

Independent Film (and) Women

Thursday 21 May 2015

12.45pm - 7.30pm

Although studies of independent film, especially in the United States, have blossomed over the past 25 or so years, with a large number of academic and more popular books published on the subject, the sub-topic of women independent filmmakers has remained vastly under-researched. Despite pioneering work by feminist film scholars in the 1970s and 1980s, and their efforts to support an openly political independent cinema, once the field of (American) independent cinema studies emerged in the 1990s, it took a direction that all but excluded significant attention to independent film women, whether openly oppositional filmmakers or ones working within an increasingly institutionalized independent film sector. Indeed, work by women filmmakers tended to be covered either within token chapters in surveys of contemporary American independent cinema such as Emanuel Levy's *Cinema of Outsiders* (1999) or through focus to individual film discussions such as *Go Fish* (1994) in John Pierson's *Spike, Mike, Slackers and Dykes* (1995), with the rest of similar filmmaking activity going largely unnoticed and only discussed (again minimally) in the pages of semi-academic/semi-commercial journals such as *Film Comment*, *Film Quarterly* and *American Film*.

More recently, however, the field has seen more interest thanks to the work of scholars such as Chris Holmlund, who co-edited the *Contemporary American Independent Film volume* (2005) and published numerous essays on the subject, Christina Lane, also a significant contributor through a number of essays on women filmmakers and Hilary Radner, whose recently authored and edited volumes on feminist and neo-feminist cinema threw ample light on independent films with strong interest for women. In 2014, Linda Badley, Claire Perkins and Michele Schreiber, all scholars who also had done work on independent film and women, announced the *Indie Reframed* collection, a volume that was set up to focus specifically on debates about the place and contribution of women (filmmakers) in American independent cinema. With these and other similar efforts starting to redress the balance, and with the opportunity afforded by Professor Chris Holmlund's visit to Liverpool (18-25 May) as a joint visiting professor to the Department of Communication and Media at the University of Liverpool and the Department of Media at Edge Hill University, this one day symposium aims to make its own contribution to this increasingly vibrant area in

independent cinema studies. Bringing together scholars from across the country who have done significant work in, among others, the fields of women's films, distribution promotion and exhibition, silent cinema, queer film studies, underground cinema, American independent cinema and media industry studies, and with Professor Chris Holmlund as keynote speaker, this symposium promises to ask important questions on the subject of the contribution of women in/and independent film and participate in the emerging debates that surround it.

Yannis Tzioumakis, symposium organiser

Symposium Schedule

12:45-1:00pm Welcome and opening remarks

Dr Yannis Tzioumakis (University of Liverpool) organiser Professor Stephanie Hemelryk Donald (University of Liverpool) Head of School of the Arts Professor Philip Drake (Edge Hill University), Head of Department of Media

1:00 - 2:45 Panel 1 Independent Women and the Film Industry - Julia Hallam, chair

Promoting Women's Independent Film in the UK

Julia Knight (University of Sunderland)

All Together Now: Female Filmmakers and Collaborative Distribution in American Independent Cinema

Hayley Trowbridge (University of Liverpool)

Crafting a 'Personal Public': Megan Ellison on Twitter

James Lyons (University of Exeter)

Women Film Pioneers: Feminist Film History as Present-day Activism

Sofia Bull (University of Warwick)

2:45 - 3:15pm coffee break

3:15- 5:00pm Panel 2 Independent Women on and off the Screen – Ruth Doughty, chair

Women's Cinema/Underground Cinema

Gary Needham (Nottingham Trent University)

Independent Film-making Between Gallery and Cinema Glyn Davis (University of Edinburgh)

Tragedy and the Legacy of an Indie 'Meta-Movie': *Adrienne Shelly and Waitress (2007)* Steve Rawle (York St John's University)

Giving a Voice to Greek American Women: *Nia Vardalos, My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, and Contemporary US indie cinema

Lydia Papadimitriou (Liverpool John Moores University) and Yannis Tzioumakis (University of Liverpool)

5-5:30pm Wine break

5:30-7pm keynote address, Yannis Tzioumakis, chair

Mutual Muses in Independent Film: Women Directors and Female Stars Chris Holmlund (University of Tennessee, Knoxville)

Detailed Symposium Scheduled

12:45-1:00pm Welcome and opening remarks

Dr Yannis Tzioumakis (University of Liverpool) organiser
Professor Stephanie Hemelryk Donald (University of Liverpool) Head of School of the Arts
Professor Philip Drake (Edge Hill University), Head of Media Department

1:00 - 2:45 Panel 1 Independent Women and the Film Industry (4 papers x 20 minutes + 25 minutes Q & A) - **Julia Hallam, chair**

The first of the two panels examines the place of independent women filmmakers, producers and distributors in the international film and, more recently, converged media industries. Through a number of historical and contemporary case studies, that range from the achievements of pioneer women at the dawn of cinema to the distribution of Maya Derren's avant-garde films in the UK in the 1980s to contemporary mega indie film producer Megan Ellison and collaborative practices in a converged media landscape that enable women filmmakers to make films together, the panel explores the rich history of, and interesting present for, independent women and their significant contribution to independent film.

Promoting Women's Independent Film in the UK

Julia Knight (University of Sunderland)

Much academic attention has focused on women filmmakers and the representation of women in their films. However, for women's films to have an impact, they have to reach audiences. As many women have frequently worked outside the commercial film industry, it has often been necessary to develop particular promotional strategies and distribution activities in order to build audiences for their work. This paper will explore the touring package approach employed by Judith Higginbottom at the Exeter Film Workshop, Felicity Sparrow at the UK women's distributor Circles and Cordelia Swann via the Film and Video Umbrella during the 1980s to build audiences for filmmakers. It will focus in particular on a tour of Maya Deren films in the South West, together with examples of other touring packages, to illuminate the successes that can result, as well as the challenges they can pose.

All Together Now: Female Filmmakers and Collaborative Distribution in American Independent Cinema

Hayley Trowbridge (University of Liverpool)

In recent years, American independent cinema has seen a rise in the adoption of collaborative distribution practices that are used to connect independent film with core audiences. This trend can be linked to contemporary debates around the perceived movement from the distribution of media content to its circulation, the portability of media content and consumers, the thriving access-on-demand media consumption culture, and the hybridisation of the roles of media producers and media consumers.

This paper will explore models of collaborative distribution in relation to the industrial, sociocultural, and technological contexts in which they have emerged, with specific reference to the role that female filmmakers have played in pioneering such innovations. Using the distribution of Nina Paley's *Sita Sings The Blues* (2008) and the #summerindiemoviechallenge of 2014 as key case studies, this paper will demonstrate the how various manifestations of media convergence have facilitated the distribution and marketing strategies that underpinned the release of these films.

Crafting a 'Personal Public': Megan Ellison on Twitter

James Lyons (University of Exeter)

Megan Ellison, founder of Annapurna pictures (*Her* (Dir. Spike Jones); *American Hustle* (Dir. David O. Russell); *The Master* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2012), and *Foxcatcher* (Bennett Miller, 2014)), has begun to assert an unquestionable impact on the ecology of the American independent/specialty film business. As an uncloseted lesbian multi-millionaire financier, she is a figure without precedent in the history of independent cinema. Yet the issue faced by Annapurna Pictures, namely how to mitigate the uncertainty inherent in film production, is one widely shared. Described by *Variety* as 'elusive'- she famously doesn't grant personal interviews – Ellison's extensive use of the micro-blogging site Twitter in fact shows this claim to be wide off the mark. Nancy Baym writes that 'Twitter seems ideal for those careers that are increasingly dependent on audience relationships' (2014: 222), and I argue that Ellison's use of the site shows a keen understanding of how best to navigate a rapidly transforming landscape 'in which digital technology and social media allow for new ways to program for and reach audiences in theaters and online,' (Astle 2012: 76) crafting a 'personal public' and thus a potential audience constituency for Annapurna's movies, based on a set of attributes and values that are highly consonant with the indie sector's idealised self-image.

Women Film Pioneers: Feminist Film History as Present-day Activism

Sofia Bull (University of Warwick)

The Women Film Pioneers Project (WFPP) is a freely accessible, collaborative online database that showcases the hundreds of women who worked behind-the-scenes in the silent film industry as directors, producers, editors, and more. Always expanding, the database features career profiles on individual women and longer overview

essays on national cinemas and occupations, still and moving images, and archival and bibliographic resources. The project was initially set-up as a historiographical undertaking aiming to rewrite film history by rediscovering the work of women in the silent era. However, after the online database was launched in the autumn of 2013, the WFPP has also become a tool for feminist activism within the contemporary film industry. In this paper I will present some of the historical findings that the WFPP has resulted in, while also highlighting its usefulness for the current push for more female filmmakers.

2:45 - 3:15pm coffee break

3:15- 5:00pm Panel 2 Independent Women on and off the Screen (4 papers x 20 minutes
+ 25 minutes Q & A) – **Ruth Doughty, chair**

The second panel is primarily interested in examining the ways in which women's contribution to the making of independent films impact the films themselves as texts. As film is a collaborative art and business, one nonetheless that has existed historically within capitalist and patriarchal structures, the panel papers explore some of the ways in which women filmmakers, writers, actors, etc. have managed to influence the films' themes, style, sensibility and politics. From underground films and artists' film and video projects to popular examples of contemporary US indie cinema, the papers will explore the of then complex relationship between women's labour off the screen and the ways this takes shape on it.

Women's Cinema/Underground Cinema

Gary Needham (Nottingham Trent University)

This paper will explore the role of women in underground cinema arguing that women were more than simply actors but artistic collaborators with their (usually male, usually gay) male directors. Furthermore, these 'underground women' were often actively engaged in reworking elements of genre and performance associated with the 'woman's film' in order to challenge the accepted behavior and norms of women who appear in mainstream/popular cinema.

Independent Film-making Between Gallery and Cinema

Glyn Davis (University of Edinburgh)

What distinguishes 'independent' cinema - its aesthetics, thematic preoccupations, modes of production and distribution, and so on - from films made by artists, predominantly shown in gallery settings? This talk will explore the overlap between the discursive constructions of 'independent cinema' and 'artists' film and video', and ask whether (and when) it would be valuable to enable collapse of the two categories into each other. It will be suggested that a notable grey area between 'independent cinema' and 'artists' film and video' can be located in the politicised, more experimental work produced by members of minorities: queers, women, POC. The main case study that will be used as the basis for discussion is the work of Sharon Lockhart - director of films including *Pine Flats* (2006), *Lunch Break* (2008), and *Double Tide* (2009).

Tragedy and the legacy of an Indie 'Meta-Movie': Adrienne Shelly and *Waitress* (2007)

Steve Rawle (York St John's University)

In many regards *Waitress* displays several hallmarks of an indie crossover comedy: its bittersweet female comedy about pregnancy, domestic estrangement, sex and pies is typically quirky; the cast features recognisable television stars, combined with the independent kudos of its director-writer-star Adrienne Shelly, best known for her roles in Hal Hartley's *The Unbelievable Truth* (1989) and *Trust* (1990). However, none of this significantly marked the film's position in the Indiewood marketplace or its lasting legacy for independent cinema and female filmmakers in the US.

On November the 1st 2006, after the completion of the film and its acceptance at Sundance (although the notice hadn't yet been sent), Shelly was murdered in her apartment-office by a teenage construction worker. The murder overshadowed the film's screening at Sundance in January 2007, and the film sold within hours, to Fox Searchlight, for a figure reportedly in the region of \$5million. Shelly's death also determined elements of the film's marketing, as well as its reception, at Sundance and in release, promoting the Adrienne Shelly Foundation, a non-profit organisation awarding grants to emerging female filmmakers; it has given over 50 grants to female filmmakers since her death, seeking to redress the lack of opportunity for female content creators in cinema, despite their increased prominence in indie cinema relative to the Hollywood mainstream. This paper explores the construction of the narrative of tragedy around the film's release and reception (which is totally at odds with its content), as well as its legacy in the development of female filmmaking talent and the broader issues relating to the need for such charitable support for female filmmakers.

Giving a Voice to Greek American Women: Nia Vardalos, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, and Contemporary US indie cinema

Lydia Papadimitriou (Liverpool John Moores University) and Yannis Tzioumakis (University of Liverpool)

Although the film *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (MBFGW) (written by and starring Nia Vardalos and directed by Joel Zwick, 2002) is widely considered one of the most successful independent films in the history of US cinema, it has received very little scholarly attention by the existing literature and has often been dismissed as an aesthetically conservative film, a romantic comedy that is permeated by a televisual aesthetic given that its director, Joel Zwick, had been working primarily on television prior to that film. However it is the film's "relationship to the broader social, cultural, political or ideological landscape" (King 2005) that this paper is interested in. More specifically, it will argue that from this angle the film is very much part of a US contemporary independent film discourse, one that gives voices to minorities and (in this case Greek Americans – an ethnic minority that has seen very little representation in both Hollywood and independent film prior to *MBFGW*) and provides alternative views – elements that will be explored within the context of a contested authorship. Released in a sensitive cultural climate in March 2002, just a few months after the 9/11 events, the film actively celebrates gender and ethnic difference, and given its

incredible commercial success it represents a rare example of a cultural product of that nature that was fully endorsed by mainstream America.

5-5:30pm Wine break

5:30-7pm keynote address (sponsored by the Liverpool Film Seminar, a collaborative project between the Department of Communication and Media at the University of Liverpool and the Department of Film Studies at Liverpool John Moores University) **Yannis Tzioumakis, chair**

Mutual Muses in Independent Film: Women Directors and Female Stars

Chris Holmlund (University of Tennessee, Knoxville)

Working on the lower economic end of the contemporary "indie" world, with budgets ranging from \$8 million to just \$300,000, Nicole Holofcener/Catherine Keener and Kelly Reichardt/Michelle Williams explore the 'everyday' worlds of ordinary people. Concern not just for self but also for others preoccupies their films. The choices the lead characters make are historically and economically delimited, and that delineation is something that the actresses translate through the minutiae of performance choices. Reichardt/Williams portray migrants and immigrants; Holofcener/Keener craft suburbanites and urbanites. Unsurprisingly, the films resonate somewhat differently politically: at times Reichardt/Williams wrench potentiality from powerlessness; consistently Holofcener/Keener sketch middle class ennui and options. Drawing on the recent writings of Luce Irigaray, I engage with sexual difference in my discussions of five of their films. I am, however, less interested in a "difference from" that opposes women and men than in a "difference for" that enlists gender variation, recognizes racial, generational and class contexts, and has ethical implications.

Speakers' Bio Details

Sofia Bull is currently conducting a postdoctoral research project at University of Warwick, examining discourses on genetics and biomedicine in contemporary television. She was a postdoctoral fellow on the Women Film Pioneers Project in 2014 and continues to contribute to the project as a researcher and co-editor of its 'overview essays' section.

Glyn Davis is Chancellor's Fellow and Reader in the School of Design, Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh. He is the co-editor, with Gary Needham, of 'Warhol in Ten Takes' (BFI 2013) and 'Queer TV: Theories, Histories, Politics' (Routledge, 2009); with Kay Dickinson, Lisa Patti and Amy Villarejo he co-authored 'Film Studies: A Global Introduction' (Routledge, 2015). Glyn is the author of monographs on 'Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story' (Columbia University Press, 2009) and 'Far from Heaven' (Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

Chris Holmlund is currently Hedda Andersson Visiting Research Professor at Lund University (Sweden) and Past President of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies. This summer she will return to the University of Tennessee; there she is Arts and Sciences Excellence Professor of French, Women's Studies and Film. She is the

author of *Impossible Bodies* (Routledge, 2002), editor of *The Ultimate Stallone Reader: Sylvester Stallone as Star, Icon, Auteur*, (Columbia UP/Wallflower, 2014), *American Cinema of the 1990s* (Rutgers UP, 2008), co-editor (with Justin Wyatt) of *Contemporary American Independent Film* (Routledge, 2005) and (with Cynthia Fuchs) of *Between the Sheets, In the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary* (Minnesota UP, 1997). Current projects include books on *Female Trouble and Being John Malkovich*, and a co-edited issue on “Sexuality” for the *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema*.

Julia Knight is a Professor of Moving Image and Director of the Centre for Research in Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Sunderland. Between 2002 and 2009 she led a series of AHRC funded research projects that examined artists' and independent film and video distribution in the UK from the 1960s to 2000. The research focused primarily on the London Filmmakers' Co-op, The Other Cinema, London Video Access, Cinema of Women, Circles, Film and Video Umbrella, Cinenova and Lux. The key outputs from this research were the book *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image* (2011) and the online Film & Video Distribution Database (fv7.distribution-database.ac.uk), both co-authored with research fellow Peter Thomas. The database is an ongoing project, with new material being added on a regular basis to stimulate further research.

James Lyons is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Exeter. He is the author of *Selling Seattle* (2004) and *Miami Vice* (2010). His work on American independent film includes book chapters on John Sayles; Mumblecore; and the role of the contemporary independent producer. He is currently writing a book for Routledge on risk and performance in independent documentary.

Gary Needham is senior lecturer in the department of English, Culture, and Media, Nottingham Trent University. He is the author of *Brokeback Mountain* (Edinburgh University Press 2010) and with Glyn Davis co-editor of *Warhol in Ten Takes* (BFI 2013) and *Queer TV* (Routledge 2009). He is an editor of the journal *Film, Fashion, and Consumption* (Intellect) and series editor with Yannis Tzioumakis of *Hollywood Centenary* (Routledge) and *American Indies* (Edinburgh University Press). He is currently working on a book on Warhol and Edie Sedgwick around issues of performance and another on John Waters.

Lydia Papadimitriou is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at Liverpool John Moores University. She has published extensively on different aspects of Greek cinema. Her monograph *The Greek Film Musical* (2006) has been translated into Greek (2009), and she has co-edited (with Yannis Tzioumakis) *Greek Cinema: Texts, Forms and Identities* (2011). Her current research interests include independent cinema, documentary, film festivals and distribution.

Steve Rawle is a senior lecturer in Film & Television Production at York St John University. He has published broadly on the work of Hal Hartley, including the monograph *Performance in the Cinema of Hal Hartley* (2011), as well as articles and book chapters on associated figures, including Martin Donovan and Adrienne Shelly. Steve's other publications have featured in *Film Criticism*, *The Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema*, *The East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* and *Asian Cinema*.

His current work includes a monograph on transnational cinema and a collection about the collaboration between Alfred Hitchcock and Bernard Herrmann

Hayley Trowbridge has recently completed her PhD thesis titled *From the cinema screen to the smartphone: A study of the impact of media convergence on the distribution sector of American independent cinema 2006 – 2010*, which examines the multifaceted influence – across technological, industrial and sociocultural levels – that media convergence has had on the ways in which independent film is connected with consumers. This study situates itself within the broad research terrains of media industry studies and distribution studies, and is representative of Hayley's research interests that include media distribution and circulation, the US film industry, participatory and ondemand cultures, paratextual study, and grassroots, independent media and film practices. Outside of academia, Hayley is a digital practitioner with a keen focus on using technology in community and informal learning settings to enhance people's lives, develop skills and capacity (at both individual and organisational levels), and to address social and cultural inequalities.

Yannis Tzioumakis is Senior Lecturer in Communication and Media Studies at the University of Liverpool. He is the author of three monographs, most recently: *Hollywood's Indies: Classics Division, Specialty Labels and the American Film Market* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012) and co-editor of four collections of essays, most recently *The Routledge Companion to Film and Politics* (2015). He is also co-editor of the American Indies series for Edinburgh University Press (2009 -) and of the Routledge Hollywood Centenary, a seven volume series on the 100 year histories of the major Hollywood studios. He is currently co-authoring with Cynthia Baron *Acting Indie: Industry, Performance and American Independent Cinema* for Palgrave.