 115, Levy 1999, 55, King 2005, 102, Newman 2011, 15).

- o If Hollywood cinema is replete with continuity editing and more recently "hyper-classical" editing (Bordwell 2006, 51–62, 121), long takes are an obvious oppositional style. Long takes also fit well with the direct cinema documentary style, the deliberate pace, and improvisational acting, and they are economical to shoot if planned well.

These features work well with the "economic base" that indie filmmakers often cherish as both a matter of pride and of necessity: for example, low- or no-budget filmmaking. If Hollywood established its mode of production and stylistic conventions to accommodate a very particular signifying practice (Bordwell *et al.* 1985), so have indies.

The second wave of indie cinema (circa late 1970s through 1989) is perhaps more diffuse than the third wave in its appearance and solidity, yet it still indicates that a minor strand of indie practice existed within a set of conditions and institutions of support. Notable film directors beginning their careers in this period include John Sayles, David Lynch, Jim Jarmusch, and, at the tail end, Todd Haynes. Dave Kehr (2009) pinpoints the 1978 Utah/US Film Festival as important in foregrounding independent work, specifically the films *The Whole Shootin' Match* (1978, Eagle Pennell) and *Girlfriends* (1978, Claudia Weill). Film professor Arthur Knight had conceived the US Film Festival as a place for exhibiting independent work, with the first one occurring in 1978 (Berra 2008, 149). This festival would become the major place for spreading indie conventions. The same year, the New York Film Festival created a "sidebar" called the Independent Feature Project, which showed 20 films out of 100 submitted (Levy 1999, 7).

Scholars have provided various reasons for this array of independent product. Allen begins his list with the claim that the Hollywood blockbusters of the 1970s "did not seriously address what might be termed the social and emotional reality of America" (2003, 140). He also points out that a "withering of the foreign film market" (2003, 140) opened space in theaters for alternative product, and Joan Hawkins (2005) points to a vibrant "downtown cinema" culture during the 1980s where knowing individuals might see the latest avant-garde films. Moreover, the nationwide spread of cable television and the home video market resulted in just lots more space and time to fill with moving images (Holmlund 2005, 5–7). Henry Jenkins (1995, 116) argues that MTV also acculturated youth to much less traditional editing, visual design, and narration. So the political, social, economic, and institutional conditions facilitated demand and supply for this wave of indie movies.

The year 1989 is almost always used as a temporal marker for the start of another broad spread of indie cinema because of the sensational commercial success of *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989, Steven Soderbergh). Ironically, this is also the year of the death of John Cassavetes, whose work had been honored in a retrospective at the same US Film Festival where *sex, lies, and videotape* won the audience award. *Variety's* 1989 obituary for Cassavetes labels him "actor and indie filmmaking pioneer" (Cohn 1989, 16).

As for the prior two indie waves, scholars claim that the US social and political climate provided an environment seductive to alternative expressions. Sociologist

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Sherry Ortner (2013) believes this is related to neoliberal economics and the death of the American Dream for the Generation X population. While such a broad claim requires more evidence relating the audiences and films, other more concrete, and perhaps positive, explanations tie attention to indie films with their potential for profit making and for cultural prestige. Oscar and Cannes nominations and wins moved indies from the label of "alternate" to "best" (Thompson 1999, 341, Levy 1999, 13–15). Moreover, stories of financial daring and a DIY ethos created "heroes" of the new indie cinema: Quentin Tarantino, Richard Linklater, Robert Rodriguez, Edward Burns (Levy 1999, 15–20, also Newman 2011, 2–3). Emanuel Levy's list of ten "forces shaping the new indie cinema" (1999, 20–51, also King 2005, 16–26) includes more specific economic, cultural, and institutional reasons, such as fewer foreign films, numerous film schools, new organizational networks, and decent financing for indies. Information about these opportunities was spread through indie cultural networks: organizations such as the Independent Feature Project, publications such as *Filmmaker* magazine, *Variety*, and the blog *Indiewire*, panels at film festivals, screenings at arthouse theaters (Newman 2011, 17, 53–83, Ortner 2013, 108–116). Thus, the third wave of indie cinema probably now has as much established international cultural stature and recognition as Hollywood cinema,⁷ although by no means the same financial grounding.

The Historical Establishment of the First Wave of Indie Cinema

Yes, John Cassavetes' 1959 *Shadows* is the ur-text" of indie cinema (Newman 2011, 26, also Holmlund 2005, 5). As Jacob Levich summarizes:

[*Shadows*] established a look (handheld camera, grainy 16mm black and white, location shooting on city streets), a sound (ambient noise, jazz soundtrack), and an attitude (urban bohemianism, relative sexual frankness, hipster locutions and fashions) that soon became staples, even clichés, of the New York school of independent cinema (1993, 52).

However, *Shadows* is not the first or only film of 1959 to display features of a "half-way" cinema. Prior to or simultaneous with *Shadow's* exhibition, I would point to *Little Fugitive* (1953, Ray Ashley, Morris Engel, and Ruth Orkin), *On the Bowery* (1956, Lionel Rogosin), and *Pull My Daisy* (1959, Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie). Through the 1960s, the early films of Brian De Palma, the provocations by Robert Downey, Sr. the extravaganzas of Andy Warhol and, later, Paul Morrissey, and numerous other "minor" films make up a first wave of indie films.⁸ Various general political, economic, cultural, and aesthetic factors, as well as the existence of the requisite material facilitators, explain this assemblage of creativity.

As is established film history, the dearth of product and changing exhibition structure after World War II opened the theatrical doors to foreign art films and independently financed American films. Besides importing new ideas onto US screens, these films also evinced attention to contemporary social and political upheaval – the Cold

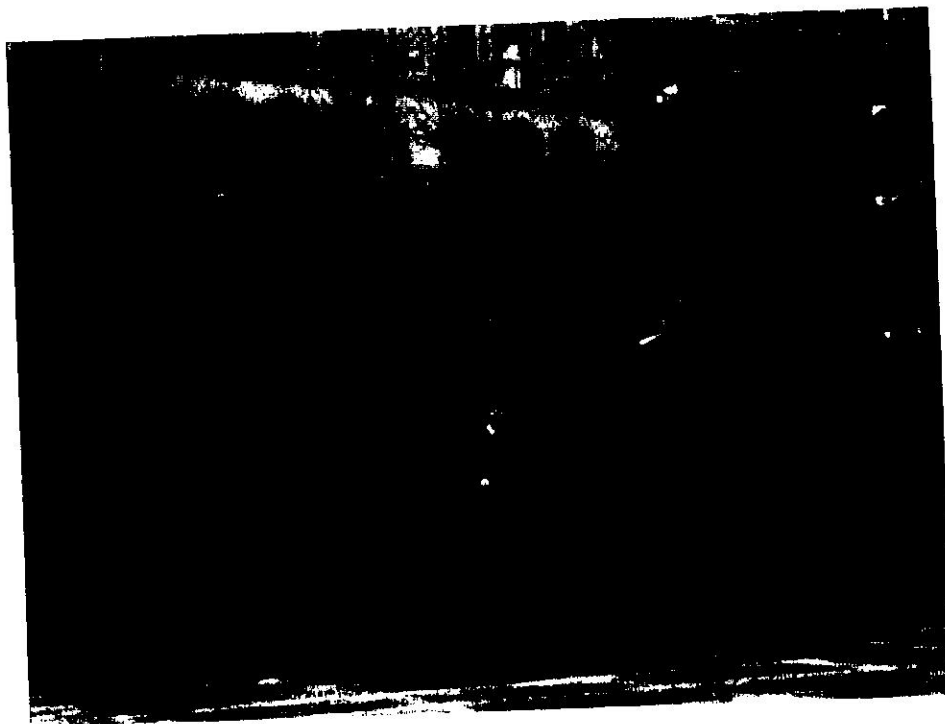


Figure 9.1 Ben (left, Ben Carruthers) and friends walking and talking in the sculpture garden at the Museum of Modern Art in *Shadows*, director John Cassavetes, 1959.

War, civil rights movements, suburban flight, changing sexual mores, and later antiwar and counterculture sentiments. Both Hollywood and independent films have always sought a certain type of relevance, and films financed in both ways attempted to evoke "realism" mutually in subject matter and in style.

For the purposes of illuminating the more specific context for the proto-indies, worth noting are particular aesthetic trends privileged by Beat culture – the more explicit liberal/libertarian response to 1950s conformist, gray-flannel-suit life. As David James explains, "beat/existential values of spontaneity, improvisation, and sincerity" (1989, 102; also Charity 2001, 23–24) had consequences in texts. For one, improvisation was privileged in music (especially jazz, bop, John Cage's avant-garde compositions), painting (American abstract expressionism, Jackson Pollock's action painting), and writing (Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs' cut-ups). As Allan Ginsberg famously opined: "first thought, best thought." James deftly connects this aesthetic to its political alliances. Black music for Beats was partially about an oppressed social group, but it was more than that:

Valorized over and against the completed artifact, the improvisational energy and quasi-physical intensity of the process of composition broke the hold of bourgeois, European-oriented, academic literary standards in espousal of populist and third-world spiritual traditions. Artistic creation became an act of psychic wholeness and ecstasy, a model and source of social renewal and the vehicle of social dissent (James 1989, 96–97).

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Improvisation supposedly also implied *authenticity*, a value streaming through late twentieth-century indie culture. James (1989, 85–100) points out that, as Beats drew on continental Existentialism, *existing, doing* might be considered a performance. It is in this way and this period that modernist reflexivity is prized (being is performing and vice versa), and “happenings,” beginning in the late 1950s, were a logical outcome.

Although coming from a very different aesthetic heritage, that of Russian “realist” theater, “improvisational acting” developed in Lee Strasberg’s Actors Studio (the site of “Method” training) into a sign of mid-century modernism. Created as an exercise (not an actual performance technique), improvisations attempted to achieve results that would produce greater authenticity when actors returned to the written scripts. The exercise included ad libbing dialogue for analogous situations, the purpose of which was to break actors from patterns of reading scripted dialogue (Hirsch 1984, 145, Garfield 1980, 24–26). As Cynthia Baron explains, method acting also pitched American actors against the older-styled (and formerly more prestigious) Brits. The oppositions involved the British as “poised, formal, and overly articulate,” with an “external approach,” which was thus “false”: Americans in contradistinction were “physically active [which] carried with it connotations of spontaneity, intensity, and defiant emotionality.” Their “natural” manner was hence “real” (Baron 1998, 95–98). Certainly the 1950s actors associated with the Method and with Stella Adler’s competing acting school were viewed as young, emotional, natural, and unconventional: Marlon Brando, Robert De Niro, Jane Fonda, Marilyn Monroe, Paul Newman, Jack Nicholson, Al Pacino, Shelley Winters.

Within this more general cultural and aesthetic context, promoters created very specific material facilitators to support access to the new films and to spread an associated discourse giving them value. Here I need to emphasize that, while I have been referring to this proto-indie cinema as leading to a second US film practice, it is important to acknowledge that at this time what is going on is very much a New York City thing in both production and exhibition, and it would remain so through the 1960s. Only toward the end of the decade did the films move into other parts of the country via the distribution channels of avant-garde, underground, and midnight movies. So while some of these films would be reviewed in major newspapers and periodicals, a trip to New York City was about the only way actually to see them. Other cities (Los Angeles, San Francisco) would continue to produce experimental work as they had from the 1920s, but this “half-way” cinema seems particularly bound to New York, at least in the first decade. This is likely also because the material facilitators are centralized here, and it takes several years for the films and the discourse to energize other communities.”

Moreover, New York City had been the locus of a major film culture for several decades. The New York City Film Society (founded in 1933), the Museum of Modern Art’s film library (started in 1935), Amos Vogel and his Cinema 16’s eclectic screenings and vibrant panels (begun in 1946), and Jonas Mekas’s provocative *Film Culture* journal (initiated in 1955) are only some of the preparatory sites to spread the aesthetic. New York also provided an adequate-sized audience and theatrical venues for avant-garde and experimental cinema and, in the early 1960s, for underground cinema, which particularly confronted sexual norms (Staiger 1999). So film societies, exhibition sites, and journals existed.

For proto-indie cinema in particular, I want to add perhaps a surprising place: film production training sites. While New York University and Columbia University figure in the biographies of several of these filmmakers (De Palma, Martin Scorsese), another training site was New York's live studio television drama of the 1950s, which is where Cassavetes worked extensively and where many of the new-style actors found major early roles. The masterpieces in this era raised serious social issues (although nothing quite as taboo or controversial as would the proto-indies). Classics here are *Patterns* (1955, Fielder Cook, written by Rod Serling), which poses questions about corporate morality, and *Days of Wine and Roses* (1958, John Frankenheimer, writer J.P. Miller), which portrays alcoholism. Although the narratives conform to classical Hollywood cinema and theatrical norms of fairly tight linear structures, ordinary and "quirky" people become protagonists: see *Marty* (1953, Delbert Mann, writer Paddy Chayefsky) and *No Time for Sergeants* (1955, Alex Segal, writer Ira Levin). When United Artists promoted the film version of *Marty* for the Academy Awards, its publicity stressed the film as "realist," having a "commitment to the quotidian," and not like Hollywood (Kraszewski 2008, 282). TV production constraints (live, studio-bound, three-camera shooting) trained production workers to choreograph extended long takes with intricate camera and mise-en-scene setups unlike classical continuity editing for a Hollywood movie: see *Marty* or *The Comedian* (1957, John Frankenheimer, writer Rod Serling). This shooting style also had similarities in terms of moving cameras and extended takes with the direct cinema (and cinéma vérité) documentary style, which Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker, Albert Maysles, David Maysles, and others exhibited from about 1958 on and which became associated with "realism" and contemporary revelations of important modern social concerns.

Beyond training in movie making, controversial events and heroic stories are important in spreading discussion that will promote additional adherents to a film practice. The furor over *Shadows* is one such example.¹⁰ Cassavetes began *Shadows* in early 1957 as a workshop project for a group of actors he and Burt Lane had organized, and used borrowed film equipment, including some from his friend Shirley Clarke. Pitching the project on a radio program (an early example of a "Kickstarter" campaign), he received about \$2,000 from listeners to help finance what would eventually be a \$40,000 movie. He edited a version of the project and exhibited a cut, which Mekas saw and praised. However, other responses persuaded Cassavetes to shoot additional material in early 1959 and to re-edit (Charity 2001, 17–19, Carney 2000, 10–15, 2001b, Cohn 1989, 16, Fine 2005, 79–80). In November 1959, Vogel premiered the revised *Shadows* together with *Pull My Daisy* at a Cinema 16 screening entitled *The Cinema of Improvisation* (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1983, 39–40, Charity 2001, 32, also James 1989, 88–90, MacDonald 2002, 369–373).

Mekas was extremely disappointed by the new version and proceeded in the *Village Voice* to praise *Pull My Daisy* (created by Kerouac, and starring Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Peter Orlovsky, and other celebrity Beats) as a "signpost" for a new cinema, calling for filmmaking that has "a visual beauty and truth," is less Hollywood and more like the "neorealist" cinema that is "transplanting life" to the screen, and provides "a sense of reality and immediacy that is cinema's first property" (Mekas 1959b, 6).

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Mekas also expressed his dissatisfaction with the new version of *Shadows*, the controversy escalating as various people defended the new version while he disagreed (Mekas 1960a). A review of the film in *Film Quarterly* led to an invitation to screen the film in London in July 1960 at the British Film Institute's Beat, Square, and Cool Festival (Fine 2005, 119), thus directly associating *Shadows* with Beat culture. Cassavetes also brought it to the 1960 Venice Film Festival, where it won the International Critics Award (Cohn 1989, 16). *Sight and Sound* was very impressed with "the spontaneity and speed with which the movie had been made" and "devoted sections of three successive issues [...] to discussions of the film and an interview with the film-maker" (Carney 2001b, 8). Although *Shadows* had some US distribution (ironically from British Lion), it did not gather large audiences and became unavailable for some time after that (Carney 2001b, 71).

In February 1959, before the premieres of *Shadows* and *Pull My Daisy*, Mekas was already proselytizing for radical changes in filmmaking, writing in the *Village Voice* "we need less perfect but more free films. If only our younger film-makers [...] would really break loose, completely loose, out of themselves, wildly, anarchically" (Mekas 1959a, 1). Again, he articulates an oppositional practice in *Film Culture* that year. These new cinema artists should

mistrust and loath the official cinema and its thematic and formal stiffness [...] [and be] primarily preoccupied with the emotional and intellectual conditions of its own generation [...] [and] seek to free themselves from the overprofessionalism and overtechnicality [sic] that usually handicaps the inspiration and spontaneity of the official cinema, guiding themselves more by intuition and improvisation than by discipline (Mekas 1959c, 74).

Yet despite its problems according to Mekas, *Shadows* became a touchstone for the independently produced, creative cinema craved by tastemakers such as him. In summer 1960, Mekas devoted a major issue of *Film Culture* to a call to arms. While he still disagreed with the second version of *Shadows*, claiming "the result was a bastardized, hybrid movie which had neither the spontaneity of the first version, nor the innocence, nor the freshness" (Mekas 1960b, 11), he acknowledged characteristics worthy of praise:

no Hollywood schmaltz & polish; no beautification, no John Alton & Co., no makeup, no arty conscious angles. [...] The very imperfections, the "unprofessionalism" of his techniques became an integral part of the film (Mekas 1960b, 12).

More to the point, in this issue, Mekas sets out the parameters of what will become the indie film practice. This cinema comes from a new generation in "rebellion" against the artificial and with "spontaneity and emotionalism bordering on irrationality" (1960b, 6). Mekas suggests that the new generation in the United States should also emulate the stylistic features of the directors admired by the French journal *Cahiers du cinéma* – Rossellini, Renoir, Hawks, and Hitchcock. These include long takes, which imply "fluid personal expression." Moreover, a liberation from theatricality means developing "a spontaneous dialogue and a spontaneous

action" (1960b, 4–5). Mekas links Brando and James Dean with the jazz musician John Coltrane (1961)¹¹ and justifies their acting style:

The fragile, searching acting style of the early Marlon Brando, a James Dean, a Ben Carruthers is only a reflection of their unconscious moral attitudes, their anxiety to be – and these are important words – honest, sincere, truthful. [...] There is more truth and real intelligence in their "mumbling" than in all the clearly pronounced words on Broadway in five seasons. Their incoherence is as expressive as 1,000 words (Mekas 1962, 106).

Side details not particularly relevant to the story have value.

In their films the consciously imposed form seems to give place to a spontaneous, even hazardous flow – a style full of bits of slightly indirect details that do not always progress the plot but add to it indirectly, as moods, atmospheres, observations. And it is particularly these asides, these between-the-action remarks, that helped these directors to develop their very distinct personal styles and to inject their films with a live, natural, and fluent quality (Mekas 1960b, 4).

He also praises cinematography that does not conform to Hollywood standards, so bad framing and cutting off heads of characters are described as freeing the camera (1960b, 14–15). All of this is not merely an aesthetic to Mekas but something more: "spontaneity serves an ethical purpose. Spontaneity as liberation, as bliss, as a means of freeing one's self from the moral, social clichés, out-dated mores, the business way of life" (1960b, 17). He summarizes: "It should be clear by now that [...] the New American Cinema is not an esthetic but primarily an ethical movement" (1960b, 19).

Thus, if *Shadows* (at least partly) and *Pull My Daisy* were emblems of this new cinema, Mekas was the town crier. In true movement spirit, Mekas and Lewis Allen started the New American Cinema Group on September 28, 1960. This event has always been seen as pivotal for alternative cinemas in the United States. Yet, as Patricia Mellencamp notes, the promoters were not so much anti-narrative, as was the case with much of the work of the avant-garde, as anti-commercial and anti-Hollywood (1990, 1). Beyond Mekas and Allen, the 23 organizers include *Pull My Daisy* directors Frank and Leslie, Rogosin, Clarke, Peter Bogdanovich, Emile de Antonio, and Daniel Talbot. Mekas had noted in summer 1960 that *Variety* indicated "about 25 low-budget (under \$100,000) movies were being made in New York alone" (Mekas 1960b, 7). The New American Cinema group provided an association for filmmakers attracted to a different way of filmmaking. In announcing the group in *Film Culture*'s summer 1961 issue, the journal not only provided the group's manifesto but discussed practical labor and financing ideas – a sort of "how to" ("New American Cinema Group" 1961). By 1962, Mekas and others had formed a distribution organization, The Film-Makers' Cooperative (Mekas 1978; also see James 1989, 83–87).

Film Culture also created its hall of heroes and own counter-Oscars. The first "Independent Film Award" went to Cassavetes for the first version of *Shadows*; the second to *Pull My Daisy*. In 1961, the third award went to the direct cinema documentary *Primary* (1960, Robert Drew). Yet by the mid-1960s, Mekas and *Film Culture* were more devoted to non-narrative cinema, to avant-garde and underground cinema. Still

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the promotion and material discourses of the early 1960s affected young narrative filmmakers. Figures ranging from Scorsese to Nicolas Winding Refn have pointed to *Shadows* as a touchstone (Charity 2001, xii, 52). The discourse of what might be a viable alternative cinema was firmly established, and material sites existed to support and reinforce this film practice. Moreover, both the films to come and their critical reception solidified the conventions for this first wave of indie cinema. When Hollywood took notice, nominating Cassavetes for an Academy Award in 1969 for writing *Faces* (Cohn 1989), no one could be in doubt that the practice had arrived.

Conventions and Viewing of First-Wave Indie Cinema

In considering the conventions of first-wave indie cinema, I will focus on the films of Cassavetes, De Palma, and Downey, drawing in additional examples as useful. However, it is worth repeating that foreign art cinema (especially neorealism) and the New York context were already influencing some people prior to *Shadows*, factors that set in play a wider promotion and then convergence of these practices through the 1960s.

The 1953 *Little Fugitive* is a small, episodic story of a runaway boy and his older brother's attempt to find him, shot in black and white with a hand-held camera using ambient sounds and the locations of the city and Coney Island. Three years later, a sort of combo documentary/fiction film, *On the Bowery*, about a newcomer to skid row who is robbed quickly and then learns the ways around the area from old-timers, was also shot in the lower east side of New York City in natural light with characters played by people from skid row. *Bowery* director Rogosin added a nondiegetic soundtrack of jazz and improvised music, quite at odds with 1950s Hollywood practices of associating this sort of music with either psychologically disturbed characters or nightclub scenes.

Of the three example predecessors to *Shadows*, *Pull My Daisy* offers perhaps the least goal orientation for its characters, motivated "realistically" since the characters are Beats and this is a representation of Beat daily life. Moreover, the characters are not given names but generic labels: "the saint," "the bishop," and so on. They do Beat things: they hang around and talk; they share a joint and go into the bathroom, probably to use harder drugs. Beyond the "everyday," episodic flavor is the novel but also crucial tone of the film provided by Kerouac's voiceover narration, which explains and comments somewhat warmly and at other times paternally about the action. The narrator observes how the Beats are "goofing" on three visitors, one of whom, the bishop, is promoting Buddhism. For instance, one of the Beats asks the bishop whether baseball is holy, pulling the man's leg. Stylistically, jazz is again the preferred music, allowing the narration to seem as though it is poetry being recited in a Village coffee house. *Pull My Daisy* does not respect Hollywood rules of cinematography: the camera revolves in a 360-degree pan, ignoring the narrative content of what is going on; the shots are not always in focus; "irrelevant details" such as the cockroaches in the apartment enjoy camera attention. Importantly, not only did the *Film Culture* and

Cinema 16 crowd like *Pull My Daisy*, so did Robert Hatch of the liberal/progressive journal *The Nation*, who describes it as a "beat 'Our Gang' comedy" and who appreciates Kerouac: "when he talks the beat mumble he is funny" (1960). Thus, a potential political (not just cinephile) alliance is being created.

As I have argued elsewhere, the indie film practice has set conventions; moreover, film practices have associated implicit viewing procedures: for indie cinema, appeals are both to emotions and to intellect. Many of these indie films attempt to evoke the pleasures of humor through narrative events, but, in addition, some use sophisticated stylistic moves: for example, *Babo 73* (1964, Downey), *The Wedding Party* (shot in 1963, released in 1969, De Palma), and *Murder a la Mod* (1968, De Palma) reproduce silent-era comedy mannerisms such as fast-motion chases that make the events look ridiculous. This tactic addresses the audience intellectually for those who would recognize the outdated style (Staiger 2013, 22–24).

Emotional responses are still valued, however, whatever they were. "Disgust" in the spectator seems occasionally to be a desired experience, especially since in the 1960s such a reaction might reinforce the political and social criticism in which some of the films were engaged. For a crude but succinct example, Downey shows a dog pooping in his 1968 *No More Excuses*. The affective point for some of these films was not the pleasures of a Hollywood happy ending but a negative reaction to the contemporary bourgeois world. Moreover, a disapproving response from a reviewer would not necessarily be a "bad" thing if either the reviewer was part of the bourgeoisie or the reviewer's distaste resulted in an intellectual engagement with the issue being raised in the film.

Let me start this review of the conventions and critical responses with *Shadows* and possibly the most politically conservative of my three primary indie directors. Cassavetes pursues investigations of individual characters within their social classes: in *Shadows* it is a family of three African American siblings living in the New York art, literary, and music scene. However, as Marcia Landy and Stanley Shostack conclude, while Cassavetes' cinema might be described as "American realism," the films are descriptive rather than analytical, the dynamics psychological not sociological (1980, 68–72). Even though an event of racism (upon realizing the young sister is a very light-skinned African American, her young white male lover suddenly discovers he needs to leave) is included in the story, *Shadows* remains a character exploration rather than an analysis of larger social issues or civil rights activities. (This is even more the case for Cassavetes' *Faces* and *Husbands* (1970), which focus on quite well-to-do middle-class marriages.) The narrative structure of *Shadows* is also fairly classical 1950s theatrical (and Hollywood) drama, in that events take place over a short period of time and involve a small number of people. The racist event produces something of a midpoint crisis, which is slightly resolved when the white person returns but rather inadequately apologizes, and the family continues on. In its acting style, *Shadows* is famously misunderstood as "improvised," partially because the final titles state this, but people were not familiar with what this might mean for an actor (Viera 1990).¹² Like those in *Faces* and *Husbands*, Cassavetes' actors rehearsed the scenes many times before also shooting multiple takes. As would be normal for a Broadway drama of the era, much of the action involves dialogue among the various people rather than a

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chaining of events. Even the famous scene in which the younger brother and his pals spend time in the sculpture garden of the Museum of Modern Art operates to show off the personalities of the friends, although this is done via bodily action as much as dialogue. The documentary-style camerawork merely adds to the ad hoc feel of the narrative. In all of his 1960s films, Cassavetes favors extremely tight close-up shots of characters. Shots are not always in focus. The camera moves on its own and becomes nearly another "body" in the film; it is even "socked" during a fight at the end of the narrative. Jazz figures in it, as for other indie films of the 1960s, but this time it is motivated realistically since the older brother is a musician.

What is important for *Shadows* is what people viewed at the time as novel and characteristic of the film. Many reviews mistakenly described the action as improvised but associated the entire feel of the film with something different. "'Shadows' is both real and rousing" ("Out of the 'Shadows'" 1960, 120). "This method [of no script] results in a lyrical realism, fresh and spontaneous" (MacDonald 1961, 42). Okay as an experiment, it has a "free, jazzy, immediate feeling" (Kauffmann 1961, 21). "It is fitfully dynamic, endowed with a raw but vibrant strength, conveying an illusion of being a record of real people, and it is incontestably sincere" (Crowther 1961). Although "the picture has no plot" and "Cassavetes & Co. have made howling blunders [...] the group scenes [are] pulsingly spontaneous," and "again and again the line between acting and living is erased" to create a "flawed but significant piece of folk art" ("The \$40,000 method" 1961). Hollis Alpert opines "technically on the primitive side, but it does have a heart and a conscience" (1961). What Beat would not have wanted such praise?

With *Shadows* as the ur-film, other "amateur" filmmakers would engage in the medium and practice. Subject matter for this wave of indie cinema gravitates, unsurprisingly, toward satirical and serious investigations of youth sexuality, contemporary life, and political themes. More specifically, these include finding the right romantic partner and marrying (*The Wedding Party*, *Who's That Knocking at My Door* [1967, Scorsese]), non-traditional sexual behavior (*Vinyl* [1965, Warhol] on sadomasochism, *My Hustler* [1965, Warhol] on male and same-sex prostitution, *Chafed Elbows* [1967, Downey] on incest, *David Holzman's Diary* [1967, McBride] on stalking, *Lonesome Cowboys* [1968, Warhol] on casual sex and cross-dressing, *Murder a la Mod* on sexual violence, *Greetings* on sex and violence, *Hi, Mom!* [1970, De Palma] on sexual violence), the consequences of the general existential angst of modern life (*Guns of the Trees* [1961, Mekas], *The Connection* [1962, Clarke], *Easy Rider* [1969, Hopper]), the corruption and hypocrisies of business (*Putney Swope* [1969, Downey]), the violence of culture and of police (*Wild 90* [1968, Mailer], *Beyond the Law* [1968, Mailer]), race and delinquency problems (*The Cool World* [1964, Clarke]), and ineffectual politicians and the Vietnam War (*Babo 73*, *No More Excuses*, *Greetings*, *Maidstone* [1970, Mailer]). Cassavetes remains slightly outside this cluster of 1960s Beat/ counterculture material with his late 1960s *Faces* and *Husbands*, which investigate the boredom of middle-class, middle-aged, married life and infidelity.¹³

Hollywood had treated some of this subject matter but much more discretely: not in the blatant and often sarcastic manner of these filmmakers. Downey, for one, was the Trey Parker and Matt Stone¹⁴ of the 1960s. Nothing was sacred; everything was

available for humiliation. *Chafed Elbows*, a sort of exegesis on incest, played for months in New York, received positive reviews from major critics, and was interpreted by Parker Tyler as "a sort of parody of underground hipsterism" (Dixon 2001, 4; Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1983, 73n; Tyler 1972, 49). Referring to this film, Mekas remarked "I think Bob Downey is the Lenny Bruce of the new cinema" (1966).¹⁵ *Newsweek* reviewer Alex Keneas, on *Putney Swope*, proclaims "Downey's trump card isn't sex; it's his refusal to honor the taboos that Hollywood fastidiously obeys" (1969, 85). Most of Warhol's work is similarly disruptive. *Lonesome Cowboys* has a humorous plot making apparent the homoeroticism and overall queerness of cowboy movies. Not surprisingly, some of the films had problems with New York State's censorship. *The Connection* screened at the Judson Memorial Baptist-Congregationalist Church to circumvent state obscenity laws, which prohibited the public use of a colloquialism for heroin ("'Connection' film at Judson Church" 1962, 1). The sexual scenes in *Greetings* produced an X rating (Bouzereau 1988, 24). Thus, as a consequence of the public attention to the indies and the recognition of an apparent existence of an audience for these themes, some filmmakers found financing for and produced the more traditional and muted versions of this subject matter, such as in *The Graduate* (1967, Mike Nichols) and *Midnight Cowboy* (1969, John Schlesinger).

The first-wave indies operate usually as episodic stories, and, without an obvious goal for the characters, reviewers may struggle. Vincent Canby resorts to describing *Husbands* as "a narrative film without any real narrative" (1970). Part of this is the filmmakers' refusal (or ineptness) to conform to standard story-making principles. Half way into *Faces*, which has been focusing almost solely on the husband's boredom and search for change, the narrative turns to the wife, who later attempts suicide. While a sort of climax of action occurs as her young male pickup saves her, next to nothing was set up earlier to forecast this drastic turn of events. *Easy Rider* is almost rigorous in its episodic scene-by-scene exploration of various possible answers to the American dream. However, Warhol's *Vinyl* could easily compete for the weirdest adaptation. Taking prose phrases from its source, Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, the scenes are simply strung together.

Although episodic narrative typifies most of these indie films, two of the films pursue the convoluted narrative evident in some of the second- and third-wave indie puzzle films. Scorsese uses a series of flashbacks through *Who's That Knocking* to reveal the thoughts of the protagonist. An even more complicated example is *Murder a la Mod*. To elucidate the events leading to and following a murder, the plot returns three times to an earlier temporal moment to show what is happening from different characters' perspectives and concludes with a projected movie that shows the actual murder. A *New Yorker* story about the making of *Murder* indicates that the publicity agent, Ken Burrows, claims "'It's stylized. The same sort of thing that Brecht was working for – not to compare ourselves to Brecht – or that 'Batman' aims at'" ("The Talk of the Town" 1966, 25). Brian De Palma adds that he "structured the plot like 'Psycho.' We stick with Margo for the first third, develop her personality fully, then we kill her off out of nowhere and start picking up different areas. We have three suspects; we go back to the murder three times. Three different perspectives. Not like 'Rashomon,' which is concerned with the actual truth – just different estimations of the importance of the same events'" (25).

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With episodic and even convoluted narratives, first-wave indies do spend more time with characters who are presented as variously "real," off-beat, or ordinary, usually established through extended dialogue scenes and new method acting. Several of these films star Taylor Mead, who was the Posey Parker of the first wave. People knew the film was an indie if Mead was in it. Gorgeously odd and mumbly, Mead starred in films by Ron Rice, Downey, Warhol, and others (Martin 2013). In *Babo 73*, Mead plays Sandy Studsbury, President of the United States, who is whipped around and manipulated by his corrupt band of political advisors. Brendon Gill of the *New Yorker* praises the film, especially Mead: thanks go, he writes, "to Taylor Mead, who, as the President, looks like a cross between a zombie and a kewpie and speaks as if his mind and mouth were full of marshmallow" (1964). Mead is similarly hilarious as "the nurse" and friend to Ramona (played by Viva) in *Lonesome Cowboys*, drawling non sequiturs faster than the men drew guns.

Dialogue scenes are often extremely extended compared with Hollywood films. Genre can partly motivate this. In *The Connection*, which is a pseudo-documentary about heroin addiction, the "talking-head" cliché justifies the set interviews with several of the characters. However, in most cases, these sorts of scene just go on as if in real time. In *Greetings* two buddies walk a third one to the draft induction headquarters. As might happen in an everyday stroll, one of them tells an exceptionally long story about a girl, her friend, and whipped cream that has no narrative purpose and

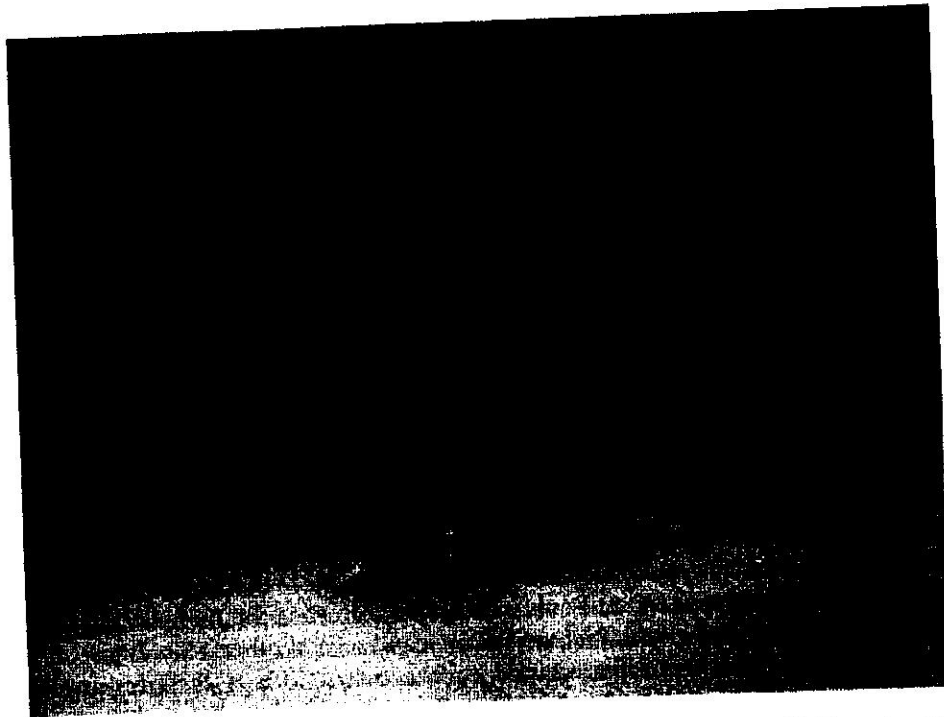


Figure 9.2 President Sandy Studsbury (center, Taylor Mead) and his staff discussing their shooting of the Prime Minister of Luxembourg in *Babo 73*, director Robert Downey Sr, 1964.

is not even particularly funny. The "Royale with cheese" scene of *Pulp Fiction* (1994, Tarantino) it is not, but it is a forecast.

Cassavetes' films are the locus of origin for these explorations of characters. Although people recognize that the conversations continue at length, one reason why the scenes seem less stilted than they would have had they been shot Hollywood style is that people gesture wildly and also roam all over a room. For *Faces*, Joseph Morgenstern in his *Newsweek* review calls it "action painting with people" (1968). In addition, these dialogue scenes have extended takes with the camera moving round the room as well, making it hard to keep track of where everyone is. Moreover, when people are talking, their dialogue is different from classical Hollywood staging of such action. Todd Berliner describes the differences which appear in the speech of Cassavetes' characters: like real people, the characters adjust what they are saying as they say it; they do not always communicate effectively; the dialogue does not always advance the plot or serve any narrative function (1999, 8–9). Additionally, then, to make the scene more complex, Landy and Shostack note that in Cassavetes' films "gesture and physical movement [...] often undercut the verbal discourse and provide another means through which the audience can begin to perceive conflict and ambivalence" (1980, 72). So both of Cassavetes' innovations – excessive body motion and excessive verbal expressing, not always in sync – make for an original experience.

Some of the more improvisational-feeling films by De Palma and Downey were less rehearsed and more ad lib than were those of Cassavetes. Both of these filmmakers shot on streets without securing permits, and real people going about their everyday lives became part of the scenery. Both directors also seem to direct their actors simply to run joyfully through parks, beaches, and public monuments. In an era in which spontaneity is prized and happenings are art, whatever developed seemed creative. Finally, even if no characters are described as such, Pauline Kael remarks about *Hi, Mom!* "Brian De Palma, who wrote and directed it, obviously has a quirky view of life" (1970, 118).

As I have discussed, stylistic divergences from classical Hollywood cinema had both practical and aesthetic motivations. The long take permits extended dialogue scenes that would not require multiple takes and continuity editing later. Besides, it gave actors trained and working in television and theater an opportunity to play in character for more than a minute. Sometimes the style also gestures toward realism by implying that the films are documentaries. *The Connection* was shot as though it were a documentary, but credits at the end reveal that it is an adaptation of a play by Jack Gelber of the Living Theater, an important off-off Broadway group of the period. *Wild 90* uses documentary-influenced long takes with the camera wandering around the room in addition to jump cuts, silent cinema (and blatantly amateurish) intertitles, and direct address to the camera. The shooting style for this Mailer movie likely comes from the cinematographer D.A. Pennebaker, who also shot the fictional narratives *Beyond the Law* and (along with Richard Leacock and several others) *Maidstone*.

These indie filmmakers experimented in other ways. *Guns of the Trees* revels in revealing details of life in the urban environment for one black and one white couple: a cabbage patch, a junkyard, an anti-nuclear-war protest, the fish market, rain in the

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streets, the railroad yard. In *My Hustler*, filmed on location at Fire Island, the camera zooms in and out on groups of people in no discernible pattern. In a bathroom scene with Joe (Joseph Campbell) and Paul (Paul America), the men talk about dentists, shaving with Noxzema, sports, and hustling, in a single 30-minute take. In an inversion from improvisation and realism, the actors in *Vinyl* clearly read the dialogue from cue cards held off-screen. *Chafed Elbows* uses images and sounds akin to practices in the very popular and zany *The Ernie Kovacs Show* (1952–56, 1961–62), the experimental visual work of Stan VanDerBeek, and the crazy *Mad* magazine (1952–). *No More Excuses* has an opening similar to Bruce Connor's *Cosmic Ray* (1962), using stock footage of various wars, cross-cutting with US Presidents. While jazz was the fashionable nondiegetic music in the early 1960s, popular music and rock 'n' roll took over by mid-decade: see *Who's That Knocking* and *Greetings*. In De Palma's *Greetings*, the camera tracks backward through New York City locations, and its fast motion through Central Park seems similar to comic scenes in *Help!* (1965, Richard Lester), partially because of the popular music accompanying the action.

Who's That Knocking is also a collage of stylistic idiosyncrasies. It deploys the camera in one long take, moving all around the Staten Island ferry when J.R. (Harvey Keitel) meets the Girl (Zina Bethune). The film also uses unusual and extreme close-ups (once on car power windows closing) and odd overhead shots. In the scene in which J.R. has frenzied sex with "a broad" (the kind of girl you do not marry, he explains), the entire version of one of Jim Morrison's songs provides the justification of the length of the scene, which also uses jump cuts, a disoriented temporal order, and 360-degree camera circles around the couple kissing. In the scene in which the Girl tells J.R. that a former boyfriend raped her, sections of the event are repeated and two soundtracks run simultaneously. As J.R. walks out, the door slams three times. The following scene, in which J.R. imagines the rape while drinking with his buddies, also runs as long as the song does. Thus, musical necessity rather than narrative need determines the length of the scene.

Jean-Luc Godard was another major source of inspiration for some of the stylistic experimentation. Chris Dumas (2012, 10–15) catalogues the similarities between De Palma and Godard in terms of their humorous and ironic tone, pastiche, allegory, and stylistic features. Dumas is not the first to see these parallels: Richard Schickel considered *Hi, Mom!* an "intermittently brilliant movie" and connects it with the films of Godard and Downey (1970). Some of the Godard associations are just because of the oddity of the stylistic choice. A la Godard's *Weekend* (1967, released in the United States in 1968), *No More Excuses* shows three different stories mingling in the same physical space of 1968 New York City: a Civil War soldier who awakens in a battlefield and begins to ramble through time, the assassination of President James Garfield in 1881, and a modern New York City story. The wandering Civil War soldier finally arrives at Yankee Stadium during a baseball game. In *Vinyl*, the film's credits appear in dribs and drabs at several different points in the film in between the narrative action. Sometimes, though, the Godard connections are explicit. McBride's protagonist for *David Holzman's Diary* quotes Godard's maxim that "film is truth twenty-four times a second" to justify his film diary.

Unusual stylistic choices often produce self-referential moments. In *Faces*, long hand-held traveling shots track two men who compete for a female's attention. This tactic is repeated later for a similar scene with several men and two women. The long takes, extreme closeups, and repetitious conversation (as long as it would likely take in real life) encourage a certain boredom and wandering of attention. Kael notes in her review of the film that she became conscious of the acting in *Faces* as well as in the long-take films of Mailer and Warhol (Kael 1968, 203; also specifically associating *Faces* with Mailer and Warhol were Morgenstern 1968 and Wright 1969). Landy and Shostack argue that "both improvisation and close-up act as distancing devices in a Cassavetes' [sic] film. The audience is sometimes positioned as voyeur, and other times encouraged to empathize with character and situation" (1980, 72). Thus such a stylistic choice may request both an intellectual and an emotional audience engagement. Similarly, De Palma claims in 1973 "In *Hi, Mom!*, for instance, there is a sequence where you are obviously watching a ridiculous documentary and you are told that and you are aware of it, but it still sucks you in. There is a kind of Brechtian alienation idea here: you are aware of what you are watching at the same time that you are emotionally involved in it" (in Rubinstein 1973, 9). Film school and film culture, especially in New York City, encouraged such reflexivity and other stylistic explorations, grounding them in both modernism and contemporary aesthetic conversations.

Conclusion

Film practices can be short lived: see the decade-long German expressionist and Soviet montage examples. While some of these filmmakers continued for a couple more years to produce "half-way" cinema (Downey for one), others, such as De Palma, Scorsese, and Cassavetes, moved into the big time as Hollywood attempted to co-opt a cinema that seemed to appeal to a heady and venturesome audience: youth. The successes and failures of this direction have been well discussed. Still, the overall alternative strategies of the first-wave indies caught on because of their freshness and their opposition to Hollywood filmmaking. Thus, as Hollywood remained Hollywood, only more intensely in the next half-century, indie film practice could continue to enact its conventions in very similar ways.

I want to stress, though, that being alternate, being indie, is not a guarantee of ideological difference from Hollywood. Many of the first-wave indie films articulate a liberal-to-progressive ideology, but strands of racism, homophobia, classism, and sexism exist within them. Other first-wave indies are much more conservative, even regressive, in their discourses. The same should be said about contemporary indie cinema. The point here, though, is that the environment, particularly in the film culture in New York City and especially in the discourses of the Beats and of Mekas, provided a fertile location to permit half-way, first-wave indie cinema to flourish.

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pressionist and ed for a couple rs, such as De d attempted to adience: youth. still, the overall their freshness ood remained practice could

a guarantee of films articulate u, classism, and ervative, even mporary indie rly in the film ; and of Mekas, to flourish.

Selected Filmography of First-Wave Indie Cinema¹⁶

Ashley, Ray, Morris Engel, and Ruth Orkin.
1953. *Little Fugitive*.

Cassavetes, John.
1959. *Shadows*.
1968. *Faces*.
1970. *Husbands*.

Clarke, Shirley.
1962. *The Connection*.
1964. *The Cool World*.

De Palma, Brian.
1968. *Murder a la Mod*.
1968. *Greetings*.
1969. *The Wedding Party*.
1970. *Hi, Mom!*

Downey, Robert, Sr.
1964. *Babo 73*.
1966. *Chafed Elbows*.
1968. *No More Excuses*.
1969. *Putney Swope*.

Frank, Robert, and Alfred Leslie.
1959. *Pull My Daisy*.

Hopper, Dennis.
1969. *Easy Rider*.

Mailer, Norman.
1968. *Wild 90*.
1968. *Beyond the Law*.
1970. *Maidstone*.

McBride, Jim.
1967. *David Holzman's Diary*.

Mekas, Jonas.
1961. *Guns of the Trees*.

Rogosin, Lionel.
1956. *On the Bowery*.

Scorsese, Martin.
1967. *Who's That Knocking at My Door*.

Warhol, Andy.

1965. *Vinyl*.

1965. *My Hustler* (with Chuck Wein).

1968. *Lonesome Cowboys* (with Paul Morrissey, uncredited).

Notes

Thanks to Peter Staiger, Steve Carr, and an audience at the 2014 Society for Cinema Studies Conference for conversations about this project.

- 1 Dates are for the release dates according to the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). However, some films in this discussion were produced several years prior to any substantial theatrical run. Hirsch had a vested interest in making this statement; he cowrote and produced *Greetings*.
- 2 For me, "indie cinema" is different from "independent cinema." I use the first term to refer to a film practice and the second to describe an industrial condition; see Staiger 2013. As I discuss there, the term's meaning is flexible, applying to both notions, but from a scholarly point of view value exists in making the distinction. It should be noted that the term "indie" seems to have been applied first to the film industry. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *The New York Times* uses "indie" in 1928 as a noun for "an independent film [...] producer or production company." Its second use arrives in 1942 to refer to an independent film exhibitor; third is to "an independent record company, musician or band" by *Billboard* in 1945. (*Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed October 28, 2013.) These uses relate to economic structure. Michael Newman (2011, 4) and Geoff King (2013, 46–51) write that the term "indie" may have come from 1990s music and "indie music"'s concern for authenticity. While some influence may exist, as I shall discuss in this essay, the privileging of "authenticity" for these sorts of films seems a consequence of the 1950s existential and Beat philosophy, which were major influences on the first wave of indie cinema. Moreover, *Variety*'s 1989 headline for its obituary of John Cassavetes refers to him as an "indie" (Cohn 1989, 16). Still, the 1990s music scene may have reinforced the labeling.
- 3 Following David Bordwell's work on art cinema as a film practice, I define a practice as having "1. A definite historical existence, including specific political, economic, cultural, and aesthetic contexts; 2. A set of conventions, including form of narrative, style of narration, and subject matter; and 3. Implicit viewing procedures" (Staiger 2013, 22).
- 4 Another example of this approach to material culture is the focus on the industrial discourses promoting and disseminating the signifying practices of the classical Hollywood cinema; see Bordwell *et al.* 1985.
- 5 Jeffrey Sconce (2002) wants to argue that "smart" cinema is a different group than indie, but I would argue that these films are within the large category of indie, not the smaller, separate group he wants to create.
- 6 As I shall discuss below, an improvisational style of acting is not ad hoc or made-up dialogue or actions. It is often extremely well rehearsed. The style and term derives from John Cassavetes' film *Shadows* (1959), which was labeled "improvised" but which was misunderstood.
- 7 See the recent wave of books and anthologies on American independent cinema and its "popularity" among non-US scholars.
- 8 As I was beginning work on this essay, significantly, the Film Forum in New York City ran the series "New Yawk New Wave," in which the curators stressed the vitality of filmmaking in this period and the employment of New York locations. Most of the films I will discuss were in this series. I will indicate reasons for this conjunction below. See Rapold 2013.

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- 9 Importantly, second- and third-wave indie cinema appears in other filmmaking centers, perhaps because individual states realize the economic advantages of supporting film production and because the practice promotes realism, oddities, and authenticity.
- 10 Cassavetes trained in the New York American Academy of Dramatic Arts but rejected an ongoing relationship with the Actors Studio. By 1955 he was working in live television (Carney 1985, 22–33, 2001a, 1–4, 36–54, Charity 2001, 7–8, Fine 2005, 18–24). Ray Carney writes that prior to making *Shadows* Cassavetes had seen and liked the films of Engel, Rogosin, Clarke, and the Italian neo-realists (Carney 1985, 22–33, 2001a, 60–61).
- 11 A nationalism also exists in Mekas's discourse. In praising the new generation of actors, he writes "There was no true American way of life until James Dean – there was only a bastardized Europe" (Mekas 1961, 29).
- 12 Other filmmakers (Warhol, Mailer) in the period did improvise to famous result: see the fight scene between Norman Mailer and Rip Torn in *Maidstone*. On the historical contextual sources for improvising scripts see Murphy 2010.
- 13 I would argue that these two films also treat questions of masculinity; however, I believe this is my reading of the text and not an issue that Cassavetes was aware he was examining. *Husbands* seems the ur-text for the bromance and multiple-male-friends-go-off-on-a-bender/last trip film.
- 14 Creators of *South Park* (1997–).
- 15 Lenny Bruce was a contemporaneous comedian well known for breaching many taboos in discussing sexuality, race, and religion. His use of obscenity also produced a major trial in 1964, which became a landmark in free-speech rights.
- 16 These are the films that I have been able to watch. Others probably in the group include *Hallelujah the Hills* (1963, Adolfas Mekas), *The Brig* (1964, Jonas Mekas), and *Chelsea Girls* (1966, Paul Morrissey and Andy Warhol).

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