

CHAPTER ONE



Voices from the Margins, and the New Digital Cinema

As the end of the first century of the cinema becomes an accomplished fact, film critics and historians are busy compiling lists of the most influential or important films of the past one hundred years. The American Film Institute (AFI) famously announced its list of the one hundred best American films, including such rather dubious honorees as *E. T.*, *The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Fargo* (1996), *Tootsie* (1982), *Forrest Gump* (1994), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), and *Rocky* (1976). Superb entertainment films perhaps, but as exemplars of the finest that the cinema has to offer? The AFI list of one hundred final choices was created from a master list of four hundred possible entries, compiled by the AFI curatorial staff. Subsequently, the list was sent to a range of industry professionals; “actors, directors, producers, cinematographers, studio executives, exhibitors, critics—and to a few outsiders, including President and Mrs. Clinton and Vice President and Mrs. Gore” (Watson and Brown 20). The entire enterprise is, of course, tied into a promotional tour, in which Blockbuster video and the AFI team up to present a memorabilia road show of cinematic detritus to publicize the selection of the “top one hundred films,” and concomitantly into numerous home video promotions from the various companies who stand to benefit handsomely from the re-release of these certified crowd pleasers.

Simultaneously, the British Film Institute (BFI) has compiled their own list of the three hundred and sixty most influential films of all time,

on an international scale, or one film for nearly every day of the year. The BFI list, curated by archivist David Meeker, offers a much wider selection of titles (partially, of course, because it is a much larger number of films), but it includes a wide variety of international cinema, including Louis Feuillade's *Les Vampires* (1916), Teinosuke Kinugasa's *Kurutta Ippeiji (A Page of Madness)*, 1926), Jean Renoir's *La Chienne* (1931), and Luis Buñuel's *El* (1952) along with more mainstream choices such as Raoul Walsh's *White Heat* (1949), Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942), and Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980). While more eclectic and certainly more balanced than the AFI list, the 360 feature films chosen by the BFI also manage to marginalize both women filmmakers and entire national cinemas, as filmmaker Stig Björkman pointed out when asked (in all fairness, by the BFI itself) to comment on their list.

Dorothy Arzner, Jane Campion, Ida Lupino, Kathryn Bigelow, Lina Wertmüller, Liliana Cavani, Astrid Henning-Jensen, Julia Solntseva, Mai Zetterling, Marguerite Duras (*India Song*, 1975): a female perspective is almost completely omitted. African directors such as Youssef Chahine or Ousmane Sembene: a whole continent is omitted. [Other omissions might include] Tod Browning (*Freaks*, 1932), Bo Widerberg (*Kvarteret Korpen*, 1963), Blake Edwards (*The Party*, 1968), Bob Fosse (*Cabaret*, 1972), Werner Herzog (*Kaspar Hauser*, 1974), Otar Iosseliani, Abbas Kiarostami, Ken Loach (*Kes*, 1969), Sergei Paradzhanov, Glauber Rocha (*Antonio das Mortes*, 1969), Peter Watkins (*Edward Munch*, 1974), Maurice Pialat, Ettore Scola (*C'eravamo tanto amati*, 1974), the Taviani brothers, Mike Nichols (*Carnal Knowledge*, 1971). (James, *360 Classic* 28)

Other critics invited to comment on the BFI list noted that it contained no less than eleven films by John Ford, and, as Ed Buscombe noticed, "if you take out Satyajit Ray (over-represented here) there isn't much from outside America, Europe and Japan/China" (James, *360 Classic* 28). Critic Jim Hoberman notes that "the simple most egregious omission is Chantal Akerman, by any standard one of the most important European filmmakers of the post-'68 era" (James 30), while Philip Kemp deplores the absence of Ousmane Sembene, Edgar G. Ulmer, Eric Rohmer, and Ritwik Ghatak, among others (James 30). Colin MacCabe "regret[s] . . . the relentless good taste [of the list]: surely one of Terence Fisher's Hammer movies and at least one of Gerald Thomas' *Carry On*

films” could easily have been on the list (James 30). David Thomson asks, “Do we really think *Marnie* or *The Birds* are better than *Rear Window* (1954)? Or that *MASH* is superior to *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971), or *Nashville* (1975)? Do we all want to take *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* over *All About Eve* (1952)? And is *Judex* in the same class as *Les yeux sans visage*?” (James 41), while Amy Taubin notes that at least ten “essential” titles are missing from the BFI list:

Jeanne Dielman (Chantal Akerman, 1975); *Prise de pouvoir par Louis XIV* (Roberto Rossellini, 1966); *The Chelsea Girls* (Andy Warhol, 1966); *Dance, Girl, Dance* (Dorothy Arzner, 1940); *A Woman under the Influence* (John Cassavetes, 1974); *India Song* (Marguerite Duras, 1975); *Xala* (Ousmane Sembene, 1974); *Killer of Sheep* (Charles Burnett, 1977); *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1966); *Il gattopardo* (Visconti, 1962). (James 33)

Perhaps Colin MacCabe sums up the list’s limitations best when he comments that:

All canons are organised from a particular history: Meeker’s list places him as a son of Henri Langlois, from the first audiences to be brought to cinema past and present, in a systematic way, and an initial canon composed of D. W. Griffith, German Expressionism and Soviet cinema. The *nouvelle vague* articulated its next stage of the canon, with the best of Hollywood leavened by the best of world cinema. Godard’s list wouldn’t look so different, except for more Mizoguchi or Rossellini. It is Eurocentric—but that simply means we should encourage such lists from Asian, African and Latin American perspectives. (James, *360 Classics* 39)

All in all, the BFI list has a greater claim to our attention despite these caveats, because at least it makes a sincere attempt to be as inclusive as it can within the confines of any closed set. Both the AFI and BFI lists, however, represent extensions of the same strategy that Jonas Mekas first propounded in the early 1970s, with the creation of his Essential Cinema list for Anthology Film Archives, which was (at first) a closed set of cinema classics projected quarterly at Joseph Papp’s Public Shakespeare Theatre. Since that time, Anthology has moved to its new home on 2nd Street and 2nd Avenue in Manhattan, where it continues to project the Essen-

tial Cinema series, but now in conjunction with a wide range of new and classic films culled from archival collections around the world. All attempts at canon, it seems, must ultimately fail for the rather simple yet evanescent reasons: superb new films keep getting made, thereby calling into qualification all of cinema history by the very fact of their freshness and originality; and secondly, that cinema history is writ largest at the margins. Those films not included in any of these lists become all the more important by the mere act of their exclusion. With the proliferation of video technology, more and more classic films are available to the public at large, both on VHS tape and DVD disc, but also through such cable outlets as Turner Classic Movies, Bravo, and American Movie Classics.

Everyday, classic films of the past once thought lost are being found and restored to find new audiences, although it is still true that nearly *half* of all films made throughout the world before 1950 have been irretrievably lost through the twin exigencies of neglect and nitrate decomposition. And even re-mastered films will eventually need to be re-mastered again. As the producer Val Lewton once commented, making films is like “writing on water”—perhaps no other creative medium is as ephemeral as the cinema.

What fuels these lists of classic films is, of course, the fact that one hundred years of cinema have now passed us by, and as the new century dawns, all of us seek to make some sense out of the multitude of images we’ve collectively absorbed in our lifetimes, and with the death of such cinematic icons as Jimmy Stewart, Robert Mitchum, and Maureen O’Sullivan, we seek to hold onto the past as the century mark approaches. The movies are, above all, a zone of fantasy and audience participation in which all of us, sharing only the common bond of the price of admission, share an experience which is at once fixed and yet indeterminate, different for every viewer in the theatre audience. Reception theory holds that there are as many interpretations of a film as there are viewers, as many different stories within the confines of one celluloid construct as there are audience members who view a specific film.

THE CINEMA AS SPECTACLE

As we crest the wave of the new century, it is interesting to note how our shared perceptions of what a film is have changed, and how differently we view the film-going experience now than we did, say, at the mid-century

mark, in the 1950s. Invited to comment on changing tastes and values in the cinema in the last days of the 1990s, former *New Yorker* critic Pauline Kael observed that,

There's an enthusiasm for the young moguls, the new, sleek Sammy Glucks. They've become heroes. Although there is a fear on the part of some people in the press that movies are dying, the medium itself is still exciting to school kids—maybe more exciting than ever. It's the art of film as we used to talk about it that is probably metamorphosing into something else—into the show, which is what it started as. (Sawhill 93)

Cinema as spectacle. But how long can spectacle sustain us? What resonance does a film like the 1998 *Godzilla* have, or James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997), as they evaporate from our collective consciousness in a trail of tie-ins, manufactured memorabilia, promotional gimmicks, home video cassettes, and signature T-shirts? What lies beyond the horizons of the spectacle film, a genre which is so costly as to be open to only a few practitioners, in direct contrast to the relative democracy of the cinema during the period between 1900 and 1970? Now, budgets of one hundred million dollars and over for a film are not uncommon, with additional promotional expenditures of twenty to thirty million dollars to bring the film before the public. Major features now routinely open in several thousand theaters; this makes only the most exploitable, pre-sold films likely candidates for production and/or widespread theatrical release.

In an interview with Corie Brown and Joshua Hammer, four major motion picture producers (Joe Roth, John Calley, Laura Ziskin, and Michael De Luca) reflected on the influence of rising budgets and promotional expenses on the films they make. John Calley, at age sixty-eight a veteran of the Hollywood production wars (he worked at Warner Brothers as head of production in the 1970s, and now serves as the president of Sony Pictures), noted that,

In the old days the amount you risked was infinitesimal. I was fighting with [Stanley] Kubrick on the 'Clockwork' ['Orange'] budget. He wanted \$1.3 million. I wanted \$1.282 million. I ruptured our friendship for months over \$18,000, which today is lunch. It's grotesque the way it's changed. Last year we released 38 movies, and much of it was s____. And we had a huge year. (Brown and Hammer 117)

Laura Ziskin of 20th Century Fox admits that the current cinema “audience is not particularly demanding. If you give them something really good, they are really happy. But if you give them something not very good, they sort of don’t care. They go anyway, if the movie has these other things . . . like thrills” (Brown and Hammer 117). Joe Roth, Chairman of Walt Disney Studios, notes that “It’s [about] visual effects. That’s the key to reaching someone in under five seconds in a cluttered world.” He nevertheless remains optimistic about the future of the medium as a viable art form. “In 10 years, all these countries will emerge as markets, and this generation coming up will be incredibly potent” (Brown and Hammer 118). But what sort of films will this new generation of filmmakers create, and will they follow the same mold as contemporary Hollywood products? While some younger filmmakers embrace the model of the dominant cinema (as Joe Roth recounts,

I walked on the set of one of my movies where the 32-year-old director and the 29-year-old cameraman were standing there staring at the *Variety* weekend grosses. And I’m saying, ‘Hey, I’m the head of the studio and I can’t be seen doing this. What are you guys doing?’ [Brown and Hammer 117–118]),

many others are choosing to create films on a much smaller scale: films which are ambitious in content, but not in budgetary requirements. Aiding this shift to widespread low-budget commercial feature film production are a number of factors, but perhaps the most important is the shift from film to videotape as the primary production medium for many new projects.

A decade ago, this would have been unthinkable. Feature films originated on 35mm film (or in 16mm or Super 16mm film for riskier projects, such as *Leaving Las Vegas* [1996], which was shot in Super 16mm and then blown up to 35mm to reduce initial production costs), and were presented in theaters in 35mm film format. Video editing, first introduced in the early 1980s, has now entirely replaced conventional Steenbeck flatbed editing (which, in turn, replaced the use of the old upright Moviola as the primary tool of the film editor), and the AVID system has become the new industry standard (although other video editing systems are also employed). Yet while feature films pass through a digital video stage on their way to the final print, 35mm film remains, for the moment, the primary medium for original image capture.

This may be changing. Television programs—even those shot on 35mm film—long ago abandoned 35mm release prints as their final stage of post-production. Such teleseries as *The X-Files* and *Xena—Warrior Princess* are shot on 35mm film, then converted into digital video editing elements (both for editing and the creation of computer-generated special effects), and finished on videotape for final televisual distribution. No final film print is ever made. Similarly, when Turner Classic Movies makes a new print of one of the many classic feature films or short subjects in their vast library, they have no need to strike a new film print. They simply make a positive video image from the original film negative and optical soundtrack, and use the videotape for television and home video sales. Productions *originating* on videotape lacked the image definition, visual resonance, and depth of 35mm film, and when transferred *to* 35mm film from videotape, the video feature films of an earlier era looked washed-out, with poor color balance and image quality. (One example of this is George Schlatter's 1976 feature film *Norman. . . . Is That You?*, which was shot on videotape, but released to theaters on conventional 35mm film, with abysmal results.)

DIGITIZING THE MOVING IMAGE

A new generation of video cameras may make conventional 35mm cinematography, if not obsolescent, at least a luxury, or perhaps an aesthetic choice for the filmmakers of the twenty-first century. Sony has introduced a new line of video cameras specifically designed to produce images for transfer to 35mm film with a nearly undetectable difference in image quality. Just as the process of blowing up 16mm to 35mm has greatly improved over the past ten years, such as using new "T-grain" stocks and the wider Super 16mm format to increase original image quality, now Sony has produced a series of cameras for the new era of Digital Electronic Cinematography. As a technical brochure from the Sony Corporation notes,

Digital Electronic Cinematography has a great deal to offer the independent film producer. The extraordinary strides of recent years in electronic imaging now allow superb images to be captured on compact digital cassettes. Sony's novel EBR Transfer System will transfer these digital images and sound directly to 35mm film, producing a high quality release print.

The DVW-700WS camcorder produces widescreen images of extraordinary clarity. When transferred to 35mm film, the results often exceed those of an equivalent Super 16mm origination that is enlarged to a 35mm film release print. And now, Sony has the world's first digital High Definition television camcorder—the HDW-700. When this tape is transferred to film its quality ranks with that of a direct 35mm film origination.

For the important and extensive low-budget independent sector, digital camcorders can bring very cost-effective solutions to cinematography. Sony's DCR-VX1000 camcorder will produce a film transfer that ranks with the best 16mm origination that is enlarged to a 35mm release print. The professional digital DVCAM version, utilizing the DSR-200 camcorder can produce even higher quality. ("Digital Cinematography" 5)

These cameras are lightweight and easy to use when balanced on the cameraperson's shoulder. As noted, they shoot "wide screen" images which can then be transferred, after final video editing, into a 35mm composite release print for theatrical screenings at a fraction of the cost of conventional filmmaking. Videotape requires no developing, workprints, sound transfers, or other viewing/editing preparations; immediately after shooting it can be played back.

Jerry Lewis first used videotape as a "video tap" on a conventional 35mm film camera to offer an instant replay of a take to see if it was usable. Today, the video tap is in nearly universal use on all theatrical and television film productions, both to save time (the director need not look through the viewfinder of the camera as often to line up a shot) and to improve the overall visual look of the production. 35mm film projection survives for the moment as a theatrical institution, ironically, because it is (for the moment) the cheapest method of producing a large, high-quality image on a conventional theatre screen. The moment that video projection advances to the level of conventional film projection in terms of image quality, sound, brightness and definition, 35mm film will be unceremoniously abandoned—perhaps within the next ten years. No doubt revival houses, museums, and specialized theaters will continue to present feature films in *film* format, but when one realizes that the cost of a DVD or DVT copy of a feature film is but a fraction of the cost of making a 35mm film print (perhaps twenty dollars versus fifteen hundred dollars per copy), one can see why the dominant Hollywood cinema would

welcome the conversion to all-video production/exhibition purely on a bottom-line basis.

Nor does Hollywood's embrace of digital imaging stop with the complete digitization of the theatre image production process. Much has been written on the ramifications of computer generated imagery to conflate the "real" with the "cooked" in contemporary cinema. Such hyperdigital extravaganzas as *Titanic* (1997), *Starship Troopers* (1997), and *Armageddon* (1998) leave little doubt that the age of fully realized digital special effects is upon us, creating a fictive world so seamlessly seductive that the viewer can no longer discern where traditional image capture ends and the computer takes over, to create a final series of hyperreal glyphs which are then sequentially projected on the cinema screen. It has now become commonplace to see the images of long dead Hollywood icons—John Wayne, Fred Astaire, and others—lifted from their past films and plunked down in advertisements or feature films, brought back to flickering half-life like so many members of the fraternity of the undead. As far back as 1981, the prescient Michael Crichton posited the possibility of creating computer generated models of human actors to sell both merchandise and promote political candidates in his underrated film *Looker*. Now, that time may soon be upon us, as John Calley of Sony Pictures notes,

I don't think I will be around to see it, but it will be really interesting when we start creating characters. When you get a [special-effects guy] who creates Julia Roberts and Brad Pitt, these irresistible leading men and women, and they don't really exist and the world falls in love with them . . . I've been talking to Sean Connery about doing it in a small film. I said, 'Listen, if there is a flashback, you know you are going to look like s___ with some terrible hairpiece and makeup and you're 15 pounds overweight. How would you feel if we do a 35-year-old Connery?' He's open to it. (Brown and Hammer 118)

CINEMA AT THE MARGINS

At the other end of the spectrum, Marc Levin created his cinema verité-style fiction feature *Slam* by shooting on location at a jail in Washington, D.C., in a mere twelve days, using a handheld 16mm camera to

shoot much of the work. The film, a testament to a raw and unsparring vision of humanity in crisis, captured with a minimum of technical leg-erdemain, went on to win the Grand Jury Prize for Best Dramatic Film at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival. And Darren Aronofsky, shooting on 16mm black and white reversal film (one of the most non-commercial production mediums imaginable), created *Pi*, his first feature film, for a grand total (including 35mm blowup) of \$134,815. Of this amount, the single biggest expenditure during production was film purchase and processing: \$5,414 for the raw film stock and \$18,000 for developing. The 35mm blowup cost \$25,571, and the final optical soundtrack cost \$3,000. Film editing was done on an AVID, but the “negative” cutting (or “master” cutting, since this film was shot entirely on positive-image film) cost \$9,915. This runs to a total of \$61,900. The actual production of the film itself, aside from these bare-bones figures for physical production materials, was thus completed for a mere \$72,915 (“Pieces of Pi” 82). This is still a long way from the \$1,200 production cost of Andy Warhol’s *Chelsea Girls* (1966), or the \$1,000 Ron Rice spent to create his epic romantic feature *The Flower Thief* (1960). But in terms of production costs by Hollywood standards, \$134,815 is a pittance, what a major film would spend on “craft services” (food for cast and crew) in less than a week. In an interview with Scott McCaulay, Darren Aronofsky and his producer Eric Watson described how they accomplished this astonishing feat.

Using borrowed, begged, and scavenged equipment, Aronofsky shot 53,000 feet of 16mm film—some twenty-three hours—over a twenty-eight-day shoot. The major location for the filming was an apartment set created in a desolate warehouse in Bushwick, which Aronofsky acknowledged is “a pretty grim area . . . we found this back room there, gutted it, and built the set. It was cold. It wasn’t the best situation in the world, but at the same time, for no money, it allowed us to have a set” (“Pieces of Pi” 27). As for location filming in New York’s subway system, Aronofsky and his crew simply walked in and shot. They had no money for permits. “We just hung out on the platform from 10 PM to 6 AM for about a week” (30). *Pi* emerges as a paranoid masterpiece, fueled by the desire to simply make a movie with the materials and facilities at one’s disposal, in the face of all possible obstacles. Hyperedited, filled with grainy close-ups of the protagonist’s anguished countenance, this mathematical conspiracy thriller won the Director’s Award at the Sundance Film Festival, and went on to successful and critically acclaimed commercial release, perhaps the first black and white 16mm “no-budget” feature to break out into mainstream

distribution since Kevin Smith's \$27,000 debut film *Clerks* (1994).

Aronofsky is not alone. For as the cinema enters its second century of imagistic production/exhibition, both alternative syntactical structures and production methodologies will continue to come to the fore. Spurred on by an all-consuming personal vision, and in many cases disinterested in following the traditional Hollywood route, Aronofsky joins such filmmakers as John Waters, Kevin Smith, and Lisa Cholodenko (who made an impressive debut with her 1998 feature *High Art*). These filmmakers work outside the mainstream, but manage to get their films noticed by the discerning public in major metropolitan centers, while simultaneously solidifying their future professional careers.

Whether or not they will continue to seek out their personal vision is another matter; after the stunning success of his first feature *Sex, Lies and Videotape* (1989), Steven Soderbergh went on to direct *Kafka* (1991) and *King of the Hill* (1993), both commercial failures, though superb films from a purely critical viewpoint. However, Soderbergh found himself increasingly on the margins of employment in the commercial cinema until he directed the routine Elmore Leonard crime programmer *Out of Sight* (1998), designed primarily as a vehicle for George Clooney. Similarly, Roberto Rodriguez directed his breakthrough color 16mm feature *El Mariachi* (1992) in two weeks for a mere \$7,000, substituting (as Aronofsky did in *Pi*) arresting visual setups and kinetic camera movement for action or facilities greater funding would have provided. Rodriguez photographed, edited, directed, wrote, and co-produced the film with one of its principal actors, Carlos Gallardo. When the film was blown up to 35mm and released with a re-mixed soundtrack, it attracted both critical and box-office attention, but Rodriguez's subsequent work has been decidedly less arresting, and as of this writing, he seems to have been absorbed by the Hollywood machine.

The most inventive and original cinema continues to be produced at the periphery of the commercial marketplace. Along with a new wave of video art, live performance pieces (many of them one-person shows), and new directions in painting and sculpture, the cinema of the next millennium will continue to find its greatest inspiration in those who operate outside the system, creating works of originality and brilliance beyond the zones of corporate financial risk.

Lisa Cholodenko's *High Art* (which Cholodenko scripted and directed) is another interesting example of the new wave of low-budget independent filmmaking. Syd (Radha Mitchell) is an assistant editor at a

trendy fashion/photography magazine, who meets by happenstance Lucy (Ally Sheedy), a once popular photographer who has seemingly abandoned her career for a life of drugs and aimless drifting through life with her lover, Greta (Patricia Clarkson), a hopelessly stoned junkie who once acted in the films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder. The film is photographed in a deceptively low key manner, playing off the youthful ambition of Syd against the world-weary cynicism of Lucy and her heroin addicted companions. Greta is justifiably suspicious of Syd's attention to Lucy; Syd sees cajoling Lucy back into the world of art photography as her entrée to a better job at the magazine where she works, but Syd is also fascinated by Lucy's lifestyle, and gradually falls in love with the older woman. Greta, whose slurred speech and theatrical presence recall Tallulah Bankhead at her most self-indulgent, seems powerless to affect the relationship, until she induces Lucy to do one last fix of heroin with her as a gesture of farewell. This gesture proves fatal for Lucy, who dies of an accidental overdose at the end of the film's narrative.

As Syd persuades Lucy to meet with her superiors at the magazine during a series of high-power lunches, during which Syd's bosses offer Lucy free artistic reign for a photo essay to be featured on the cover of the next issue, Lucy continually resists the urge to be pulled back into the avant-garde "mainstream." Finally, desperate to have Lucy fulfill the commission (and thus save her job, which is contingent upon Lucy's successful completion of the photo essay), Syd agrees to serve as Lucy's model and lover, during an informal road-trip photo shoot for the magazine. At first intimidated by the gaze of Lucy's camera, Syd succumbs to her visual and physical advances, and the two women have sex in the idyllic Victorian bedroom of a country bed and breakfast resort. Feeling personally compromised by these highly intimate images (Lucy has gone so far as to photograph their lovemaking), Syd initially submits some of Lucy's old work for publication. But her editors reject the earlier photos as dated and unusable, forcing Syd to hand in the photos Lucy has taken of the two women together. Syd's editors, while surprised that Syd has agreed to model for Lucy, are impressed by the photos, and agree to run the entire series of images as a photo essay, putting Syd's face on the cover of the magazine. Shortly after the issue is published, however, Syd learns of Lucy's death as a result of the heroin binge with Greta, thus leaving Syd's ascendance at the magazine highly compromised.

While a number of New York critics found *High Art* to be simplistic or overdrawn, it seems to me that the film captures the tone of des-

peration and empty chic which pervades much of the edgier manifestations of throwaway pop culture. Ally Sheedy's burnt out, world-weary performance as Lucy perfectly fits the tenor of her character, and Sheedy herself welcomed the film as a significant change of pace from her earlier work. Best known for her films as a relative youngster (1983's *War Games*, and 1985's *The Breakfast Club* and *St. Elmo's Fire*), Sheedy had grown weary of her fresh-scrubbed ingénue image, and dropped out of films for almost a decade. *High Art* gave Ally Sheedy a chance to reinvent herself, to come back in an independent project which would allow her more latitude than the mainstream roles she had previously been chosen for. Speaking of her dissatisfaction with the manufactured images created by the dominant cinema, Sheedy stated:

It was frustrating. I thought, Oh, my God, this is so backwards. Hollywood is the definition of sexual discrimination. So I figured, I'll do something that pays me well once a year, and with the salary my husband [David Lansbury] makes from acting in the theater, we'll get by from job to job. I'm very happy with the work that I do, and I have a lot of time for my daughter, and really, I don't want to be a superstar because it takes a great deal of effort to maintain that kind of life once you've created it. The pursuit of fame becomes your career, and you have to spend all your time trying to look good. You have to have a real love for that particular game. I have the desire to work as an actress, but I have no ambition to be a star. (Weitzman 73)

A concrete example of the difference between Cholodenko's *High Art* and some of Sheedy's previous Hollywood films came during the filming of the climactic lovemaking scenes between Syd and Lucy. Compared to previous sex scenes Sheedy had been required to appear in, her lesbian scenes with Radha Mitchell as Syd were

more comfortable than doing a love scene with a guy. Usually sex scenes are completely geared toward making the man look good: You're waiting underneath him, burning with passion or whatever, the accessory to his great sexuality. *Always*. It's so boring! But for this one, I didn't have to feel like, 'OK, now they're lighting him to show his muscles and sweat, and I need to get into some seductive curve on the bed here, ready for him.' (Weitzman 73)

The naturalness of this sequence, combined with trancelike music from the techno-pop group Shudder to Think and Cholodenko's cool, contemplative visuals, create in *High Art* a world which is both seductive and dangerous to know and experience.

Katja Von Garnier's *Bandits* (1998) offers an example of the new wave of post-feminist German independent cinema. The plot of *Bandits* is simple: four women in prison unite to form a rock and roll band, and then escape from confinement when they are allowed to play outside the prison at a policeman's benefit. Hoping to escape to South America, they become cult heroines on the radio, as their songs generate excitement in the Hamburg underground. Von Garnier reacts violently when some critics describe her film as primarily a feminist tract:

If a film is about a bunch of men, no one asks if it's a men's movie. A film is just a film. Men and women differ in that women are allowed to show their emotional wounds but not their anger, whereas men show anger but conceal their emotional pain. All this does is make it difficult for everyone. (Adams 34)

Having just gotten a deal with Columbia Tri-Star, Von Garnier will now have a chance to bring her outlaw vision (exhibited both in *Bandits* and her 1993 film *Makin' Up*) before a wider audience.

Vincent Gallo's *Buffalo 66* (1998) is another uncompromising film, but in a different fashion: the audience is asked to root for Gallo playing a perpetual loser named Billy Brown, a pathetic, motor-mouthed failure who has just been released from prison. To impress his spectacularly dysfunctional family, Gallo kidnaps a young girl named Layla (Christina Ricci, late of the *Addams Family* movies, but now grown up into a curiously mature and yet innocent teenager) and forces her to pose as his wife for his crazed and lecherous father Jimmy (Ben Gazzara) and his sports obsessed mother Janet (Anjelica Huston). Shot in a flat, Jim Jarmusch-styled series of opposing masters on 35mm color reversal film (a major departure from conventional feature cinematography) by Lance Acord, *Buffalo 66* proceeds as a triumphal domestic nightmare, with brutal and deadpan assurance. Nevertheless, the film manages to make audience members care deeply about Billy as a seriously conflicted protagonist, and Layla's confused but persistent affection for him, even as the drab contours of their lives threaten to devour them at every turn. Set in a bleak universe of shabby hotel rooms, donut shops, and strip joints—a zone in

which even one's childhood home is a location of unremitting anguish—*Buffalo 66* is a film made entirely on its own terms both visually and narratologically. In this, Gallo's film recalls Peter Emmanuel Goldman's *Wheel of Ashes* (1968), a film about the torment of a young man living a marginal existence in 1960s Paris, starring Pierre Clementi, Katinka Bo, and Pierre Besançon. Shot on a shoestring, *Wheel of Ashes* effectively conveys Clementi's despair and loneliness as he threads through the fragments of mainstream society hoping desperately to find a foothold which constantly eludes him.

THE VISUAL ARTIST AS SOCIAL CRITIC

Many of today's independent features are indebted, stylistically or spiritually, to the independent feature films of the 1960s, films that tested the boundaries of accepted audience discourse during that era, and often were marginalized as a result. Andy Warhol's *I, A Man* (1967) is a ninety-nine-minute 16mm feature starring Tom Baker, Ivy Nicholson, Nico, and most notoriously, Valerie Solanas (who would unsuccessfully attempt to assassinate Warhol the following year). It is a nearly plotless film in which Baker roams restlessly through a series of cluttered apartments in search of sex, momentary satisfaction, and perhaps a fleeting human connection. Like Vincent Gallo's insistently verbal protagonist in *Buffalo 66*, Tom Baker in *I, A Man* never shuts up, although his dialogue is less engaging, and his rapacious persona almost totally devoid of audience empathy. Rather than seeking a relationship with one partner (and finding it, for, against all odds, *Buffalo 66* ends on a triumphant note of heterotopic bliss), Baker is, at the end of *I, A Man*, as frustrated and unfulfilled as he was at the start of the film, always on the prowl for some new conquest.

Compare this vision of macho dystopia to Mai Zetterling's rarely seen *Flickorna* (*The Girls*) (1968), in which a troupe of women led by Bibi Andersson set out to perform the play *Lysistrata* in the provinces of Sweden, only to find both incomprehension and hostility from their rural audiences. *The Girls* (the title itself is now something of a cultural "marker") effectively demonstrates why the culture in the 1960s had to change, buckling as it was under the Vietnam War, the continued threat of patriarchal interference in the arts, and a pervasive double standard which made any real relationship between women and men a near impos-

sibility. As the leader of her theatrical troupe, Andersson is both resolute and hopeful that creating a dialogue with the audience will bring about real changes in social relationships. At one point, she even steps out of character at the end of a performance to ask the audience to comment on what they have just seen, but her entreaties are met with strong silence. What seemed an unbridgeable gulf then now seems more easily traversed, thanks in large measure to the large number of women who are turning to film and video in the late 1990s as a means of expression and communication.

Susan Skoog's *Whatever* (1998), for example, chronicles a young woman named Anna (Liza Weil) whose disastrous home life leaves her ill-prepared for the perils of young adulthood. Set in New Jersey in the early 1980s, *Whatever* joins Richard Linklater's *Dazed and Confused* (1993) as one of the key films about the pleasures and dangers of adolescence in pre-AIDS heterotopic America. This movie, however, presents Anna's situation against a backdrop of dysfunctional and/or abusive domestic spheres; Anna's best friend, Brenda (Chad Morgan) has clearly been damaged by her supposedly wholesome suburban upbringing.

Skoog is a native of Red Bank, New Jersey, who worked her way through a series of menial jobs at VH-1 before moving to Los Angeles to break into the film business. After one short film, *A Dry Heat*, was successfully screened at Cannes, Skoog decided to spend her savings on her first feature film—as with Aronofsky's *Pi* and so many other independent features, no other financing was directly forthcoming. As Skoog told Sarah Jacobson, "I had a big hunk of money I had been working like crazy to save. What was I going to do with it? Buy a house and have no movie?" (44, 47). As with so many other independent cineastes, what finally drove Skoog to make the film was the dearth of films that dealt honestly with the rites of passage of being a heterosexual teenager. Says Skoog, "I really hadn't seen a movie that realistically portrayed what it's like to be a teenage girl in this country" (47). Following the now time-honored route of using her savings, credit cards, friends, family and, in time, outside investors, Skoog created in *Whatever* an authentic vision of the misery and splendor of teenage angst, and the film was picked up by Sony Pictures Classics for distribution, and opened to a commercially and critically successful reception.

Yet the boundaries which once constrained women in the arts in the 1960s have not altogether vanished. Indeed, the performance pieces presented in Manhattan bring the need for artistic license into sharp focus,

and remind us that the threat of censorship is never far from work that operates on the cutting edge of the social fabric we so tenuously share. Karen Finley became something of a *cause célèbre* with her mid-1990s performance piece *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, in which she smeared herself with chocolate and tinsel as part of a ritualistic depiction of the plight of the socially and sexually marginalized within American society. Finley presented her piece *The Return of the Chocolate Smeared Woman* in the face of a Supreme Court decision upholding a “decency test” as part of the process for awarding federal arts grants. Finley has an MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute, and has received numerous grants and awards throughout her career, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, a grant from the National Endowment on the Arts, an Obie, two Bessie awards, and a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts.

The Return of the Chocolate Smeared Woman, which was presented in the summer of 1998 in a small performance space in Manhattan’s Chinatown called the Flea, is an attempt to deconstruct *We Keep Our Victims Ready*. It signals Finley’s move from this provocative performance piece which defined so much of her early work to new and fertile ground. As part of *The Return of the Chocolate Smeared Woman*, Finley, rather than covering herself with ritualistically daubed chocolate and streamers, instead appears on stage already covered in full performance regalia and accompanied by a troupe of scantily clad go-go boys and girls named the Furballs. To an endlessly looped version of the old disco dance hit “The Hustle,” Finley and the Furballs gyrate down a makeshift runway in front of the audience, simultaneously critiquing the entire act of body display for a commercial audience and reveling in it. After an introductory “chorus line” greeting to the audience, the Furballs abruptly depart, and Finley takes to the stage alone. Accompanied by only the most minimal lighting designs and video projections, Finley spends the bulk of her time on stage reprising updated sections of her earlier work in *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, offering a scathing analysis of the social, sexual, and political mechanics behind the censorship process in the United States, and then ritualistically cleaning her body of the chocolate and tinsel with two large buckets of water. She drapes herself in a shawl, and concludes her performance with an invocation and prayer for the homeless, for those who are HIV positive, and for those who come from abusive families. The depth of her sincerity and commitment throughout the performance is evident in her piercing gaze, her curiously confrontational and yet engaging manner with the members of the audience, and her willingness to demystify

the performance process by including several theatergoers as a peripheral part of the staging of her presentation. From time to time, Finley improvises new sections of the piece during the performance, and directly addresses the technical crew to give them new lighting and/or sound directions; at other points she breaks out of character momentarily to ask for the audience's help in moving props, rearranging the seating, or adjusting the staging area.

I witnessed the July 3, 1998, performance of *The Return of the Chocolate Smearred Woman*, managing to get into the door at the last minute despite the fact that the performance was sold out (apparently, a number of people had made reservations, and then simply failed to appear). The performance space itself was minimal in the extreme. In a bare loft with four large, painted-over windows (reminiscent of the loft made famous in Michael Snow's 1968 film *Wavelength*), using only the simplest of staging areas (a catwalk constructed on the right side of the loft, which then continued around the room at the front), and a few props (a director's chair, some plastic buckets, and water), Finley mesmerized the audience with an eighty-minute display of ferocious virtuosity that effectively interrogated the dark heart of the American dream. Appropriately, the seating arrangements for the audience were extremely primitive. Large plastic buckets turned upside-down, the kind used on industrial construction sites to hold large quantities of caulking, for example, were used for the majority of seats; a few folding chairs were brought in at the last moment to accommodate latecomers. Having seen several of Finley's earlier performances dating back to the early 1990s, I was to some extent prepared for the spectacle I was about to witness. But this time, the atmosphere was tinged with new anger and sadness. Not only had the Supreme Court ruled against Finley and three other performance artists during the previous week, declaring that the National Endowment on the Arts had the right to impose a vaguely constructed "decency" standard on those whom it funded, but Finley also announced from the stage (to a resounding chorus of disapproval) that her upcoming show, *The Great American Nude*, which was to have been presented at the Whitney Museum for American Art in December of 1998, had been abruptly and somewhat inexplicably canceled.

"There's going to be a piece in the *New York Times* tomorrow about this," Finley told the crowd, more in resignation than anger, but it was clear to me that she was in a state of shock from this latent assault on her works. The article, which ironically appeared in the July 4, 1998, issue of

the *New York Times*, quoted a spokesperson for the Whitney as stating that the cancellation of Finley's show "was not just a financial decision, but finances had something to do with it" (Gussow B12). While the Whitney denied that its decision had any connection to the Supreme Court ruling or the content of Ms. Finley's proposed show at the Whitney, others were less sanguine. As Mel Gussow, author of the *New York Times*' article noted in his commentary on the cancellation, "artists have suggested that institutions like galleries and theaters might use the [Supreme Court] decision as a means of limiting their artistic freedom" (B12). And Thomas Healy, Ms. Finley's gallery representative, was even more forthright. As Healy told Gussow, "this would have been a good time to mount an exhibition in defiance of the ruling," and added that the cancellation was "a little too bizarre to be a coincidence" (B12). Gussow then went on to detail the proposed presentation that the Whitney had decided to cancel.

At the center of 'The Great American Nude' exhibition would have been Ms. Finley's 'Go Figure,' an installation of a class in life drawing. Continuing through museum hours, the life class would have been led by Ms. Finley, who would herself have been one of the artists' models.

Any member of the public visiting the museum would have been eligible to take part as an artist in the class and Ms. Finley would have been available to criticize the work. This part of the exhibition was to be a re-creation of a show that Ms. Finley had presented last year at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. (B12)

Finley herself was understandably furious at the decision, which the Whitney insisted was brought about as much by financial exigencies (the need to raise the "\$300,000 to \$400,000" [Gussow B12] needed to mount the show) as other mitigating factors. "It's astonishing the way the decision was made," Finley commented. "The Whitney is the leading museum for American art in this country and the world. By not having my show, the museum is saying, 'She can't be funded, and our board can't fund her'" (as quoted in Gussow B12). This cancellation is made all the more curious by the fact that the Whitney was presenting, at the same time, an exhibition of sculptures by Charles Ray, including his massive sculpture (so large that it fills an entire room by itself) "Oh! Charley,

Charley, Charley . . ." (1992), which, as described by Calvin Tomkins, "presents us with eight nude replicas of the artist engaged in mutual masturbation" (73), in complete anatomically correct detail. Describing Ray's sculpture correctly as "an orgy for one," Tomkins also notes that "Ray himself has described the piece as asexual and 'kind of sad' . . ." (73), a totemic exercise in isolated autoerotic self-delusion. Yet the work's visual splendor and supposed shock value remains both fixed and transfixing, inviting the viewer to investigate its tangle of mannequin-perfect bodies without risk of personal involvement.

As part of Finley's proposed show at the Whitney, the artist had hoped to perform an homage to Marcel Duchamp's once-scandalous "Nude Descending a Staircase," in which Finley would replicate the movements captured in Duchamp's painting in a live performance piece on a stairway at the museum. That, of course, would confront the viewer with the image of a *living*, not safely plasticine, human body—apparently the figurative line that contemporary culture seems unwilling to cross. Curiously, the Whitney was also presenting, at the same time as the Charles Ray retrospective, a rather staid show of landscapes by the late Andrew Wyeth. As Tomkins noted of the disparity between the two exhibitions, "What is there to love or to hate [in Wyeth's paintings], after all? . . . In spite of Wyeth's virtuoso technique, his range is too limited to involve the viewer on an active level, and it asks no questions. His arrow hits the target every time, but it's always the same target. [Wyeth's] art is not just pre-modern; it's stone dead" (73). Which seems to me to be precisely what the American public wants at the end of this century, just as we did in the late-Victorian era: postcard-perfect visions of a safely encapsulated world, presented to us without risk or engagement. Finley's show was finally presented, as she had originally envisioned it, at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, Connecticut in late 1999.

As a complementary vision to Karen Finley's ongoing fight to present her work, *An Evening with Quentin Crisp* offered New York audiences in the summer of 1998 the spectacle of the ninety-year-old performance artist, writer, and social critic still engaged in a vigorous dialogue with his audience despite his advancing age. Since Crisp's life story was made into a superb telefilm starring John Hurt as Crisp in 1974 (*The Naked Civil Servant*), Crisp has appeared in a variety of stage and film presentations, including Sally Potter's widely praised film *Orlando* (1993), in which the openly and flamboyantly gay per-