

100 AMERICAN INDEPENDENT FILMS

2ND EDITION

BFI SCREEN GUIDES

Jason Wood



palgrave
macmillan

A BFI book published by Palgrave Macmillan

© Jason Wood 2009

1st Edition published by the British Film Institute 2004

Reprinted 2005

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2nd Edition published in 2009 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

on behalf of the

BRITISH FILM INSTITUTE

21 Stephen Street, London W1T 1LN

www.bfi.org.uk

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Series cover design: Paul Wright

Cover image: *Junebug* (Phil Morrison, 2005, © Junebug Movie LLC)

Series design: Ketchup/couch

Set by Cambrian Typesetters, Camberley, Surrey

Printed in China

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-84457-289-2 (pbk)

ISBN 978-1-84457-290-8 (hbk)

100 American Independent Films

Acknowledgments

Numerous people generously assisted with the completion of both the first and second editions of *100 American Independent Films*. Those who I wish to thank for their help and inspiration include: Nigel Algar, Geoff Andrew, Eileen Anipare, Nicky Beaumont, Clare Binns, Sophia Contento, Douglas Cummins, Andi Engel (in memoriam), Jane Giles, Daniel Graham, Philippa Hudson, Steve Jenkins, Michael Jones Leake, Asif Kapadia, Andrew Lockett (the editor of the first edition), Ben Luxford, D. A. Pennebaker, Salvatore Raimato, B. Ruby Rich, Howard A. Rodman, Jonathan Romney, Dave Shear and Gavin Whitfield.

My special thanks are extended to Scott McGehee, David Siegel and Tom Kalin for their extremely generous and spirited involvement and support. I'd particularly like to thank my editor Rebecca Barden, not only for commissioning this volume but for her valuable insights and general good humour.

Preface to the 2009 Edition

'The sky is falling! The sky is falling!' So said Chicken Little. And maybe that damn chicken was right; maybe it wasn't just an acorn after all. In a bracingly grim keynote address in Los Angeles this June, film executive Mark Gill agreed with the proverbial bird. He cited massive staff cuts and shutdowns at New Line, Picture House and other companies, the evaporation of 'hedge fund' Wall Street money, a marketplace glutted with films and the diminishing returns of independent distribution. And that was just the prologue, before the curtains pulled back to reveal act one of global recession.

In this atmosphere of gloom and uncertainty – brightened by the fall of George W. Bush and the rise of Barack Obama – it's easy to lose perspective. Since I can't even tell you exactly what we mean by 'independent film' anymore, I'll leave it to others to predict how changes in technology, financing, distribution and audience taste will impact on what we make and watch in years to come. But I do know this: if you ask most film-makers, they'll tell you their careers have been defined by a series of 'sky-is-falling' moments. When you're drawn to the nail-biting high-wire act peculiar to low-budget film, you learn to court happy accidents (which are really just disasters in disguise or what my producer Katie Roumel calls a 'shit storm'). Long before the crisis in 'Indiewood' (yipes! what a word), iconoclasts as diverse as Sam Fuller, John Cassavetes, John Waters or Charles Burnett found ways to beg, borrow or steal the shots their stories demanded. Recent directors including Kelly Reichardt, Ramin Bahrani and Eric Mendelsohn have made astonishing, original movies on shoestring budgets. A smart approach: put your money where your mouth is.

Like many of the film-makers you'll read about in this book, my unsentimental education began at home (in my case, suburban Chicago). Born youngest of eleven in a middle-class Catholic family, I learned from my family everything I would later need to know about the art of navigating difficult personalities, improvising within chaos, or the strategies of pleading, silent coercion and nimble debate required to get things done. Like a latter-day low-rent Mitford family across the pond, we're a tribe of autodidacts rich with strong characters and complex intrigues (tenant organiser, corporate executive, Transcendental Meditation teacher, 'born-again' Christians, medical professionals, college professors, troubled loners – you name it, we got it).

My interest in crime springs from family roots too: my father had a long career in social work and criminal justice. (Just beneath lurks the dramatic irony: he studied at seminary and nearly became a priest. After he married my mother, he rarely went back to church.) He was the director of a reformatory school called the Saint Charles School for Boys and worked for the National Council on Crime and Delinquency. He spent the end of his career at the State of Illinois Parole Department, which includes Stateville Penitentiary where Leopold and Loeb were imprisoned. Since my parents were children in the early 1920s, the 'Crime of the Century' depicted in *Swoon* loomed large as family folklore. My mother and I went out to Stateville on several occasions to visit a prison pen pal we met through a Catholic charity. It took years for me to really appreciate my relatively unique teenage life.

I discovered the fast-paced, hard-boiled world of Warner Bros. on late-night television and developed an abiding affection for genre movies and actors like James Cagney (Irish Catholic American antihero) and Barbara Stanwyck, world-weary but wise. Later I'd put this love of genre to good use and discovered the potential to fly below the radar within these deceptively familiar forms. Like a number of my contemporaries (including Todd Haynes, Mary Harron, Gregg Araki or Christopher Münch), I've been drawn to material such as the 'biopic', the crime story or the domestic melodrama. I'm inspired by the reinvention and

subversion of these genres by trailblazers such as Joseph Lewis, Nicholas Ray, Douglas Sirk, Max Ophüls, Robert Bresson, Jean-Luc Godard, Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Arthur Penn.

When I moved to New York City from Chicago during the blazing hot summer of 1987, I only knew one person who had died from AIDS. Leslie Harvell. It wasn't easy growing up in 1950s America as a black gay boy named Leslie, but his disarming, sly humour paved the way. He got sick and died with cruel and breathtaking speed. Shortly after, I came to attend the Whitney Museum's post-graduate studio art programme. Thinking I would be here for a year, I packed light. (A good thing too, since for the next five years my bedrooms never measured more than eight by twelve feet, barely large enough for a bed. This city quickly redefines public and private space.) I was in blind unconscious flight from Leslie's death. Now, in retrospect, it's easy to see irony and humour in the fact that I escaped AIDS by moving to the world's epicentre.

Within months I found my way into a meeting of ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) held in a crowded room at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center, where I first met Todd Haynes and Christine Vachon. It's nearly impossible now to conjure the urgency, possibility and electricity in that room. Through Todd, Christine and others, I discovered the legendary Collective for Living Cinema, Anthology Film Archives and Millennium: mainstays of the downtown film world. I came too late for the fertile scene at the Mudd Club and watched from afar the first features of Lizzie Borden, Spike Lee or Jim Jarmusch. In the 1980s, most of my friends made short films – not 'calling card' auditions for future studio careers but rather shorts as a destination, a vital form to be explored. One of my watershed moments was seeing the low-fi masterpiece *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987). Who else but Todd Haynes could make emaciated Barbie dolls so utterly heart-rending? A handmade cinematic tour de force (it's emotional tone both 'in quotes' and stirring, not), *Superstar* unspools a riveting story while heightening our awareness of storytelling itself.

Through ACT UP, I met Mark Simpson, another close friend who later died of AIDS. (More layers of connection: we were both members of Gran Fury, an artist/activist collective that included Todd Haynes, Marlene McCarty and Donald Moffett – Don and Marlene designed *Swoon's* distinctive titles.) Mark and I became room-mates in a decrepit tenant-owned building rescued from collapse in the 1970s. The East Village was another planet then; homeless people camped in Tompkins Square Park in a sprawling shanty town. On my way to work, I used to watch a man shave himself in front of a broken mirror nailed to a tree. (The confusion, again, of public and private space.) Junky squatters lived in the building behind us. They stayed up late nodding by candlelight, and in the morning climbed down the fire escape carrying business suits, on their way, presumably, to respectable jobs. I always wondered where they showered.

In 1988, the police descended on a group protesting recent curfew rules in Tompkins Square and began to drive the homeless people from the park. They attacked with nightsticks and chased us up the trees. Video footage shot by demonstrators showed cops with concealed badge numbers swinging clubs. This early moment of local media activism – which became overnight national news through the release of the amateur video footage – provided another spark to the collective imagination. Despite limited means, the whole world was watching.

New York in the 1980s has been mythologised aplenty, given a romantic gloss in the hit play *Rent*. Well, it was a romantic time – but an awful one too, full of exhilaration and despair. But too much nostalgia leads you down a blind alley. The world of film production a mere twenty years ago now looks like a dusty curiosity shop crammed with Steenbecks, Moviolas and enormous optical printers, with a white cotton-gloved negative-cutter hunched over a bench in the corner. Yes, the tools continue to evolve but a story well told will always quicken the pulse.

When I made *Swoon*, I barely understood continuity or the 180-degree rule; much of my 'bold camera placement' came from art-school

ignorance. When cinematographer Ellen Kuras and I watched the first screening at Sundance, the print practically still wet from the lab, we were horrified to see the harsh, grainy blow-up from 16mm. Three days later, Ellen won the first of her three Best Cinematography awards at the festival. What did we know? Like any business, after some years you learn about spin and damage control – instead of forgetting to shoot coverage, you intended a long take; can't show an expensive prop so you 'activate off-screen space' with the framing.

Savage Grace gave me another chance to explore the tension between documentary fact and dramatic truth. It also completely shifted my perception of what it means to be an American independent filmmaker. We shot entirely on location in and around Barcelona, and I quickly learned that the standard shooting day in Spain is shorter than I was used to and that six-day weeks are rare. I also learned some new things about moving fast while looking good from my superb Spanish crew. Nearly everyone spoke a mixture of Spanish and Catalan and put me to shame with their fluent English. Though I eventually picked up some slang and learned to fumble around with my meagre vocabulary, I could never follow the intricate dance of language on set. This linguistic bubble was both crippling and useful – it encouraged a heightened awareness.

One particular shoot day included three scenes set at two different locations: Brooks and Blanca's rustic villa in Mallorca and Tony and Jake's hash-infused Cadaqués lair. Finding something that worked for both proved difficult. We finally settled on a remote house in the mountains and the art department went to work transforming the interior – walls covered with hippy drawings, the room resplendent in velvet and fur. Two days before shooting, they returned to find every scrap of set dressing scattered by the dirt road in front of the house. After some prodding, the owners tersely informed us that they sensed the hand of Satan. So we lost that location on suspicion of witchcraft. Scurrying to fix the crisis, we found and re-dressed an even better replacement.

Sometimes what film-makers need creatively is *more* chaos, not less, to fly without a net. In the words of the great Robert Bresson, 'My movie

is born first in my head, dies on paper; is resuscitated by the living persons and real objects I use, which are killed on film but, placed in a certain order and projected on to a screen, come to life again like flowers in water.'

Tom Kalin, New York, 2009

From short experimental videos to feature-length narrative films, Tom Kalin's critically acclaimed work has been screened throughout the world. His debut feature, *Swoon*, was awarded Best Cinematography at Sundance, the Caligari Prize at Berlin, the Open Palm at the Gotham Awards and the FIPRESCI Prize in Stockholm. His work is in the permanent collection of the Centre Georges Pompidou and MoMA. His recent film, *Savage Grace*, premiered at the 2007 Quinzaine des Réalistes in Cannes. As a producer, his films include *I Shot Andy Warhol* and *Go Fish*. He has been a faculty member of Columbia University's Film Program since 1996.

Preface to the 2004 Edition

Scott McGehee and David Siegel

For the record, we only agreed to write this preface thinking we would have some sway over the content of the book itself, and might be able to insist on the inclusion of *Billy Jack*, which was for both of us a first and formative experience with American indie film-making. But as it turns out, we've had no impact whatsoever on the author's choices, and you will find that *Billy Jack* is not, in fact, included, and as far as we know, isn't even mentioned within these pages except right here.

That being said, there are 100 other films listed, all of them somehow American and apparently 'independent' in some meaning of the word.

It's an interesting phenomenon that even the lowliest of social groups (in this case 'independent film-makers') manages to figure out a way to instil some sense of snob exclusivity to their meagre social or cultural identity. How often have we been with our fellow independent film-makers and their few remaining friends (if you can really call them that) and been party to conversations about whether or why a particular film or film-maker is not actually 'independent', as if having no money, respect or financial prospects to carry on making films were somehow a highly prized social privilege or badge of honour.

Because the American independent film movement is a more or less ad-hoc affair, lacking a charismatic leader or a Vow of Independence (or any kind of vow, for that matter) to give it shape or discipline, one finds that there tend to be almost as many opinions about what qualifies a film as 'independent' as there have been entries to the Sundance Film Festival recently. Luckily, over the years, we've culled our own list of ten

or so indisputable ground rules that we thought might be helpful to the reader in the context of this list of 100 films:

- Rule no. 1: No one in the entire film industry ever helped the independent film-maker make his or her film. In fact, every gainfully employed industry person the film-maker ever spoke to about the film said it was a lame, derivative, unintelligible – or at least a financially unviable – idea.
- Rule no. 2: If someone in the film industry did help somehow, the help was not substantial or financial, and/or the ‘brave’ film industry helper was in danger of losing his or her job by providing help. (Since everyone in the film industry seems always in danger of losing his or her job, this rule can often be brought into play.)
- Rule no. 3: The film was made for no money. The meagre goods and services involved in production were stolen or borrowed or bartered, or charged on credit cards that were already past their limit.
- Rule no. 4: If there was money involved, it wasn’t nearly enough, and most importantly, it was less than lots of other films that claim to be independent that aren’t as good. If the film in question had a budget larger than the budget of one’s own independent film, however, the film in question is especially questionable.
- Rule no. 5: No film industry money was involved. Any real money came from investment by non-film industry dentists, or from something called a ‘German Tax Fund’ that (it will one day be proven) is actually a code name for non-film industry German dentists, and is wholly unreliable. If film industry money was involved, it was from an ‘independent’ company, such as Fine Line or Miramax or Fox Searchlight, which are by unspoken agreement somehow considered ‘independent’ from AOL Time Warner or Disney or the Fox News Corp despite considerable evidence to the contrary.
- Rule no. 6: The film was poorly distributed, if at all. If it found success it was against common wisdom, and by luck, fluke and

happenstance, or because the film-maker personally telephoned everyone who ever attended.

- Rule no. 7: The film as an enterprise was pure financial folly. Even though it was made for no money, it miraculously stands to lose more money than it would have been made for had it been made for money. Occasionally certain distributors might profit from an American independent film due to shady accounting practices, but under no circumstances can the dentists or German dentists profit, and certainly not the film-makers.
- Rule no. 8: The film has no proper stars. If it does have stars, they have somehow fallen out of favour due to evidence of low morals, or worse, the poor box-office performance of a recent film. They worked for no money and wore no make-up except what they put on themselves.
- Rule no. 9: The film has no special effects. If it does have effects, they are not special.
- Rule no. 10: No animals were harmed in the making of the film.

We believe *Billy Jack* qualifies under this or any other reasonable set of criteria, and why it is not included here is a question to be put to the author of the book. Indeed, lots of films qualify that aren't here. (Our last film, in fact.) No doubt the author has some slap-dash criteria of his own. As Billy Jack's girlfriend Jean said in explaining the founding principle of the Freedom School, 'Each man has the right to follow his own centre, follow his own conscience, do his own thing ...'.

Which brings us to one final rule, which we call the 'Independent Spirit' rule:

- Rule no. 11: In the spirit of independence, the above rules should be ignored when it is found helpful to ignore them. If a film is good, no matter how it was produced and financed, it can be found to have an 'independent spirit' that distinguishes it from its studio-developed brethren. (And of course, if a film is bad, its relative dependence or independence will rarely be an issue.)

A writer friend of ours describes studio development as the process whereby a script that could only possibly have been written by one person is transformed into a script that could possibly have been written by anyone. We suspect that one reason we tend to like independent films is that they have usually been spared this process (for better or worse), and it shows. (They've usually been spared all sorts of other really useful things that studio films have loads of, but enough complaining.) Or perhaps the entrepreneurial spirit that is a necessary component of the independent film-maker's character does, mysteriously, have some sort of aesthetic analogue that leads to some fresh, surprising, worthwhile and entertaining movies. Or perhaps it's a simple matter of probabilities, that given enough struggling American film-makers, enough typewriters and cameras, and not quite enough film, sooner or later there will inevitably be movies made to fill a book called *100 American Independent Films*.

Strip yourself of your greed and ego trips and let the spirit enter you.

Billy Jack

Scott McGehee and David Siegel are the writer-producers-directors of *Suture*, 1994 (Official Selection at the Cannes Film Festival and Jury Prize at the Toronto Film Festival), and *The Deep End*, 2001 (selected for Director's Fortnight at the Cannes Film Festival). Both films won the Best Cinematography prize at the Sundance Film Festival. *Bee Season*, McGehee's and Siegel's third collaboration, was released in 2005. The pair recently completed *Uncertainty*, the story of a young couple whose decision to flip a coin at the film's opening sets in motion two wildly different stories that unfold simultaneously.

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