

## Independent American Cinema and the Hollywood Mainstream

As a counter point to the *Hollywood dream factory*, the first statement of the *New American Cinema Group*, dated 30<sup>th</sup> of September 1962 declared that cinema “[...] is indivisibly a personal expression” ([www.badlit.com/?p=675](http://www.badlit.com/?p=675)), thus giving name to a new type of cinema – an independent cinema that worked around a social engagement. The *American New Wave* was a new name, but independent cinema was not a new concept. It actually reaches back to the birth of cinema with independent filmmakers working outside of the three major companies – Edison, Biograph and Vitagraph (King, 2005, p. 3). However, this new cinema differs from examples like Hans Richter’s abstract animations of the 1920’s and Jean Epstein’s contemporary anti narrative films; These new films were not aiming to find the pure cinema before “it was sullied by realism” (Rees, 1997, p. 96), rather, it embraced the narrative. However, in contrast to Hollywood cinema, it actually engaged with real life – dealing with social issues. They were, like Hollywood, storytellers. But where Hollywood was *manufacturing dreams* (Cook, 1999, p. 61), this new cinema was interested in documenting, or creating something close to reality.

This new American cinema has been said to have had an influence on later Hollywood due to different social and political issues, which I will be looking at later in this essay. I will be looking at the films *Shadows* (1959) by John Cassavetes, and the later Hollywood distributed film *Mean Streets* (1973) by Martin Scorsese. I will thereby try to consider what influence the independent cinema has had on later

Hollywood films, and try to understand the reasons for the popularity of the independent cinema in the 60's and 70's.

An important factor when talking about the independent sector's popularity is the story of Hollywood in the 1950's; the total amount of films produced in the United States had fallen from 391 in 1951 to 131 in 1961. This was a result of audiences abandoning the theatres after the invention of television (Neve, p. 211). Following the federal antitrust suit, known as the *Paramount* case in 1948, it was not possible for the major studios to keep all production within the studio. This can also be seen as a reason for the economic crisis that Hollywood went through in the 1950's, 60's and part of the 70's. After the *Paramount* case production was outsourced to smaller companies, but still distributed by the Hollywood majors. The loss of audience and power led to a type of niche production where films were fabricated to a certain group, or sometimes race of people, and it was difficult for Hollywood to adapt to the new procedures. Hollywood did not succeed in creating films for one specific group, namely the youth audience (King, 2005, p. 6). They simply did not respond to the social changes in the post-war decades and this created a large gap in which "[...] stepped a number of independent producers [...] supplying the teen audience with a range of low-budget horror, hot-rod, biker and beach-blanket movies" (King, 2005, p. 6), thus leaving Hollywood as a financially struggling institution.

In 1954 the word *authorship* was first used by the French filmmaker François Truffaut. He stated, in contrast to Hollywood mainstream and its assembly line mode of production that "[...] film should be a means of personal artistic expression for its director [...] bearing the signature of his or her personal style, rather than being the

work of some corporate collective” (Cook, 1998, p. 11). *Authorship* became broadly recognized in the U.S. in 1967 with the release of Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde*, but was previously used in underground cinema and was, associated with independent films like *Shadows*. Filmmaker John Cassavetes is in fact known for his “[...] insistence of creative freedom” (Margulies, 1998, p. 275) – a creative freedom that could not be found in Hollywood. Or, as Casavetes himself more radically put it: “the producer intimidates the artist’s new thought with great sums of money and [...] clings to pas references of box-office to compromise. And the cost of the compromise is the betrayal of basic beliefs [...] the artist is thrown out of motion pictures, and the business man makes his entrance” (Margulies, 1998, p. 284).

With an urge for recognition of a director’s *authorship*, and the creation of the *New American Cinema Group Manifesto* was born the *American New Wave* – a type “[...] of more “artistic” and in some cases “avant-garde” independent filmmaking” (King, 2005, p. 6). Gary Morris argues that it was natural for this type of more experimental cinema to gain an audience; “the same audiences that were rejecting the social status quo (racial segregation, sexual repression) were also demanding that movies incorporate new forms of expression to parallel those being created in painting (abstract expressionism, Pop art) and literature (the beats)” ([www.brightlightsfilm.com/27/sixtiescinema1.html](http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/27/sixtiescinema1.html)). Another important fact as to why these films became popular compared to earlier experimental film, broadly speaking, is the fact that “[...] this U.S. audience was younger, better-educated, and more affluent than Hollywood’s traditional audience” (Cook, 1998, p. 12). This younger audience grew up with television and they knew how to process audiovisual

language. In other words, the conservative Hollywood mainstream did not recognize and adapt to the changes in society.

*American New Wave* filmmakers like Cassavetes were highly influenced by foreign films; “[...] with their frank portrayals of sexuality [which] gained fresh currency; Italian neorealism, in particular, and then-cutting-edge directors like Godard, Bergman, and Fellini” ([www.brightlightsfilm.com/27/sixtiescinema1.html](http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/27/sixtiescinema1.html)). This was an edge which was not present in Hollywood, but in many ways it was very appealing to young people and gained a big audience.

So, how is this important with regards to the Hollywood mainstream cinema? The independent cinema of the 1960's has been said to have had an influence on later Hollywood film, and when looking at *Shadows* for example, we see some clear elements first to emerge in Hollywood about ten years later. *Shadows* is, like many other independent film from this era taking place in New York ([www.brightlightsfilm.com/27/sixtiescinema1.html](http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/27/sixtiescinema1.html)). It is a film about young people in Manhattan, New York. But not the type of young people the contemporary Hollywood would show. This is young people “living in the shadows of the neon crazy streets on Manhattan” ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZx-I0wJ\\_8s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZx-I0wJ_8s)) as the film's 1959 trailer tells us. In other words something more realistic, or something that was easier to relate to than what Hollywood would show - it is a film about the little people. The film is to some extent improvised, and it is shot solely on real locations. It is possible to argue that this was done because of the low self-acquired budget, but for Cassavetes the “[...] use of location shooting, non-professional actors, and episodic structures promised a fresh cinematic narrative, a direct confrontation with reality” (Margulies, 1998, p. 283). Margulies has also argued that because *Shadows* is shot in

real time, on real locations, and is so loosely structured it actually both documents and provokes its audience - something that the glamorous Hollywood was not cable of doing (Margulies, 1998, p. 282). *Shadows* shows “real” people having “real” conversations and struggling with “real” problems, meaning that it was not trying to construct a world of dreams, in contrast to Hollywood whose goal was exactly to produce dreams.

In *Shadows* it does not seem that the story or plot is very important. Or more accurately; the story is very minimal in contrast to the contemporary Hollywood films, and a synopsis of the plot can be written in very few lines. What is important in *Shadows* is expressions, shapes and faces, and when looking at the cinematography this is underlined by a camera that moves much closer to the faces to capture all feelings and expressions. In fact, Cassavetes has been said to be very interested in expressions, namely the hesitation that you find in between the dialog.

A tiny experiment created on the “keyword function” on [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com) shows the rawness and reality in *Shadows* compared to the contemporary Hollywood melodrama *Some Came Running* (1958). Where *Some Came Running* has keywords like *Love* and *Boyfriend Girlfriend Relationship* ([www.imdb.com/title/tt0052218/keywords](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0052218/keywords)), Cassavetes film *Shadows* has keywords like *Sex* and *Racism* ([www.imdb.com/title/tt0053270/keywords](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0053270/keywords)). This indeed underlines the fact that these new independent cinemas had a different agenda than Hollywood. However, in contrast to earlier experimental film these films do not work against the concept of the narrative cinema. It is not a matter of saying *we work against Hollywood*, rather, *we are something other than Hollywood*. Or, as Gary Morris has put it, the goal was to: [...] attack American notions of complacency, coherence,

and blind optimism” ([www.brightlightsfilm.com/27/sixtiescinema1.html](http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/27/sixtiescinema1.html)). In that way it was more about “extending the boundaries of narrative film art” than it was about working against it ([www.brightlightsfilm.com/27/sixtiescinema1.html](http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/27/sixtiescinema1.html)).

As mentioned above, *Shadows* is a part of the beginning of a movement within the American independent cinema – *The American New Wave*. A movement which was made possible in part due to Hollywood’s lack of evolution in films to fit the modern society (Cook, 1998, p. 12). However, this movement did not seem to last for long. It emerged and disappeared all within approximately 10 years. This is because Hollywood around 1967 began to “recognize the social, and to some part political concerns of the youthful counterculture” (Neve, 1992, p. 214). Hollywood was starting to recognize that young people were a huge part of the cinema audience. The first proof of a radical turn in filmmaking within Hollywood was the box office success *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), which I also have mentioned above as the first Hollywood film linked with the word *authorship*. In that sense, *Bonnie and Clyde* was one of the first films within the new Hollywood – the Hollywood renaissance (Kramer, 1998, p. 297), and also the end of the era of *American New Wave* cinema.

*The American New Wave* disappeared as fast as it had emerged, however it has been argued that it left trails of its cinematic style in the Hollywood renaissance. The financial crisis that Hollywood had been in during the 1950’s and 60’s led them to “[...] actively recruit a new generation of writer, producers and directors [...]” (Cook, 1998, p. 13). In contrast to the earlier Broadway and theatre trained directors and writers, this new generation studied “*film as film* in university graduate programs and professional schools” (Cook, 1998, p. 13). Moreover, they had been raised with

cinema and films on TV, and knew from a very young age exactly how to read cinema effects like editing.

One of the directors of this new Hollywood renaissance was Martin Scorsese. His “[...] first important feature as an auteur [...]”, *Mean Streets* (1973), distributed by Warner Brothers, has been said to be highly inspired by the cinematic style of John Cassavetes. In fact, Scorsese mentioned in an interview with the Telegraph that it was Cassavetes who inspired him to write the film *Shadows* after he suggested that Scorsese had “[...] just spent a year of [his] life making a piece of shit”, referring to *Boxcar Bertha* (1972) ([www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmmakersonfilm/7366950/Martin-Scorsese-interview-for-Shutter-Island.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmmakersonfilm/7366950/Martin-Scorsese-interview-for-Shutter-Island.html)).

When looking at *Mean Streets* there are clear similarities with earlier *American New Wave* films like *Shadows*. In particular, we have here again a very minimalistic storyline or plot which can be surmised down to a few lines. Likewise, this film is also shot on location in Little Italy, New York (Cook, 1998, p. 24) and both Robert De Niro and Harvey Keitel make use of John Cassavetes much loved theories about improvisation. This really comes to show in the scene where Charlie (Harvey Keitel) talks to Johnny Boy (Robert De Niro) in the back alley outside of the bar, and also in the scene where Johnny Boy finds out that Charlie had an affair with his cousin.

In conclusion what we see in *Mean Streets* has drawn a lot of inspiration from such filmmakers as John Cassavetes, and this goes for a lot of the contemporary Hollywood filmmakers including the aforementioned generation of university trained filmmakers including established filmmakers such as Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. Hollywood learned a lot from the *American New Wave* with regards to what was relevant to the younger audience, and in that sense the

*American New Wave* has been playing an important role in pushing Hollywood over a boundary about what could, and should, be shown in cinema. Having seen some of the independent films from the 1960's, I think it is possible to argue that *American New Wave* has played a huge role in getting part of Hollywood to move from the desire to create sweet dreams into something more artistic, such as films like *Mean Streets* that does not only entertain you, but also to some extent, challenge you.

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