

Sherry B. Ortner, **Not Hollywood: Independent Film at the Twilight of the American Dream**, Duke University Press, 2013, 352 pp., \$22.47 (paperback).

Review by
Ritesh Mehta
University of Southern California

What Sherry Ortner accomplishes in **Not Hollywood: Independent Film at the Twilight of the American Dream** is the product of more than seven years of investigation. Methodologically, it is an intriguing mixture of interviews, modified participant observation, and the author’s watching of 650+ films, followed by a seemingly simplistic yet thought-provoking interrogation between primary and secondary data. What has resulted is accessible and cogent: an instant classic on a socioeconomically particular, occasionally popular, and undeniably iconic industry-art form, which reads in part as history, as narrative, and as documentary, but is ultimately an interpretive ethnography, a “work of anthropology” (p. 23).



The underrated (or clichéd, depending on your ivory tower company) insight that permeates Ortner’s anthropological as well as sociological travels into the field is that industry-art forms can only emerge from a particular “place/time” (p. 7). As we read, we get the sense that the place/time in question, which is the largely American indie film scene from 1989 to 2012, is charmed in that it came about in a somewhat unexpected and unprecedented way. Besides, it remains charmingly contested. Industry practitioners continually ask if the indie world is truly independent from mainstream Hollywood, and as academics we continually wonder to what extent is it “dominant qua dominated,” to invert Bourdieu, Ortner’s most conspicuous theoretical ancestor in this work. Throughout, the author conveys this vexed situation by expertly specifying relationships among key phrases—or, I submit, her ethnographic master “categories” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990)—relationships that, in turn, form her central thesis. Her book is highly recommended to academics as well as industry practitioners—basically to anyone interested in the multiple crossroads of global cinema, media anthropology, production studies, and cultural sociology.

Not Hollywood’s Central Thesis

As alluded to above, five master categories¹—“Independence,” “Hollywood,” “Neoliberalism,” “Generation X,” and “Professional Managerial Class”—help us navigate Ortner’s individual chapters. Her

¹ The master categories and the following “synthesis” of their relationships are the outcome of my analysis, not Ortner’s offerings per se. It is possible that Ortner may not even consider her analytic style as grounded theory in the strict sense. She would, however, be hard pressed to deny that these categories are key to her work.

central thesis about the nature of independent cinema and the contemporary indie scene can then be synthesized as follows ('master categories' in italics).

Independent cinema, generally understood by its producers as the antithesis of mainstream *Hollywood* films and practices, was spurred into being in the late 1980s, in great part due to the detrimental economic effects of *neoliberalism*. Its emergence is consistent with the Marxist insight that cultural shifts in capitalism are correlated with the rise of new classes (p. 12). Neoliberalism impacted a generation (*Generation X*, born between 1961 and 1981, but considered an ongoing cohort) of future artists and filmmakers that was not brought up to expect downward mobility or political insecurity (which signified the weakening of the American Dream). This generation then imparted its dark, sometimes depressing, aesthetically edgy, politically cynical, oft feminist, and morally ambiguous visions in films that found patrons in the newly influential *professional managerial class* in the 1990s.

Not Hollywood's Ethnographic Chapters

Ortner goes about elaborating and applying this thesis in four "ethnographic" chapters on industry discourse (chapter 1), industry niches (chapter 3), industry elite (chapter 5), and industry process (chapter 7). For these chapters, she relies mainly on 75 or so formal interviews, along with plenty of "interface ethnography," an ethnographic workaround to the problem of access to impenetrable and indifferent Hollywood studios (see Ortner, 2010), in which the researcher observes and interacts with her subjects in public arenas such as film festivals like Sundance and screenings of films followed by Q&A sessions. Ortner insists that not only are her interviews and observations "stories" but also "texts" that she takes apart to examine the underlying discourse, language, and modes of self-representation. In this regard, she exemplifies the methodology developed in works of ethnography in film/TV production/industry studies that have emerged in recent years (see, e.g., Caldwell, 2008). The strength of her approach is that it is transparent and easily imitable by young anthropologists, sociologists, film/media scholars, and communication students.

Where this research especially excels is in Ortner's grounded categories or findings, particularly in her ethnographic chapters. As exegesis, I reproduce and restring her five master categories as well as point out other categories she puts forth (in italics below). Doing so helps us connect the arguments in her separate chapters with the book's central thesis.

Chapter 1, "Making Independence"

Despite critiques leveled against *independent* film that it is not *truly free* or that the boundaries between it and *Hollywood* are illusory, it remains in a widely held sense *not Hollywood* by critiquing the dominant culture (and *happy endings*) *Hollywood* movies represent, and by embracing a *harsh realism* in films that proclaim to *passionately tell the truth* about our world. And yet, structurally, the business of independent film is still somewhat dependent on *Hollywood* studios, which since the 1980s have had separate in-house divisions for niche films.

Chapter 3, "Making the Scene"

The contemporary *indie scene*—with separate and fascinating *prehistories* in the 1990s in *New York* (relatively more DIY in its emergence) and *Los Angeles* (where "anarchists-at-heart" worked to produce material for Hollywood's "specialty" divisions)—began to flourish mainly because of the patronage of the *professional managerial class* (alternatively, the yuppies, the new "cultural elites," Bourdieu's "dominated of the dominant"). This patronage came on the heels of the *neoliberalism*-induced economic bubble of the late 1990s, and resulted in a "relatively sophisticated audience, willing to be made to think, willing to read subtitles," (p. 101) and to process the edgy, difficult, and thought-provoking content of indies.

Chapter 5, "Making Value"

Independence is hard-won, and credit must be given to indies' underrated, highly educated *producers*, who are the less-sung heroes and heroines (nearly half of all indie producers are female) of the indie world. They tend to be *gutsy*, skilled *networkers* with plentiful *chutzpah*, who *produce substantive value* by relentlessly standing by the writer-director, but in selecting and developing scripts in the first place, are the *tastemakers* and gatekeepers of the indie world.

Ortner's central thesis thus resounds in specific ways through each of these chapters. Chapter 1 admirably explores how contested the terrain of "independence" actually is. This is particularly satisfying because Ortner carefully dimensionalizes her grounded categories, presenting independence from mainstream Hollywood as a continuum extending from negative ('was never independent') to positive ("truly free") values. Chapter 3 is the most narratively engaging, describing the story of how the indie scene came about. Other academic works (Staiger, 2013; Tzioumakis, 2013) delve into this history more expansively but do not tell the tale from the horse's mouth. Via extensive interview-like portraits that sometimes make her chapters read a bit fitfully, Ortner imparts endearing and humorous images that narrate how the indie scene gradually emerged "in incestuous, collaborative fashion" (p. 104). For instance, we learn about how the beginning of the "good marriage" between then-unknowns Ted Hope and James Schamus took place in a sleepy East Village café meet-up in the mid-1980s and how now-veteran Spike Lee sold socks outside the tiny premiere of his film at the Lincoln Center and how the "young and poor" Albert Berger and Ron Yerxa were thoroughly bowled over at the nearly empty 10 p.m. Sundance screening in 1989 of Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies and videotape*, the film casually regarded as the big indie bang. Ortner rounds off this chapter with one of the book's most persuasive arguments: that the rise of the indie scene is correlated with the patronage of the newly formed, *nouveau riche*, and opinion-making professional managerial class.

Chapter 5 proffers the book's most distinctive contribution. Ortner solidly makes the case that producers of independent films are perhaps more crucial than the directors, molding themselves as a film's most indispensable, versatile asset, from selecting the film all the way through finding distribution. Particularly striking is her application of Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" to the producer's set of skillful contributions; in this regard, I was intrigued by the idea that producers "produce value" in part by "anointing" or transferring their creativity, resourcefulness, and educational capital like a "physical quantum" onto the director. Throughout her book, but here especially, the range, quality, and pedigree of

her interviewees impress greatly and convince sufficiently. Of course, if Ortner had reached the same conclusions via additional evidence from actual participant observation, this fascinating claim would have been more grounded. However, a sign of an academic work's generosity is that it justifies the gaps that need to be filled by future research. In this case, ethnographic work in the cognitive sociology of media industries, along the lines of Rowlands and Handy (2012), can attempt the difficult task of sizing up vital collaboration in situ. Finally, Ortner really flexes her interpretive muscles in presenting the book's most easily overlooked yet interesting connection: Even though the indie producers she spoke to also hail from Generation X, they, unlike indie directors, "come from the more successful part of that class location, the handful . . . that made it through . . . the neoliberal funnel." (p. 154) Indie directors tended to be less successful and less confident about this metaphorical passage, whereas indie producers tended to be more successful and more confident. This psychological as well as sociological difference in the habitus of producers and directors might in part explain, Ortner suggests, the "productive synergy" between the two groups, and, in turn, the rise of independent cinema in the 1990s.

Since chapter 7, "Making Films," along with Ortner's accounts from the Sundance Film Festival in the opening pages, incorporates the most participant observation, it is her most straightforwardly ethnographic chapter. Yet, it is the chapter that stands as the odd man out in this work. This is because her three categories—(1) the production process as "vulnerable" or prone to chaos; (2) the set as belonging to the director; and (3) "rituals of production" (such as "wrap gifts" for the crew or the mutually enforced quietness when the camera rolls) as the "mechanisms by which fragile social systems are held together" (p. 216)—while notable in their own right, do not seem unique to independent cinema, the indie scene, or the work of indie producers. Besides, none of her master ethnographic categories is put to effective use in this chapter. Yet it's a pleasurable and light read, "a good [pre-Fordist] story in bad [post-Fordist] times" (p. 226), pertinent to researchers interested in the group process of temporary organizations (Bakker, 2010) and, more generally, in "mid-level" industry and production studies (Havens, Lotz, & Tinic, 2009).

Not Hollywood's Film Chapters

Four chapters on interpretations of actual independent films alternate between the ethnographic chapters. In chapters 2 and 4, which I focus on, Ortner respectively elaborates on—once again, using grounded theory-like categories—the "dark" nature of indies and their "moral ambiguity." In chapter 6, she applies these tropes to female indie filmmakers, the depiction of women in independent film, and the feminist agendas of some indies. And in chapter 8, she discusses her favorite type of indie, the "political film" (primarily, certain types of documentaries). At first, one might wonder why any film chapter is necessary. To an extent, the book would have been compelling simply as a portrait of a sub-/anti-industry. However, there are at least two reasons why these chapters are welcome.

First, although it's convenient, even necessary, to analytically separate the film industry from its movies (Newman [2011] separates industry practice from a film's textual qualities, whereas Staiger [2013] focuses productively on both), it's rare to see an attempt at a through line across the discourses and practices of production, text, and (an anthropologist's) reception. If the ethnographic chapters describe the relationship of the American independent film industry with American society, then the film

chapters describe the relationships of the films themselves with society as well as with the industry. Since Ortner's central thesis is about the emergence of film practitioners from a particular place/time, in her film chapters she shows how their movies reflect and critique that place/time. In this regard, the master category that reverberates with the most feeling across these chapters is "Generation X," and the master relationship that we are compelled to visit—and that the films thereby revisit—is that of Generation X's worldview molded by the class transformation induced by neoliberalism. If films belong to public culture, as Ortner contends, then her film chapters poignantly showcase the gray and black hues and the intense textures of indie realism as misery, misogyny, insecurity, apathy, and ambiguity. We are made to realize these hues and textures *already constitute* public culture. That realization is sobering.

Second, Ortner attempts to go where she recognizes few anthropologists have gone: She "decided—possibly impossibly" (p. 2) to emphasize the film side as well as the ethnographic side of the nexus others (see, e.g., Ganti, 2012) have unilaterally explored. Initially, this choice reads as a head-scratcher. If ethnography is in great part what an anthropologist does, what does it even mean to say that an anthropologist examines a side that is not ethnographic? We wonder: In what way is watching a film "ethnographic"? Ortner has a two-pronged explanation: First, she affirms that it is true that what an anthropologist does is "maintain a critical eye and ear, but at the same time to take what people say seriously and see where that takes us" (p. 58), and second, she channels this adventurous spirit into observing producers' and directors' experience of American social change encoded in their films. In other words, she subtly demonstrates that watching a film is an act of abstracted, temporally extended participant observation. This constitutes an admirable if not always clear-cut methodological contribution.

So how does Ortner bring this about? She interrogates a filmmaker's words—for example, a film is worth something only if it really "beats [me] up" (Rodrigo Garcia) (p. 60)—by watching his or her film and metaphorically taking the "beating." Having watched 650+ films, Ortner has been quite beaten up, and she is able to catch sight of, even fleetingly, a film as the denouement of years of socioeconomic and sociopolitical change on producers and directors who strive to realize and proffer to the culture their vision of this impact.

To this end, chapter 2 presents the raft of change experienced by Generation X filmmakers as "the end of security," or put differently, as anger, frustration, and helplessness accompanying economic anxiety spilling into and mixing with the fear of bodily damage, "crime . . . disease . . . degradation, and war" (p. 65). (Unexpectedly fun in these noir pages is her deconstruction of the notoriously impervious indie term of art, "edgy.") Especially cogent is her reading of *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) as "carry(ing) the subversive view of anti-work to its destructive extremes" and of the "9/11 film" *The Visitor* (Todd McCarthy, 2007) as, like all "dark, immigrant films," depictive of the "specific type of insecurity that has emerged in the wake of 9/11" (p. 85). More broadly, she asks us to see how the representation of the immigrant as "other" shows us how "neoliberalism pits rich countries against poor countries, rich people against poor people, and poor people against each other" (p. 89).

Similarly, in chapter 4, in discussing the "morally ambiguous" portrayal of the pedophile in movies such as *Little Children* (Todd Field, 2006) or Generation X's experience of the family unit as deeply dysfunctional in movies such as *Rachel Getting Married* (Jonathan Demme, 2008), Ortner convincingly

suggests how the “fuzzy morality of so much American public culture . . . mirrors the fuzzy morality (or worse) of neoliberal capitalism” (p. 143). She appeals to audiences and readers to consider that indies help us see, appreciate, and know again that “the world is a very morally messed up and confusing place, and that we cannot go back to the white hats and black hats of Hollywood melodrama. We need to be shaken up and disturbed” (p. 145). Ortner has displayed in her film chapters not just from whom films come, but from where, and further, how films “conjur[e] in audiences worldviews, subjectivities, and structures of feeling” (p. 72) and plead with us to observe and participate in our own place/time.

Concluding Remarks

Where one can differ or disagree with Ortner is in deciding whether dark and depressing is bad or new. And that’s where one limitation of her work comes to the fore: Generation X filmmakers are no longer the only makers of independent cinema, not in America and certainly not in the world, where the marketing construct that is “Generation X” may not even apply. While one may appreciate or agree with Ortner about the origins of this wave of independent cinema (Tzioumakis [2013] claims there is a wave before it), one gets the sense that her account does not consider the changes in the world of indies in the last decade. Especially since the rise of digital filmmaking, indie TV, and crowdfunding avenues such as Kickstarter, independent film cannot productively be seen as just one generation’s political worldview or even personal expression. If Ortner claims that it is Generation X’s worldview that we see in the indies of the 1990s and 2000s, then one can argue that the Millennials, another marketing-driven generational construct, could shape, and are already shaping, a quite different vision for independent cinema. It is only in her concluding pages that Ortner seems to let go of her insistence on Generation X as a seemingly indefinite cohort and admits that young filmmakers today might be in less shock about the flotsam of neoliberalism than those before them. Thus, the next wave of cinema might reflect and critique a different American society and public culture. This is an exciting prospect that ethnographic production studies of up-and-coming filmmakers (see, e.g., Henderson [1995] on film schools and student filmmakers) are well positioned to—and need to—address.

Moreover, one gets the impression that from the start Ortner had a specific, downbeat reaction to the films she saw. Finding a movie’s themes “heavy” or its outlook “bleak” is a bit idiosyncratic. While it may be valid that many of the films Ortner saw were morally ambiguous and harsh—and her ethnographic follow-up with the filmmakers supports that claim—it’s also likely that *she* couldn’t escape interpreting these films primarily in that way, and that disposition somehow influenced her research questions and interrogation between ethnographic and film data. Granted, all research begins from personal takes, and Ortner is reflexive about hers. She also explicitly states that she eschews film studies’ emphases on genre, aesthetic style, and cinematic techniques. Still, crucially germane is the question of coding itself. What if an ethnographer (or audience member, for that matter) does not read tales of family breakdown such as *Rachel Getting Married* as dysfunctional or angry, or tales about pedophiles such as *Little Children* as “inherently ambig(uous) about their subjects” (p. 126)? What if, rather, the ethnographer finds the titular character of Rachel inspirational and reads the movie as a tale about fierce independence; or instead focuses on Kate Winslet’s misplaced housewife instead of Jackie Earle Haley’s misplaced predator? It is likely then that their “negotiated reading” (Hall, 2000) (of “oppositional” films nonetheless) might produce

fascinating and subtly different interrogations of the filmmakers, in turn leading to *quite* different interpretations and conclusions about what the films say about society.

These are quibbles. For when one reflects on the scale and scope of what Ortner has accomplished, one is powerfully reminded that anthropologists in particular and those interested in cinema in general should not ignore the place/time in which an industry functions and from where films—cherished or castigated, bleak or buoyant—emerge. And even though the connection between art and industry is vexed, there is always a specific cultural and economic contour to the rise, flow, and ebb of every industry-art form. Most importantly, Ortner opens our eyes to how even the most modest of films capture their filmmakers having lived through, internalized, and interpreted broader changes in class structure and political economy, and how filmic realism helps audiences grasp our particular sociohistorical moment. In these and other ways, *Not Hollywood* displays how social scientific inquiry need not shy away from delving into humanism.

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