

## Introduction

In January 2007 I attended the Sundance Film Festival, the premier American festival for independent film, as part of the research for this project. Park City, Utah, where the festival is held, is a ski resort, cold, snowy, and beautiful in January. The main street of the town is located at 7,000 feet above sea level, with snow-covered slopes all around rising to 10,000 feet, all of it bringing back memories of my earlier high-altitude fieldwork in Nepal.

I had registered for the festival and sought housing relatively late in the game, so I stayed in a condo on the far edge of town, at the outer limits of the shuttle service. This turned out to have its ethnographic benefits, as people on the shuttle were very friendly and chatty and I could have conversations with all sorts of people with various connections to the world of independent film. Indeed, the friendliness among festival-goers was noteworthy throughout, and as one stood in line after line in the cold and snow, with everyone bundled up in coats and hats and boots, one could always turn to one's neighbor and say, "So! What have you seen so far?" and everyone was happy to engage in these conversations.

By luck I had a personal connection to a specific film in the competition, Charles Ferguson's documentary about the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, *No End in Sight*.<sup>1</sup> Ferguson and key members of the production group, together with friends and relatives, were at the festival in a kind of dispersed network, occupying hotel rooms and sharing sublet houses around town. I viewed the film with some members of the group, was introduced to

Ferguson, and became an informal member of the party, which also included editor Chad Beck, cinematographer Antonio Rossi, and others. The awards are always announced on the final night of the festival, and there is an enormous gala party for everyone who either is part of the festival or (like me) had bought the right level of pass. We learned just before the party that *No End in Sight* had won the Special Jury Prize. Simply being accepted into the competition at Sundance is itself enormously prestigious; actually, winning a prize there is a mark of the utmost distinction in the world of independent film. Needless to say, there was a lot of happy celebrating in the group; even the anthropologist got to share in the collective effervescence.

I begin with this vignette because it captures and forecasts several of the main themes of this book. First and foremost, this project combines both ethnographic research on the world of independent film (including things like film festivals) and a study of many of the films themselves (including an extended examination of *No End in Sight*). Most anthropologists who work on the ethnography/film nexus emphasize the ethnographic side; a few emphasize the film side; I had decided—possibly impossibly—to try to do both. Second, although it was sheerest luck that I had a connection to the group that made that particular film, it was no accident that I was watching, out of the hundreds of offerings at Sundance, a political documentary. I had begun to view independent film as a culturally and politically critical art form, and I had made a decision even before going to the festival to focus on documentaries in general and political documentaries in particular. And finally, Sundance itself is a phenomenon that encapsulates, for better and for worse, the tension between art and commerce that animates all creative work in capitalist society. But this tension is perhaps felt in unique and exquisitely self-conscious ways in an artistic world that thinks of itself as “independent.” All of these themes will of course be explored at much greater length in the course of this book.

My original intention for this project was not to study independent film, but rather to do a re-study of “Hollywood,” sixty-plus years after Hortense Powdermaker’s pioneering work (Powdermaker 1950). My interest was in Hollywood as still one of the most powerful sites for the production of hegemonic (what the folk would call “mainstream”) American culture, and for the seduction of American and global audiences into the values of that culture. As it turned out, I found it almost impossible to get

access to the Hollywood studios, but in the course of trying, I more or less stumbled into the world of independent film. At first I was intrigued; soon I was hooked. This scene, which had begun emerging strongly in the 1980s, was producing films like I had never seen before, and seemed urgently to be trying to say something, and be something, new. I came to feel that, for all the many and large changes in Hollywood in the past decades, it was after all still in the same business of making “entertainment” (and money). The only genuinely new thing on the scene seemed to be this quirky little world of film people, styling itself as the anti-Hollywood, making films that violated one’s Hollywood-adapted expectations and that forced one to think. Or rather, what was new was that these people and these films had emerged from the art houses and had begun to achieve both critical and commercial success, playing at a theater near you.

This is thus a book about the relationship between independent film, “Hollywood,” and contemporary American society. One part of the book is ethnographic, an account of the social world in which independent films are made and circulate. Within that world we encounter a value system in which “Hollywood” is seen as presenting false pictures of reality, as “telling lies,” while independent film sees itself as trying to tell the truth, to represent reality “as it really is.” The other part of the book consists of interpretations of selected groups of films. One of the striking features of these films is that many of them are very dark—depressed, angry, violent, “edgy.” Here then I ask about the “reality” that these films are representing, and how they go about representing it. I argue that they are best understood as grappling with a range of profound changes wrought in American society under the regime of neoliberal capitalism, that is, the more brutal form of capitalism that has become dominant in the United States since about the 1970s. Although some of the films are directly critical of contemporary society, most of them use a more implicit form of “cultural critique” (Fischer 1995; Marcus and Fischer 1986), exposing the harsh realities of many people’s lives in this culture as a way of making audiences think about their own values and assumptions.

What is an independent film? Social theorist Pierre Bourdieu has argued that one should not even try to give a provisional definition of an artistic genre, but rather should attend to the way in which the genre is constructed, defended, and transformed within a “field of cultural production” (1993). I take this point seriously and will devote much of the next

chapter to examining the social field within which “independent cinema” has taken shape and is continuously evolving under various social and cultural pressures. Nonetheless, it seems to me that I have to begin by providing the reader with some sense—some images, some reference points—of the object under discussion. Here then I will spend the next few pages simply establishing a few general—and hopefully not too contentious—rules of thumb for picturing what it is I am writing about in this book.

The simplest place to start is to say that an independent film is defined to varying degrees and in varying ways as the antithesis of a Hollywood studio film.<sup>2</sup> The contrast can be seen in a variety of relatively objective indicators. Where studio films are very expensive, independent films are made on relatively low budgets; where studio films are in the business of “entertainment,” independent films often set out to challenge their viewers with relatively “difficult” subject matter and/or techniques; where Hollywood films generally eschew taking sides on political issues, independent films are often explicitly political and critical; where Hollywood films are in the business of fantasy and illusion, independent films include virtually all documentary films, and even features are usually highly realist; and finally, where Hollywood films classically have happy endings, independent films rarely do.<sup>3</sup>

Before going on, I have to say that this whole notion of a clear contrast between independent films (indies) and Hollywood movies has been contested almost from the moment independent films emerged from the art houses in the late 1980s. In a nutshell the argument holds that indies are best seen as one kind of Hollywood product, serving a particular consumer niche. I both agree and disagree, and I will take on this issue at some length in the next chapter. For the moment I will simply say that there is a spectrum of what counts as independent films, with a more Hollywood-y end of the spectrum and a more radically avant-garde and experimental end. For present purposes, in order to give the reader some initial fix on the objects (independent films and filmmakers) to be discussed in the pages that follow, the above list of typical indie characteristics—low budget, challenging subject matter, few happy endings, etc.—can provide some simple rules of thumb for distinguishing an independent film from a “Hollywood” or “studio” film.

As a further aid to picturing the “indie” object, let me provide some examples. Selecting such examples is by no means a cut-and-dried ex-

ercise. At first I thought to provide some of the more well-known examples, films that crossed over and received wide circulation, such as *Little Miss Sunshine* (Dayton and Faris 2008). But then for various reasons, including precisely its wide success (and its happy ending), it might not seem very “indie” to readers. Actually it was an independent film in the sense discussed here, although toward the Hollywood end of the spectrum. On the other hand, I could provide the names of many indies the reader probably has never heard of, but that would defeat the purpose of providing some visualizable examples.

After some thought, I devised the strategy of providing lists of winners of the two leading American independent film competitions, the Sundance Film Festival and the Independent Spirit Awards. The strategy has the benefit of objectivity, rather than being a compilation of my subjective choices. It also underlines the role of festivals/competitions in defining what counts not only as an independent film but as a good independent film. Finally, the two festivals/competitions give some idea of the range of variation within the independent film world. The Independent Spirit Awards, based in Los Angeles, are much closer to the Hollywood end of the spectrum. At the other extreme are some of the smaller and more artistically radical festivals like Slamdance. Occupying the broad middle and in a sense the high ground of the independent film festival world is Sundance, which remains the gold standard—at least in the United States—of independent film.

Table 1 lists the winners of the Grand Jury Prize (Dramatic) of Sundance and the “Best Feature Film” award of the Independent Spirit Awards for the past ten years. I’m guessing that most readers will have seen more of the Independent Spirit Award winners than the Sundance winners; most of them, being closer to the Hollywood end of the spectrum, received wider circulation, while many of the Sundance winners may never have made it to a theater. In addition to these feature (i.e., fiction) films, virtually all documentaries are independent films. With rare exceptions, Hollywood studios do not make documentaries as they are not considered commercially viable, and in any event are not seen as fulfilling the fundamental mandate to entertain. Even some of the more well-known documentaries of recent years—most of Michael Moore’s films, as well as *An Inconvenient Truth* starring Al Gore—were originally made as independent films, although they have now crossed over to a much wider audience.

TABLE 1

## Best Picture Winners of the Top Two American Independent Film Competitions

YEAR	SUNDANCE	INDEPENDENT SPIRIT AWARDS
2003	<i>American Splendor</i>	<i>Far from Heaven</i>
2004	<i>Primer</i>	<i>Lost in Translation</i>
2005	<i>Forty Shades of Blue</i>	<i>Sideways</i>
2006	<i>Quinceañera</i>	<i>Brokeback Mountain</i>
2007	<i>Padre Nuestro</i>	<i>Little Miss Sunshine</i>
2008	<i>Frozen River</i>	<i>Juno</i>
2009	<i>Precious</i>	<i>The Wrestler</i>
2010	<i>Winter's Bone</i>	<i>Precious</i>
2011	<i>Like Crazy</i>	<i>Black Swan</i>
2012	<i>Beasts of the Southern Wild</i>	<i>The Artist</i>

A few words first about my film-viewing practices for this project. When Hortense Powdermaker conducted her study of the Hollywood studios in the mid-twentieth century, she did not discuss the movies produced in those studios except largely to dismiss them. For me, and for this project, it was unthinkable to study the independent film scene without immersing myself in the films. Thus, from the beginning of the research—roughly the end of 2005—I began intensively watching films across a spectrum ranging from super-low budget indies made entirely outside the studio system to somewhat higher budget “semi-indies” (Merritt 2000) made with some kind of studio involvement. Within the indie spectrum I include both features and documentaries, mostly American-made but also some foreign-made. I also occasionally checked out a Hollywood movie, either because it won an award, or because I wanted to see what Hollywood was up to within a particular genre. By the end (although there is no real end) I had watched about six hundred fifty films, the vast majority of which were somewhere on the independent spectrum.

There was no systematic principle of selection. I tried to watch everything I could. I tried to watch all the films of the people I interviewed. I tried to watch everything that won or was nominated for a major award, everything that people I talked to recommended, everything that got good reviews in my various regular newspapers and magazines.<sup>4</sup> I also signed up

for the UCLA extension course called “Sneak Preview” for two years, attended several festivals (to be discussed below), and attended many preview screenings hosted by various film organizations in Los Angeles.

I intentionally tried to be as open-ended and, one might say, as “ethnographic” as possible in my film viewing, attempting to get a sense of what these films in some collective sense were trying to do and be. In the beginning especially I was often stunned or shocked by the heaviness or darkness of the films and found many of them hard to watch. Over the course of the project I became more accustomed to the filmic themes, moods, and strategies that were distinctive of independent film. I began to recognize patterns and styles, what one might think of as mini-genres. These thematic groupings of films, rather than individual films, will be the focus of most of the film interpretations in the pages that follow.

In a later section I will discuss my approach to reading the films, an approach that, I warn the reader in advance, draws mostly from interpretive anthropology and cultural studies rather than “film studies” per se. Most basically, the films are seen throughout as part of the place/time in which they were made, emerging from it, reworking it, and in the process critiquing it. Without dismissing important questions of aesthetics, style, and cinematic techniques, my primary issues for this book concern the films’ relationships to the social, cultural, and historical world. Specifically, I will treat independent films as part of a story of profound changes in American society and culture that began in the last quarter of the twentieth century and have been intensifying ever since.

### **Public Culture and Cultural Critique**

In the late 1980s, about the same time that independent film was emerging as a significant force in the cinema world, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai and historian Carol Breckenridge launched a new journal called *Public Culture*. Subtitled “Bulletin of the Project for Transnational Cultural Studies,”<sup>5</sup> the journal addressed itself to the workings of culture in an unevenly globalizing world. Included within the category of “public culture” is everything we would think of as “media,” but also academic works, literary and artistic works, film, nowadays everything on the Internet, and more. Appadurai and Breckenridge explain their choice of the phrase “public culture” in terms of the ways in which it “allow[s] us to hypothesize not a type of cultural phenomenon but a *zone* of cultural debate, . . . an arena

where other types of cultural phenomena are encountering, interrogating, and contesting each other in new and unexpected ways” (1988: 6). With the case of India particularly in mind, they expand on the idea as follows: “The actors in the contest are a variety of producers of culture and their audiences; the materials in the contest are . . . many [different] cultural modalities . . . ; and the methods . . . involve the mass media, as well as mechanical modes of reproduction. What is at stake in the contest is . . . no less than the consciousness of the emergent Indian [or any] public” (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988: 7). There are clear echoes of the work of Jürgen Habermas here, particularly his theorization of the emergence of the “public sphere” of political debate, in turn part of the emergence of the new bourgeois class in European history ([1962] 1994). The relationship between public culture and a changing class configuration will be central to the present work as well, and I will return to that in the next section.

Equally important in Appadurai and Breckenridge’s formulation, however, is the idea of public culture as a partially organized space or zone in which a variety of cultural forms operate in various relationships with one another. As Appadurai and Breckenridge say, this is a zone of constant contestation, but that does not mean that a particular historical ordering of forms is easily rearranged. Rather, there are powerful hegemonies in place, in which certain cultural formations dominate and which are aligned with the dominant culture/ideology of the society. But as Raymond Williams (1977) has classically argued, no hegemony remains uncontested, and there are both old (“residual”) and new (“emergent”) cultural forces that challenge the existing (“dominant”) arrangement.

This then is precisely the story of “Hollywood movies” and independent film. “Hollywood movies” are indeed hegemonic within American public culture, having borne the messages of dominant American culture, and having powerfully shaped American consciousness in line with dominant ideologies, over the course of the past hundred or so years. Of course, this is something of a caricature, since Hollywood movies themselves could be read as a zone of contestation, both across time (see especially Biskind 1998; Sklar 1975) and at any given moment (see, e.g., Caton 1999; Kellner 2010; Pfeil [1985] 1990). Nonetheless, there is little question that Hollywood dominates the huge space of “entertainment” within the public culture, and all other kinds of films and filmmaking must position themselves in relation to it.



There are different kinds of positioning vis-à-vis a hegemonic formation. There is a long tradition of “experimental” and very un-Hollywood filmmaking in America, but those films were shown in extremely small and marginal locations, the so-called art houses to be found in only a few major American cities. One could say that the earlier experimental film movements were not so much challenging the hegemony as virtually withdrawing from the public sphere. What is different about the independent film story since the 1980s is that these films were successfully moved out of the art houses and into more mainstream theaters, playing for more mainstream audiences. The story of how this happened, which involved a kind of cross-fertilization of Sundance Film Festival aesthetics and Harvey Weinstein/Miramax marketing genius, is very well told in Peter Biskind’s *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film* (2004).

It would be too much to say that independent film poses a serious challenge to Hollywood movies, in the sense of suggesting that independent films might, for example, become greater money-makers than the blockbusters and rom-coms (romantic comedies) that fill up the box office charts in *Variety* magazine. But I would argue—and independent film people would argue—that, unlike the old “experimental” films, independent films today have clearly made themselves felt as viable alternatives to the standard Hollywood movie. Indies are attracting both talented filmmakers and sizable, committed audiences, and a case could be made that, collectively, they are at least destabilizing, if not overturning, the Hollywood hegemony. Of course, this does not take place in some magic space cut off from the rest of society; it takes place within the space of “public culture,” in turn deeply tied to the real practices of producers and filmmakers, and deeply tied to the kinds of class, gender, and generational changes that will be the stuff of this book.

But if Hollywood is hegemonic and independent films are (self-defined as) counter-hegemonic, then they call for different kinds of interpretive perspectives. For Hollywood movies the job is to, using the term loosely, deconstruct them, to take them apart in terms of their coded ideological messages, their forms of subjectivation of viewers, their false pictures of the real world. There is a strong tradition of this kind of work across anthropology (e.g., Abu-Lughod 2005; Mankekar 1999; Traube 1992a), feminist studies (e.g., de Lauretis 1984; Modleski 1988; Mulvey [1975]

2004), and cultural studies (e.g., Biskind 1983; Kellner 2010; Pfeil [1985] 1990, 1995; Ryan and Kellner 1988; Shohat and Stam 1994).

Independent films, on the other hand, form a kind of “counter-cinema” (Steven 1985). They are in the business of “cultural critique,” going up against the dominant culture by way of being “not Hollywood.” At one level, of course, they are themselves full of unexamined elements of the dominant ideology, and of various political and cultural contradictions, just like Hollywood movies. How could they not be? They are part of American culture too. But insofar as one is sympathetic with what they are trying to do, it does not make sense to deconstruct and demystify them as if they were Hollywood movies. Rather, the effort must be to figure out how and in what ways they are constructing themselves as critiques of, and alternatives to, Hollywood and the dominant cultural order.

As I will discuss at length in the next chapter, the independent film world thinks of itself as “telling the truth,” as against the “lies” and falseness of Hollywood movies. It also thinks of itself as showing “reality,” as opposed to the fakeness and unreality of Hollywood movies. In the pages that follow, then, I look at the films in terms of how they go about this work of telling truths and showing realities that Hollywood movies do not tell and show. Much of this has to do with the kinds of stories independent filmmakers choose to tell, stories that for the most part Hollywood simply would not touch. The stories are often too violent, too sexually perverse, too depressing, too morally ambiguous, or perhaps simply too weird for Hollywood screens. While looking at stories constitutes a small and marginal part of certain kinds of film studies, it is absolutely central to this kind of work. It is not irrelevant that independent filmmakers themselves often talk about their films in terms of stories they felt they urgently wanted to tell.

How then to make sense of the relative success of this movement, and of the kinds of relatively uncommercial films they make? There are several levels on which this question can be answered. The first derives from the so-called culture- (or cultural-, or creative-) industries perspective. This important line of thinking begins with the work of Horkheimer and Adorno in 1944 and is developed further in the 1980s and 1990s by Raymond Williams (1981), Bernard Miège (1989), Pierre Bourdieu (1993), and Richard Ohmann (1996). The 2000s saw a veritable explosion of work in this area, including work by Richard Caves (2000), Toby Miller et al.

(2001), John Hartley 2005, Edward Jay Epstein (2006), David Hesmondhalgh (2007), and Scott Lash and Celia Lury (2007). Within a cultural industries perspective, new developments within any sector of the culture industries—like the flourishing of the independent film scene in the 1990s—need to be understood in the first instance in relation to changes in the political economy and strategic culture of the larger industry. In particular, cultural industry scholars have argued that big media corporations have increasingly pursued a strategy of diversification of offerings, including offerings for both “mass” and “niche” audiences, under a single corporate umbrella (see especially Curtin 1996). Although I have not seen any discussion specifically of independent film from this point of view, it is clear that indies would be one kind of niche-oriented product, directed toward an upscale, highly educated audience. The cultural industries perspective is thus very important for our story, as it will go a long way toward accounting for the opening or expansion of studio “specialty divisions” in the 1980s and 1990s, designed to finance and market low-budget “edgy” films that were in many ways the antithesis of movies being produced elsewhere in the same studio.

But this book is primarily concerned with understanding the emergence and flourishing of the indie scene at a different level of discussion, namely, at the level of changes in American society and American culture. If, from the point of view of the studios, indies served a particular niche, this book argues that the niche itself needs to be explored and understood as an emergent product of its times. The landscape of American society and culture has changed dramatically over the past several decades, opening up (or closing down) significant social spaces and cultural imaginaries. In particular, there have been massive shifts in the class structure at every level, and these will be central to our story. Without in any way losing sight of the inescapable influence of the culture industries, the arguments of this book situate the independent film scene, as a distinctive social world and a distinctive body of work, in the context of these broader social changes.

### **Neoliberalism and Class Transformation in the United States**

This book is informed throughout by an eclectic blend of different Marxist perspectives—political economy, Frankfurt school, Birmingham/British cultural studies, and a kind of Marxist-inflected feminism. These perspectives will be discussed in the context of their uses in various chapters. Here

I begin from the basic Marxist insight that important cultural shifts are generally tied in some ways to class transformations in capitalist societies, usually to the emergence of new classes. As Raymond Williams has noted,

It is true that in the structure of any actual society, and especially in its class structure, there is always a social basis for elements of the cultural process that are alternative or oppositional to the dominant elements. One kind of basis has been valuably described in the central body of Marxist theory: the formation of a new class, the coming to consciousness of a new class, and within this, in actual process, the (often uneven) emergence of elements of a new cultural formation. . . . A new class is always a source of emergent cultural practice (1977: 124).

Thus, working within this Marxist framework, Jürgen Habermas explored the cultural transformations surrounding the emergence of the modern bourgeoisie in England, France, and Germany in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ([1962] 1994), while E. P. Thompson did the same for the emergence of the modern working class in England in the same period (1966).

With respect to Hollywood, the case for the connection between the early development of the movie industry and the changing American class structure—specifically the massive growth of the American working class at the turn of the twentieth century—has been powerfully made by Steven J. Ross in his *Working Class Hollywood: Silent Films and the Shaping of Class in America* (1998). I have not seen similar, class-related arguments made for later periods of Hollywood history; in my view they are very much worth pursuing, but beyond the scope of this book. I will, however, pursue this kind of argument with respect to the emergence of the independent film movement in the late 1980s. Specifically, I will argue that the takeoff of independent film at that time is best understood in relation to major changes in the American class structure that had been developing since the 1970s.<sup>6</sup> Of course, independent film is only one piece of a larger set of changes in the public culture, including changes in popular music (1990s “grunge” is key), architecture (as Fredric Jameson 1984b has particularly emphasized), and so forth. Any of them could be looked at in terms of the issues at stake in this book.

The changing class configuration of American society has been well documented and widely recognized. Quite simply, since the 1970s, the rich

have gotten richer, the poor have gotten poorer, and the middle class is coming apart (Krugman 2002; Shapiro and Greenstein 1999; G. Thompson 2008; Perucci and Wyson 2008). Behind this is a particular theory of the capitalist economy called “neoliberalism,” which appears on the surface to be economically rational and socially neutral, but which is actually highly skewed toward the upward accumulation of wealth. Although I assume that most people reading this book will know what neoliberalism is, I need to provide a quick overview of it here (the following discussion draws especially on Harvey 2005; Klein 2007).

According to neoliberal economic theory, capitalism works best if there are no constraints on the free play of the market. Government regulations on corporate and financial activity simply impede the possibilities for greater profit. In the ideal capitalist economy, there would be no checks on profit seeking, including not only no government regulations but also no labor “privileges” like seniority, tenure, or collective bargaining.

In pursuit of the realization of this theory, major changes in the American economic system were initiated, starting in the 1970s. There was a decisive break with past economic policy and practices, involving two somewhat interrelated shifts. The first was a shift from a so-called Fordist to a post-Fordist framework defining the relationship between capital and labor: under Fordism there was a kind of working relationship between capital and labor, and (organized) labor did fairly well in terms of pay and job security; under post-Fordism, the working relationship is over, and labor has become dispensable, disposable, and replaceable. The second is a shift from a Keynesian theory of the relationship between the government and the economy to a post-Keynesian (“neoliberal”) theory: under Keynesianism, the government was expected to play a role in regulating the economy and in sustaining social programs for the general well-being; under post-Keynesianism/neoliberalism, the government is supposed to get out of the way.

Another piece of the picture has to do with “globalization.” Various technological advances have allowed for the increasingly rapid circulation of people, ideas, media, money, and so forth, around the globe. Some of this has had quite positive effects (see, e.g., Appadurai 1990; Hannerz 1996; Inda and Rosaldo 2002). But with respect to the American working class, among other things, the effects have been nothing short of disastrous. American companies began outsourcing production to countries where

labor was cheaper, and the American working class more or less collapsed, both economically and politically. Factories all over America shut down; industrial workers were thrown out of work in huge numbers; America “deindustrialized” (see, e.g., Dudley 1994).

The weakening of labor and the deregulation of the economy together had the effect of unleashing the worst possibilities of a capitalist system: the pure pursuit of profit with virtually no concern for its negative social effects. And although the working class was hit first by these policies and practices, the effects worked their way up the ladder fairly quickly. Corporations began “downsizing” to both increase profits and remain competitive in the global marketplace, and white-collar jobs became almost as insecure as blue-collar ones (Ehrenreich 2005; Sennett 1998).

Finally, all of this has reshaped the American class structure. The inhabitants of the uppermost layers have become vastly richer, while the inhabitants of the poorest layers have become poorer or, at least, poverty has become more devastating due to the removal of many social services under neoliberal (in this case, smaller government) policies. Most dramatic has been the impact on the once prosperous and growing middle class. As white-collar unemployment has risen, and as white-collar pay has been held down even for those fortunate enough to still have jobs, downward social mobility has been prevented (when it has) almost entirely through both spouses working full-time and/or multiple jobs.

Actually neoliberalism alone has not created these effects. As David Harvey has emphasized, under conservative political regimes it is aided by active transfers of wealth to the rich, in the form of tax cuts, special deals, lucrative contracts, and bailouts. American society today—mitigated only slightly by the election of Barack Obama—is a picture of the cumulative effects of neoliberal economic policies and conservative political agendas that favor the wealthy, producing polarization of wealth, growing poverty, and widespread economic insecurity.

Here let me zoom in more closely on the “polarization of wealth,” which will be central to the arguments in this book. Although the gap between rich and poor began to expand in the late 1970s (again see G. Thompson 2008), the issue of increasing inequality only began to become news starting in the late 1980s, when it began to be tracked in both academic studies and the media. Moreover, the polarization of wealth has, with minor ups and downs, been accelerating since that time. “You might think that 1987,

the year Tom Wolfe published his novel, ‘Bonfire of the Vanities,’ and Oliver Stone released his movie ‘Wall Street,’ marked the high tide of America’s new money culture. . . . The America of [that time] was positively egalitarian compared with the country we live in today” (Krugman 2002: 65; see also Phillips 2002).

The polarization of wealth represents a profound transformation of the class structure, including both the social organization and the culture of wealth, of the United States. After the Second World War, the New Deal and the GI Bill had the effect of creating a large and economically comfortable middle class. That class, moreover, was arguably culturally hegemonic, in the sense that its values came to be the dominant values of the nation (see Ortner 2003, drawing on a large literature about postwar America). Now, as author Douglas Coupland has recently written, “The middle class is over. It’s not coming back” (Coupland 2010). The rapid erosion of that formerly comfortable and in many ways powerful middle class has produced a new American class configuration, an increasingly bottom-heavy two-tier structure of haves and have-nots. *Washington Post* columnist Harold Meyerson has written, “These are epochal shifts of epochal significance” (quoted in Gusterson and Besteman 2010: 5).

### **The End of the American Dream**

The cultural shift that accompanies these economic and social changes has been captured in the phrase “the end of the American Dream,” that is, the end of the widely accepted belief that hard work was virtually guaranteed to bring economic success and security in America. Observers began commenting on “the end of the American Dream” in the early 1990s when, as noted earlier, the effects of the neoliberalization of the economy began to be felt. To take a few random examples, in 1991 an article in the *Ann Arbor News* proclaimed, “American Dream Fades, Changes for Middle Class” (Nesbitt 1991).<sup>7</sup> In 1992 Bill Clinton said in a campaign speech, “Millions of young people growing up in this country today can’t count on [the American] dream. They look around and see that their hard work may not be rewarded. Most people are working harder for less these days, as they have been for well over a decade. The American Dream is slipping away” (“The Economy,” quoted in L. King 2000: 11). And in 1993, anthropologist Katherine Newman subtitled her ethnography of a suburban community in New Jersey “The Withering of the American Dream.”

In the early part of the twentieth century, the “American Dream” was closely connected with immigrant visions of America as a “land of opportunity.” In contrast with other nations in which, as the story went, people were trapped in low social positions by birth (or worse, were persecuted for their lowness), in America there were no social barriers, and anyone willing to work hard enough could rise up from lowly origins. The early Hollywood moguls were themselves living embodiments of this story, and the idea became part of American public culture in part through early Hollywood movies (Gabler 1988). After the Second World War, the American Dream became more closely associated with upward class mobility within the American nation itself, as a previously quite radical working class was offered access to a middle-class lifestyle by way of better wages, affordable houses, consumer goods, and higher educations.

The American Dream was always a complicated thing, both myth and—until recently, for many—reality. As myth, it was in part a highly ideological construct, a picture of upward mobility that could not in fact be realized by many, above all by African Americans. But for large parts of the white working and middle classes, as well as many immigrant minorities, it was embraced as an ideal, a “dream,” of upward mobility, or at least material comfort, to which people could aspire for themselves and their families. Moreover, for large numbers of people this dream corresponded to real material possibilities generated by the post–World War II boom economy of the 1950s and 1960s. Middle-class Americans began to take a relatively high level of prosperity and security for granted.

With the downturn of the economy starting in the 1970s, and registering strongly by the late 1980s, people could no longer take the American Dream for granted. This sense of the dream slipping away took shape affectively as a bundle of fears, anxieties, insecurities, and, suffusing all that, anger. This is what we hear in the ethnographic literature (Newman 1993; Gusterson and Besteman 2010) and what we see and hear throughout the public culture. The central fears and insecurities are economic. People are worried about finding jobs, losing jobs, and (not) finding jobs again. People worry about jobs with respect to themselves, their parents, their partners/spouses, and their children. Surrounding the fears about jobs are the fears about larger forms of social loss—loss of home, loss of social identity, “downward mobility.” And alongside these economic and social fears are more amorphous anxieties: a rise in fear of class and racial



Others, a rise in fear of crime and violence (despite the fact that the crime rate has been declining), and a rise of obsessions with “security” in relation to all that. While 9/11 was in no way the beginning of this massive shift in the cultural mood, it certainly provided an additional charge to it.

For the (unionized) working class, the American Dream was crushed slightly earlier, with all the industrial plant closings in the 1980s. Anthropologists and other observers have provided a number of close-up accounts of the aftermaths of these closings. For example, anthropologist Christine Walley provides a very personal account of her father’s and her family’s experience in the wake of the closing of the Wisconsin Steel Works in southeast Chicago in 1980 (Walley 2010). In a more ethnographic vein, anthropologist Katherine Newman documented the experiences of workers following the closing of the Singer Sewing Machine plant in Elizabeth, New Jersey, in 1982 (Newman 1988). Anthropologist Kathryn Dudley studied the experiences of individual workers, as well as of the town collectively, in the wake of the Chrysler plant closing in Kenosha, Wisconsin, in 1988 (Dudley 1994). And in 1989 filmmaker Michael Moore made *Roger and Me*, in which he revisited his hometown of Flint, Michigan, and documented the damage wrought by the closing of the General Motors plant there. From all these accounts we get powerful portraits of the devastation of individuals, families, and whole towns by the loss of jobs.

Many middle-class observers at the time did not foresee the degree to which the plant closings in the 1980s and related events such as Reagan’s breaking of the air traffic controller strike in 1981 (Newman 1988) were a forecast of things to come for the middle class itself. However, I will suggest later that the (representation of the) fate of the American working class will become, within the context of some independent films, both a thing in itself and a parable for the fears of the middle class.<sup>8</sup>

Some would argue that the working class never entirely bought into the American Dream, at least not the dream of full-blown upward mobility. For many, there was a desire for material comfort and economic security without necessarily leaving a familiar class/ethnic social world. But if the working class was ambivalent about the American Dream, this was much less true, if at all, for the middle class, for whom it was deeply part of their culture. Middle-class life was proof that the Dream had worked and was working; the nightmare was downward mobility, “fear of falling.” As part of her multi-group study of downward mobility in America, Katherine New-

man (1988) studied the difficult experience of downward mobility suffered by the fired air traffic controllers in the 1980s, but at the time their experience seemed to be unusual, within what middle-class people still thought of as a stable and productive economy. Subsequently Newman studied experiences of social class in a middle-class suburb in New Jersey. Her book *Declining Fortunes: The Withering of the American Dream* (1993) was one of the first anthropological works to pick up on middle-class people's experiences within the new, neoliberalized economic environment, and we begin to hear the voices of the new culture: the anxiety, fear, frustration, and anger about working hard and yet losing ground, economically and socially. Newman never uses the term "neoliberalism," which did not in fact come into common usage until about 2000 (Ortner 2011), but there is little doubt that that is what she is talking about.

A note about journalist Barbara Ehrenreich, a great fellow traveler of anthropology, is in order here. Ehrenreich has been tracking social class in America since the 1980s, and her early book *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (1989) looks at the ways in which fears of downward mobility have played themselves out in the American middle class since the 1950s. In subsequent books, she began to focus on the fact that the entire economic environment was changing. In *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (2001), which was a New York Times bestseller, Ehrenreich looks at the deteriorating condition of the working class as wages go down and social services are cut. In 2005 she published *Bait and Switch*, which comes back to the middle class, this time confronting the impossibilities of the new job market for white-collar workers. For *Bait and Switch*, Ehrenreich spent several months undercover as an out-of-work middle manager trying to get a new job. She learned much about a rather desperate new infrastructure of seminars on resumé preparation, wardrobe selection, interview comportment, and so forth, designed to help such people get (new) jobs, but she never even got close to actually getting one. The subtitle again makes the point: "The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream."

There is one more piece to this picture of what we might call "post-American Dream" culture. In addition to this large cluster of fears and anxieties about economic security, there is simultaneously a large cluster of fears about physical security. Middle-class people were experiencing elaborate fears of violent crime at a time when the crime rate in America was

dramatically declining, even before the events of 9/11. In 1990, cultural journalist Mike Davis published *City of Quartz*, about class and race issues throughout the history of Los Angeles. In one chapter, called “Fortress LA,” Davis documents the degree to which Los Angeles has become a fortified and virtually militarized city, organized around the race/class fears of middle-class homeowners. In 2002, Michael Moore made *Bowling for Columbine*, about middle-class Americans’ rising fears of violence and the extraordinary growth of gun ownership at a time when, as he pointed out in the film, the crime rate was going down. (The film won Best Documentary Oscar of that year.) And in 2010, anthropologists Hugh Gusterson and Catherine Besteman published an edited collection titled *The Insecure American*, with articles on the exponential growth of physical security arrangements and institutions: more gated communities, more jails and prisons, more schemes for walling out immigrants. Middle-class people’s deep anxieties for their own economic futures are simultaneously transmuted into exaggerated fears of physical violence by aggressive Others.

**“The First Generation since the Great Depression  
That Will Not Do Better Than Their Parents”**

In a completely different zone of the public culture, there was a seemingly different but in fact closely related attempt to grasp the big cultural shift that appeared to be taking place. This was the zone of popular rather than academic culture, and the cultural shift was seen as a generational shift. The idea of “generations” as important indicators of cultural change is not for the most part taken seriously by academic analysts (but see Traube 1992a), and usually for good reason: it originates largely in marketing culture, where it represents an attempt to capture trends for marketing purposes, or to construct consumer entities (e.g., “the Pepsi generation”) as targets for marketing campaigns. As the Pepsi example indicates, many of the attempts to articulate generational differences can be quite trivial. But at certain points in time, generational breaks take place along historically significant fault lines, and when this is the case, a focus on that break can be very productive.

In the mid-1980s, media statements began to appear announcing the arrival of a significant new generation.<sup>9</sup> The new generation was initially defined demographically, as the “baby busters” who followed the “baby boomers.” The baby boom, that is, the upward trend of the American

birthrate, started right after World War II, in the mid-1940s, and ran until the mid-1960s, producing the huge baby boom generation. The birthrate first decreased in 1965 and continued to move downward until the mid-1970s, producing the smaller baby buster cohort. The boomers had ridden two decades of a strong growing economy and collectively did very well financially. The busters were born into that same good economy, and many were born into well-off or at least comfortable middle-class families, but starting in the 1970s the economy under neoliberalism began the “long downturn” (Brenner 2003). By the time the first wave of the new generation reached their twenties, the economy had begun to take the form we see today: the relentless shrinking of the job market, and especially the shrinkage of the market in good jobs—jobs with decent wages, benefits, and some kind of security, and also jobs involving some kind of meaningful work.

The main growth sector of this economy has been in what author Douglas Coupland called “McJobs,” “low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future job[s] in the service sector” (1991: 5). Coupland published a very influential novel in 1991 about three educated young people stuck in McJobs, titled *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, and the label “Generation X” was quickly taken up as the label for the new generation. And where the baby busters were defined strictly demographically (1965–76), the idea of Generation X was expanded to include people born between 1961 and 1981; this has become the standard time frame in the literature.<sup>10</sup>

Readers may have negative associations with the idea of “Generation X.” For many it is one of those empty, trumped-up marketing concepts mentioned earlier. For others it may have been a useful idea at some earlier moment, but its value has long passed. I will address these and other objections in the course of the following discussion. For the moment I ask the reader to bear with me as I attempt to set out my case.

The relevance of “Generation X” for the present study is this: the overwhelming majority of independent filmmakers were born within that 1961–81 generational time frame, give or take a few years at the transitional front end. This connection between Generation X and the independent film movement has in fact been recognized before: in both *The Cinema of Generation X* (Hanson 2002) and a special issue of the film journal *Post Script* (2000), authors explore various connections between this emerging

new generation and (mostly) independent film.<sup>11</sup> As we will see in chapter 2, some Gen X filmmakers self-consciously set out to make films about the experiences of their (emerging) generation. But for the most part the connection between generational experience and what we see in films is much more complicated; part of the point of this book will be to disentangle the various strands of that connection.

The importance of Generation X is this: they are the first generation to begin to feel the full impact of the neoliberal economy. They have been repeatedly characterized in the media as the first generation since the Great Depression that will not do better than their parents (see, e.g., *Business Week* 1991, quoted in Ortner [1998] 2006c; Newman 1993: 3). It is much harder for them to get decent jobs, to keep those jobs, and to save money for the future. On the contrary, many of them are deeply in debt before they even start out in life. In addition, they are viewed, and view themselves, as having encountered extremely problematic social conditions, including a soaring divorce rate, high rates of working mothers and latchkey children, ecological disaster, the AIDS epidemic, and so forth (this is much condensed from a longer discussion in Ortner [1998] 2006a). As a result, they express themselves—in their writings, their music, and their films—as angry and frustrated, damaged and depressed, or, as a defense against all that, ironically removed from, and with a dark sense of humor about, the world.

Generation X will be a central category in the present work. But as noted earlier, the phrase carries a certain amount of baggage, and I need to do some deck clearing here.

First, there has been some question as to whether Generation X is a real social phenomenon or some kind of marketing construct. In fact, the answer is both. This can be seen in the two kinds of literature available on the subject. On the one hand, there is a literature written by outside observers who try to define Generation X in contrast to the preceding boomer generation (e.g., Howe and Strauss 1993; for overviews see Ortner [1998] 2006c; L. King 2000); on the other hand, there is a kind of “subculture” literature, in which Gen Xers themselves appropriate the term and try to define who they are (e.g., Rushkoff 1994; Holtz 1995; Ulrich and Harris 2003). Self-styled Gen X films of the early 1990s, including *Slacker*, *Reality Bites*, and others, were also part of that process of self-definition and will be discussed in chapter 2. In other words, while Gen X was

initially a construct imposed from above, it also developed into an “authentic” (i.e., self-conscious, self-aware, self-productive) social and cultural entity in a complex feedback loop with the public culture that sought to define it.

This is not at all to say that everyone born within the Gen X parameters identifies with the category. On the contrary, although it is clearly “emic” for some people, that is, part of their conscious identity, for probably the vast majority of chronological Gen Xers it is not. Thus, I am using it primarily as an “etic” category, that is, a category that describes some social reality, whether people identify with it or not.

Second, I propose that we need to think differently about the temporal parameters of Generation X. Just as the bad effects of the neoliberal economy have not ended, neither, I would argue, has Generation X. Thus, rather than treat Generation X as a finite cohort, I treat it as an open-ended and ongoing generational entity, born after the end of the baby boom and continuing into the present. There have been various attempts to label new generations after the “official” end of Generation X, but none of them have really stuck. There was an attempt to label and characterize a “Generation Y,” mainly related to the emergence and spread of the Internet in the 1990s; the Internet has indeed been massively important, but I would argue that it has not overridden the continuity between the “generations” in economic terms. There was also an attempt to demarcate something called “the Millennials” (possibly a variant of Generation Y), but they turn out to be the same thing, or in fact worse. Thus, in 2010 we see a story in the *New York Times* about the Millennials titled “American Dream Is Elusive for New Generation.” The writer tells us that “for young adults, the prospects in the workplace, even for the college-educated, have rarely been so bleak” (Uchitelle 2010).

Third, I need to connect the Gen X concept with the earlier discussions of class. Although a “generation” would seem to include everyone born within a certain time frame, a constructed category like “Generation X” actually contains specific inclusions and exclusions. In fact, it refers primarily to the children of the (mostly white) middle class who had been brought up in reasonable (or more) material comfort and with solid (or better) educations, but who enter a world reordered by the neoliberal agenda. Working-class people and people of color have been hit at least as

hard economically by neoliberalism as the children of the white middle class, but for the most part they had lower expectations to begin with. The Gen X concept, by contrast, includes the idea of a kind of generational shock for children of the middle class, who face the prospects of a loss of comfort and security that the middle class had come to take for granted.

In sum, the idea of Generation X is meant to capture what we might think of as “neoliberalism on the ground,” specifically in its middle-class manifestations. But as I alluded to above, there is more to the idea—and the reality—of Generation X than its economic situation, as central as that may be. In fact, one of the useful things about the generational framing is that it does go beyond the narrowly economic “neoliberalism” story. There are actually two other large areas of life in which Generation X is seen as having, and sees itself as having, a more difficult time than the preceding boomer generation. One is the whole area of intimate life, where Gen X is the first (middle-class) generation to feel the full impact of the new configurations of the family, of a rising divorce rate and all its economic and emotional consequences, or of both parents working (more than) full-time even when the family is intact. As part of that, but distinct, are the upheavals surrounding the new sortings of sexual identities and gender roles. The second large area in which life is more difficult for Gen Xers than the preceding generation is the area of political life, including the new generation’s complex and fraught relationship to feminism and other forms of political activism that had been central to the political life of the boomers. I will take up all of these issues in the chapters that follow.

### **The Roles of Ethnography**

This is a work of anthropology. At the heart of it is an ethnographic study of the world of independent film, including both the production and the circulation of those films. But as is increasingly common in anthropological work today, the ethnographic elements of the book are both contextualized within and enlarged by accounts of the wider political, economic, historical, and cultural contexts (see Marcus 1998; for a recent example, see Ortner 2003). In addition, because this is a book about films, the ethnographic discussions are linked, in various ways, to cultural interpretations of significant films or groups of films. All of this is to say that ethnography today rarely stands alone and is usually part of a larger tool

kit (see also Marcus 1998). At the same time, it is, for anthropology, the sine qua non of all the rest, and I want to conclude this introduction with a discussion of the specifically ethnographic dimensions of this book.

Ethnographic studies of media production have recently emerged as a very dynamic field in anthropology, sociology, and media studies. All such work involves extended ethnographic immersion in one or more sites of media production with an aim of understanding how the forms of the public culture—film, television, music, advertising, etc.—are produced. These studies may include information on the mechanics of production, but they are primarily oriented toward understanding the culture and the politics that shape what the public is offered (or not offered) by way of news and information, advertising and marketing, and art and entertainment.

Early work in ethnographically based production studies was sparse. There were, first, the two early ethnographies of Hollywood, Leo Rosten's 1941 *Hollywood: The Movie Colony, The Movie Makers*<sup>12</sup> and Hortense Powdermaker's 1950 *Hollywood the Dream Factory*. Fast forward, then, to the 1980s, with sociologist Todd Gitlin's *Inside Prime Time* (1983), a detailed ethnography of the politics of prime-time programming inside several television networks. Then there is another significant gap of time.

Finally, in the late 1990s we start to see a marked acceleration of this kind of work. In sociology, continuing in the tradition of Gitlin, Laura Grindstaff published a remarkable ethnography of two TV talk shows (2002). In anthropology, Faye D. Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin published the influential reader *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (2002), providing a rich range of articles on ethnographic studies of media production from all over the world (see also Askew and Wilk 2002). In those and other collections, Faye Ginsburg launched a series of very influential articles on indigenous media production (e.g., 1999, 2002). Recent anthropological monographs on cultural production would include Barry Dornfeld's study of the politics of producing a PBS series (1998), Lila Abu-Lughod's ethnographic work on Egyptian television production (2005), Georgina Born's studies of the Institut de Recherche et de Coordination Acoustique/Musique (IRCAM) in Paris (1995) and of the BBC in London (2005), William Mazzarella's study of advertising production in India (2003), and Brian Larkin's study of film production and circulation in Nigeria (2008).<sup>13</sup> In media studies, John Thornton Caldwell has launched an ethnographic movement with his multi-sited



work on production practices in film and television. His pathbreaking monograph *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (2008) was followed in 2009 by a collection of articles coedited by Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and himself titled *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*.

Moving to the present work, I want to unpack the various uses of ethnographic methods in this book. As a minimal definition I will say that ethnography entails an attempt to understand a particular social world from the point of view of the participants in that world. This minimal definition, emphasizing an effort to hear voices that would otherwise not be heard, was particularly relevant to the study of societies or groups with relatively less social power than the anthropologist's own, which was the case with most anthropological work until recently. In recent years anthropologists have begun to "study up" (Nader 1969) or "sideways" (Hannerz 2010b; Ortner 2010), that is, to study people/groups who are in positions of equal or greater power than the anthropologist. Even with more powerful people, however, the effort to understand their thinking, to see the world from their point of view, is fundamental to the ethnographic enterprise and must precede any critique one might also wish to make of their power and privilege.

I emphasize this at the outset as many readers of this book may not be familiar with the ethnographic perspective. Ethnography is not just a bunch of "methods," though I will discuss some methods in a moment. It is an open-ended set of strategies for getting at how people differently positioned than oneself, socially, culturally, and historically, see the world in their own terms.

Ethnography is most commonly equated with participant observation, with the ethnographer entering physically, and in every other way possible, into the cultural spaces or life-worlds in question, and ideally spending a relatively long time there. I had initially hoped to do long-term ethnography in this sense in a movie studio or a film production company but, despite many attempts, was unable to obtain permission (see Ortner 2010 on access issues). The participant-observation parts of this project were thus relatively limited (though intense), confined mainly to several observation opportunities at film festivals and on movie sets.

At the same time, I continued to feel the need for live and relatively "natural" encounters, in addition to formal interviews. I thus improvised a

method that I called “interface ethnography.” The idea of interface ethnography is that, apart from truly “secret societies” like (say) the Freemasons, most relatively closed communities have events where they interface with the public. In the case of the independent film world, one could join a variety of film organizations and subscribe to a variety of screening series, whereupon one would be invited to large numbers of preview screenings of films, with Q&A afterward with the director or other people importantly connected with the film.<sup>14</sup> Some of these organizations and groups also hold special programs for which one can buy tickets and hear panels of directors, screenwriters, and others talk about their work. One could also buy passes to film festivals, in my case to Sundance once and the Los Angeles Film Festival twice, and attend more screenings with Q&A, as well as panel discussions, poolside chats among groups of filmmakers, public interviews of individual filmmakers, and so on and so forth. The notes from more than one hundred live, close-up, often hour-long discussions between independent filmmakers, interviewers and/or other on-stage participants, and audience members constitute the largest body of my data, other than the formal interviews.

And then there are the interviews. Altogether I interviewed, in varying degrees of depth, and in several cases more than once, about seventy-five people in various positions within the media industry in general and independent film in particular. But again I felt I had to improvise, partly for reasons of quantity, but also because of a problem particular to this project: that I could see all the films of the people I interviewed, but I could not interview all the filmmakers whose films I saw. The solution in this case came from the fact that film people are interviewed all the time, and that one can both attend live public interviews (as at the film festivals) and find published interviews more or less ad infinitum. This strategy more than doubled the pool of interviews on which I could draw in writing this book.

The interviews (of whatever provenance) are used in two rather different ways in the discussions that follow. On the one hand, people tell stories about their own experiences, and in many cases I retain their stories intact. The stories are particularly important in chapter 3, in which I piece together many accounts to provide a kind of insiders’ oral history of the way in which the independent film scene came together in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

But the interviews, as well as all the field notes from the Q&A sessions,

public interviews, and panels, are also used in a different way. Specifically, I treat them as texts to be taken apart in order to understand the language, the discourse, and the modes of self-expression of the world of independent film. This represents another way to get “inside” a cultural world, through the interpretation of social and cultural texts broadly conceived, in this case texts of ordinary talk and conversation. The study of culture as the interpretation of texts is associated especially with the work of Clifford Geertz (1973a) and was later adapted and expanded for the distinctive kind of literary/cultural analysis developed by Stephen Greenblatt under the rubric of “the new historicism” (e.g., 1999).<sup>15</sup> Recently John Caldwell has put it to powerful use in his own version of “production studies” (2008). Within this Geertzian framework a text can be anything—formal textualized objects such as Shakespeare’s plays or independent films, but also games such as Balinese cockfights, rituals such as Sherpa offerings to their gods, three filmmakers talking to one another on a panel, and so on. Throughout this book I will treat the interviews and field notes as texts in this sense and mine them for the distinctive expressions and tropes that seem to open up independent film people’s distinctive ways of thinking about their work and their world.

Looking at the book as a whole, there are film chapters and ethnographic chapters, alternating with one another. But there are films in some of the ethnographic chapters, namely, films about independent filmmaking, which I treat as another kind of ethnographic text. And there is ethnography in all of the film chapters, including both what I earlier called “stories” (people’s accounts of events and experiences taken substantively) and “texts” (people speaking in the language of independent filmmaking, where the important thing is the language). The point of it all will be to understand independent films as stories meant to shake up and disturb audiences about the condition of American society today.

We turn then to the first chapter, where I will look closely at various discourses prevalent in the indie world, to try to understand and convey what independent film people mean by “independence.” As part of that discussion, I will tackle the debate over what happens to filmmaking “independence” in the context of new conditions and strategies in the wider cultural industries.

